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HEG81-137
(Revised November 1984)



Sewing for Children¹

This NebGuide discusses issues that should be considered when sewing for children.

Rose Marie Tondl Extension Specialist-Clothing and Textiles

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Sewing for children can be great fun and a real opportunity to express your creativity. Before you decide to sew, however, ask yourself these questions:

- Do I have enough skill to make the garment satisfactorily?
- Do I own a sewing machine that is in good operating condition?
- Do I have time to sew?
- Do I enjoy sewing?
- Will the finished garment be a source of pride for me and my child?
- Am I able to determine which garments can be made at home at a real savings, and which ones would be better to buy?
- Can I make a garment with better design qualities, self-help and growth features than the one I would purchase?
- Can I make a garment with better quality fabric and workmanship than those found on the market for the same price?

If most of your answers are yes, get ready to measure!

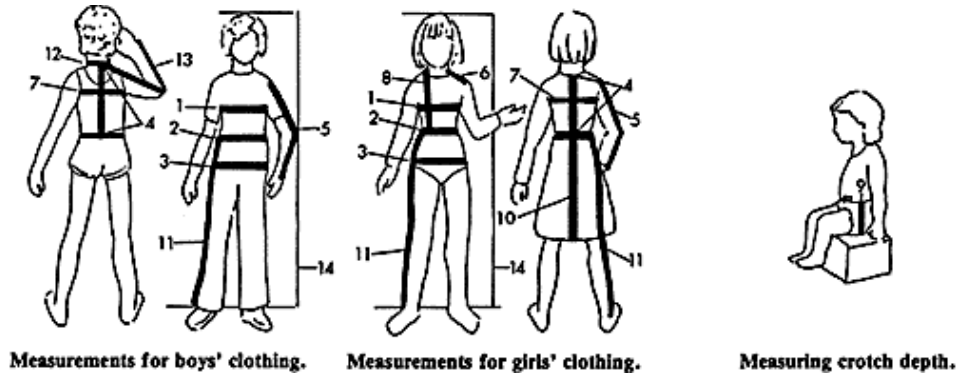
Measuring the Child

Children grow rapidly and should be remeasured each time you sew for them. A garment should fit the child the first time it is worn so you can't allow much lag time between measuring, cutting and sewing the finishing touches on a new or remodeled garment.

Buy patterns for babies by weight and height. The infant's age is not a good indication of the pattern size needed.

Patterns for toddlers and children are based on body measurements, taken over underwear. With the child standing, legs together, tie a string around the waist and have the child bend sideways to establish the waistline.

The following measurements are useful in fitting children's clothes (see illustrations).



1. *Breast or Chest.* Measure the fullest part of the chest and shoulder blades with the tape measure under the arms.
2. *Waist.* Measure around the body over the string marking the waist.
3. *Hips.* Measure the fullest part. The tape measure should be parallel to the floor.
4. *Back Waist Length.* Lowering the head forward, locate the prominent bone at the base of neck. Standing in normal posture, measure from this bone to the waistline.
5. *Arm Length.* With the elbow bent at about a 45 degree angle, measure from the top of the arm to below the wrist bone.
6. *Shoulder.* Measure from the base of the neck where it joins the body to the bone at the top of the shoulder.
7. *Back Width.* Measure across the back, about 3 to 4 inches below the neck base.
8. *Front Waist Length.* Measure from mid-shoulder to the waistline string.
9. *Crotch Depth.* With the child sitting erect on a straight-backed chair, measure the length from the waistline string to the chair seat.
10. *Dress Length (girls only).* Measure from the center back neck to the desired hem length.
11. *Pants Length.* From the waist at the side of the body, measure down over the hip to the desired hem length.
12. *Neck Circumference (boys only).* Measure around neck.
13. *Shirt Sleeve Length (boys only).* The arm should be held at a right angle to the body, with the elbow bent. Measure from the base of the neck at the center back, across the shoulder and along the arm, then over the elbow to the wrist bone.
14. *Height.* With the child standing against a wall, measure height without shoes from the top of the head to the floor.

Breast or chest and waist measurements are the *key* measurements for determining which pattern size to buy. Do *not* use age as an indicator for pattern size. For girls between sizes, buy the size closest to breast, shoulder and back waist length measurements. For boys' shirts, use a pattern that is sized closest to the neckline circumference. Buy the pattern size closest to the chest measurement for jackets.

Compare the measurements on the pattern envelope size chart with those of the child to determine what alterations might be needed. If you actually measure the paper pattern, you will find it measures larger than the measurements given on the pattern envelope. This is because ease is allowed for body movement so the

garment will not fit like a second skin. Patterns for babies and toddlers also have diaper allowance in addition to normal fitting ease. Some toddler's and children's (called little boys' and girls' sizes in ready-to-wear) patterns have the same breast and waist measurements. However, children's patterns are longer and both the shoulders and back are wider.

