



Skills Progression - Whittling

Whittling or wood carving is a skill many children are eager to learn, likely because it requires a true responsibility and trust in them. Once children have practised safe carving motions and positions they can soon build their confidence with basic whittling projects. Many children enjoy repeating whittling the same kind of craft again and again until it comes easily to them and then moving on to something more advanced. Here is a suggested progression of how you can guide a child to develop their skills with proposed projects and techniques.

Primer

Any whittling must be primed with a knife safety brief where the child(ren) understand the hazards involved, from the point of receiving the knife, using the knife and how to put it away (not move around the space with an open blade). See our Knife Safety video for further details.

It is also helpful for children who are going to embark on a whittling project with an intended outcome to have examples of the finished craft and at times examples of the stages along the way. This can be from beginners, demonstrating how to create a peeled end of a stick for cooking dampers (bread on a stick over the fire), to more advanced projects such as carving spoons.

Ages

This is very dependent on your context and the individual child. We often teach children who we are working with weekly and have built a relationship with from the age of 6 years. In some forest school contexts it is challenging to have high enough ratios of experienced and trained adults to teach whittling to a class or bigger group. You will have to assess your situation as to when it is appropriate. Working one:one with children I have also taught four year olds, but as I say, this is child dependent.

Duration

It is good to monitor the children's focus and warmth whenever they are whittling. You will find some children are able to focus on projects in an attentive way for longer than others at times regardless of age. It is helpful to be able to stop a project and pick it back up the following week if they are losing focus or getting too cold to whittle safely. I wouldn't start introducing whittling with less than a good half an hour to do a safety brief and give the children a chance to get a good feel for carving or make a start on the project.

Set Up

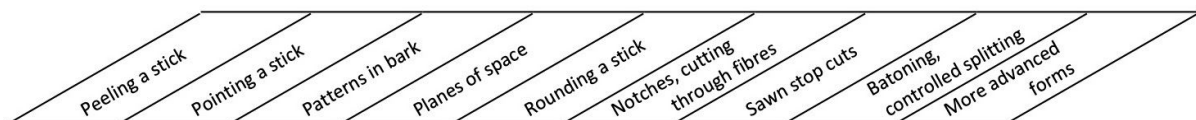
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You will want to prepare safe working spaces for each person who is going to whittle. There are many ways of creating a safe working space, however the primary principles are for each person to have:

- Space - nobody else within reach (often referred to as a safety bubble or blood bubble)
- Stable seat that enables their bottom to be level with or slightly above their knees and no obstruction to the sides (such as arms on a camping chair). We often use wooden stumps to sit on from our fire circle, I've also seen people effectively use small collapsable stools, children spaced out on a tree trunk of an appropriate height. When a certain proficiency is developed you may feel comfortable allowing children to whittle seated on the ground, however they need good technique for this otherwise there is a tendency to be carving within their 'danger triangle' (over their lap cross-legged) where a slip could cause a cut to the femoral artery.
- Clear boundaries / awareness for others in the group who may be engaged in free-play that there is whittling happening in this area

Steps to this Suggested Progression

- Peeling the stick, getting used to the motion of using a knife in a simple way
- Pointing a stick, developing more wrist strength behind the cut and learning about how the angle of the knife affects the depth of the cut
- Making patterns in the bark - this is achievable and fun for children (magic wands, staffs) and develops skills for use with stop cuts later on
- Planes of space - bringing concept of form to what they are making. Rather than whittling around the existing form of the round stick, bringing consciousness to creating 'sides' of the wood. This also involves carving deeper and developing wrist strength and familiarity of angles. (Butter Knife)
- Notches and Cutting through Fibres - developing whittling skills in the middle of a piece rather than pushing through to the end. Introducing the 'double thumb technique' and more control with 'scoop cuts'. (Pegs, mushrooms)
- Sawn Stop Cuts and Understanding the Grain - it can be a revelation to realise they can remove large chunks of wood in a quick and controlled way. This technique with batoning (or controlled splitting) is often used for making swords, mallets, spatulas.
- More advanced forms - Spoons are a great project, however do require a good understanding and competency in the above techniques.



Equipment Needed

- First Aid Kit to hand
- Well-maintained whittling knives (in alignment with your insurance and the law)
- Harvested wood - fresh green wood is easier to carve as well as certain types of wood. When first starting, softer woods such as Lime are great but we generally use what there is an abundance of at our site: hazel, birch, alder, willow. (Avoid hard woods)
- If harvesting wood with your group, you'll need a saw / loppers / secateurs also

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Teacher Tricks and Tips

- Younger children learn through imitation, so ensure how you demonstrate is how you want them to do it
- It can help to help guide their hand a few times to help them get the motion and angle
- Be prepared to help them when they get stuck on a knot so that they continue building their confidence with what is achievable for them at the skill level and stage they are at

Invisible Learning

- Focus
- Responsibility
- Awareness
- Creativity
- Self-esteem

Hazards to Highlight

- Cuts to the whittler - fingers in front of the blade, or not in a safe whittling posture
- Cuts to another child or adult in the space
- If a child comes to you for help with a knife in their hand, hazard of them slipping and falling and causing a cut either to themselves or someone nearby. Make clear agreements about moving in the space before you begin.

Risk Assessment Considerations

These are the risk assessment consideration documents to be referred to for this activity.

- Safe Knife Use
- Individual risk assessment - is there a child in your group with any anger management issues, impaired hearing for getting their attention quickly or such like to consider?
- Site risk assessment (specific to your site)

Links

- Knife Safety Brief
- Respectful harvest of materials
- All our whittling project films that take you step by step through how to make them
- Tool Safety Brief

Tags

Whittling, Skills, Wood work, Carving, Craft