Selecting Fabrics

Fabrics for children's clothes should be soft, absorbent and lightweight for comfort. Firmly woven and closely knit fabrics are the most durable. Denim, poplin, duck and many synthetic knits have a reputation for toughness, and are ideal for play clothes. Polyester-cotton blends can provide comfort, durability and easy care. Avoid harsh fabrics that may be rough or scratchy as they may irritate the child's skin. Colorfastness, shrinkage resistance, permanent press, flame resistance, soil release and washability are other fiber and fabric characteristics to consider when selecting fabrics for children's clothes. Read care labels to determine if fabrics will be easy to care for.

Printed fabrics do not show soil or wrinkles as easily as solid colors. Choose colors and prints that are well-suited to the child. Fabric designs should be small and scaled to the child's size. Large, splashy prints and large plaids are overpowering and out of proportion to a child's small size.

Select good quality fabrics. Be sure that printed fabrics are printed on the straight grain of the fabric. Generally, only colorfast, washable fabrics should be used for garment construction.

Economize by looking for alternate fabric sources. Check the remnant counter for short lengths of fabric suitable for children's wear. Two remnants can sometimes be combined to make an attractive and inexpensive outfit. Choose remnants that have care labels attached or ask the clerk for care information. If an outdated adult garment is made of a suitable fabric, consider remaking it into a new garment for a child.

Sewing techniques for children's garments are similar to those for adults. You may want to use some fabrics that require special handling, such as corduroy, velveteen, vinyl, fake fur, single, sweater or double knits. Check with your Extension office for publications on sewing these fabrics, or refer to a good sewing book.

Selecting Patterns

Unless you are an experienced sewer, select fabrics and designs that are simple to sew. Pattern companies offer many designs that are quick-to-sew because they include few pattern pieces. Simple designs will show off a lively print to best advantage.

Choose garment styles that "grow" with the child, such as raglan sleeves and elasticized waists. Simple patterns that can have ruffles or tucks added for additional length are preferable. Two-piece garments can be worn longer than one-piece garments because they are easier to lengthen. Garments without waistlines can usually be worn longer than those with waistlines. Consider styles that can be worn as tops with pants when they become too short for dresses. Also, look for loose fitting styles that will not soon become too snug.

Features of the garment should allow the child to dress without assistance. Front closures with large fasteners are easier than back fasteners for a child to manipulate. Distinguish the front of the garment from the back and the child will have less of a tendency to wear it backwards.

A touch of trim can make a child's garment something special. Consider what kind of trim might be used when selecting the pattern and fabric. Decorative machine stitching, embroidery, smocking, ribbon, rickrack, applique, ruffles, lace and bias bindings are some possibilities. Be sure that the care requirements of the trim are compatible with those of the garment fabric. If growth tucks will be included in the garment design, decide how to cover the crease lines when the tucks are let out.

Pattern and Fabric Preparation

Children grow in spurts and their body proportions change rapidly. Most alterations on children's patterns are changes in length, such as sleeve length, back waist length and finished garment length. Make these alterations at the lines provided on the pattern. Before cutting the pattern apart for lengthening, extend the grainline through the lengthening and shortening line. When making length alterations on a bottom edge, be sure to include the desired amount of hem depth.

When possible, locate pattern adjustments where they won't interfere with darts or design features. Sometimes darts may also need alterations to provide more or less fullness.

Pattern circumference may need to be increased for the chubby child or decreased for the very thin child. Alteration techniques for fitting adults shown in sewing books can be readily adapted to children's wear.

Preshrink all fabrics, notions and trims to prevent shrinkage after the garment is made. Use the same care methods for preshrinking that you plan to use on the finished garment. Also check the wash water for discoloration due to dye loss.

Tips for Safe Sewing

- Keep shears closed and out of the reach of small hands.
- Use pins with large, colored heads that don't disappear into carpets or blend with the flooring.
- Keep the iron cord and outlet out of the child's reach. Always turn off and unplug the iron when you leave the sewing area.
- Unplug the sewing machine when you leave it so that the child cannot operate it.
- Make a "safe" sewing box for the child so your own sewing equipment won't be such a temptation. Zippers, empty spools and fabric scraps of different textures fascinate young children.
- Find a corner that you can devote to sewing so you don't waste time taking things out and putting them away every time you take a break. Your sewing corner should be a place that can be closed off so small children cannot get into it in your absence.
- Remove all pins when trying garments on young children. If you are checking a hem or circumference measurement, use safety pins -- not straight pins.

Sewing Hints

General Sewing Rules

- Place all pattern pieces on the grain of the fabric.
- Pin baste and stitch as much as you can before pressing. Always press a seam open or an area of construction flat before joining it to another section. Do all of the pressing you can before you return to the machine.
- Understitch faced areas wherever possible so the facing will not roll out and show on the right side of the garment. To do this, stitch on the right side of the facing, close to the well of the seam, through the facing and all seam allowances. Grade and clip seam allowances before understitching.
- Save time and add to the garment's durability by machine sewing whenever possible.
- Ask for care labels when purchasing fabrics and sew them into the garments.

Seams

- Use 5/8 inch seams or as indicated on the pattern tissue. Most seams in knits do not require an edge finish. On firm fabrics that ravel, zigzag along the raw edges; for lightweight fabrics, turn the raw edge under 1/8 inch and stitch on the fold.

- Use flat-felled seams on rough-and-tumble playclothes made of a sturdy fabric such as denim. A welt or double welt seam may also be used.

Quick and Easy Methods

- Sew trim on by machine, using a straight stitch or zigzag. Save handwork for delicate fabrics and for special occasion clothes.
- To anchor facings, cuffs, waistbands or bias bindings in place, machine stitch in the well of the seam from the right side of the garment. This "stitch in the ditch" hides stitches in the seamline.
- Eliminate facings on a sleeveless or collarless garment by binding the neck and armhole edges with commercial doublefold bias tape after the seam allowance has been trimmed off.
- Mark the front of the garment with a decorative design so it looks different from the back. On garments where this is not possible, apply a small piece of ribbon or trim to the inside center back of the garment. A child quickly learns to place this mark to the back when getting dressed.

Adding Growth Features

Add growth tucks above the hemline on a child's dress to allow for lengthening. The additional length for tucking must be added *before* the pattern is cut and must also be considered when purchasing fabric. For a decorative effect, try three rows of horizontal tucks, each 1/2 inch deep. This will allow you to lengthen the garment 3 inches without redoing the hem. Use machine basting so that the tucks can be easily removed.

If the garment has long sleeves, try adding similar growth tucks on the lower part of the sleeve as a design touch. Make these tucks shallow -- about 1/4 inch. Tucks are put in after the underarm seams are sewn. When these tucks are let out, cover the stitching lines with trim and the garment will have a new look.

A waistline tuck can be made just above the waistline seam. Add 1 or 2 inches in length to the bodice before cutting out the pattern. If darts are involved, extend their length as well. Before attaching the bodice to the skirt, sew in the "growth" tuck on the wrong side of the bodice. The depth of the tuck will be half of the addition. Press the tuck up. To let the bodice length "grow," release the tuck and cover any fade marks with a pretty new sash or trim.

If you choose a pattern with a waistline seam, increase the waistline circumference of the bodice and skirt by 1 inch to allow for growth. Add 1/4 inch to each side seam of the bodice and skirt, tapering out from original seamlines. Omit back darts, if any. Construct the garment, following the pattern instructions. Then make a casing of bias tape along the inside back waistline seam. Preshrink and insert narrow elastic into the casing. Stitch one end of the elastic to a side seam. Adjust the fullness to fit the child. Then fasten the other end of the elastic in place by machine or hand, leaving any extra length of elastic inside the garment. Let the elastic out as the dress needs to "grow," or completely remove it. To reduce bulk, you can also stitch the elastic into the seam without using a casing.

If the garment has straps, add a little extra length to the button end. As the child grows, the button can be moved down.

Another way to add length to pants or sleeves is to add a cuff to the garment. This cuff can be let down when more length is needed. The hem can also be let out to add length.

Reinforcements

Reinforce the top corners of a patch pocket. Before attaching a pocket, iron small squares of fusible mending tape or interfacing to the *wrong* side of the garment. To secure the pocket, stitch a small triangle at the top of each pocket corner.

Reinforce knee areas before stitching the leg seams. Cut two large, rectangular patches about 8 inches long and wide enough to extend into the leg seams. Center the patch over the wrong side of the knee area. Machine stitch the patch in place. Sew the leg seams.

Seats, elbows and knees get the most strain. Decorative appliques or iron-on patches can be added for strength.

Mend tears with machine zigzag stitching, iron-on mending tape or a fabric patch on the inside of the garment. On the right side, cover the patch with a decorative applique.

Reinforce under closures. Button and buttonhole areas should be interfaced. When zipper snappers are used on children's clothing, reinforce the fabric under them. Use a piece of woven tape or an extra strip of firmly woven fabric for these reinforcements.

Sew buttons on with thread shanks to make them more secure and easier to button. The buttonhole is less strained and closes over the thread shank.

Hems

Avoid handwork on playclothes where possible. Use a simple machine straight stitch, zigzag or decorative stitch for hems, but remember that decorative stitches are very difficult to remove.

Try a machine blind hem. If your sewing machine has a zigzag hemming stitch, follow the manual for blind hemming directions.

¹Adapted originally by Linda K. Biles, former Extension Specialist-Clothing and Textiles, from "Sewing for Children" (Circular HE-339) by Sonja Rue, Clothing Specialist. Cooperative Extension Service, North Dakota State University.

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