Teaching English Smocking To Children

By Janice Ferguson
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BY
JANICE FERGUSON

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Sharing the Joy

Teaching English Smocking
to Children

Program Overview

Janice Ferguson P.O. Box 23 Glenwood, FL 32722 904/734-7152

1-3 hour program description: In order to pass on their love of English smocking, mamas, auntsies and grannies come together with children (ages 5 and older) interested in learning this classic needle art. Each child will make a keepsake smocked egg, a worthy project for priceless first stitches. Finishing at home will be necessary.

Kits
batiste 22" x 8"
Use quilting thread to match fabric to pleat 9 full space rows, one 1/2 row (10 pleating threads). Center pleating on the piece of fabric, leaving nearly equal amounts of unpleated fabric on either end:
pleated practice piece, needle, contrasting floss with which adult can demonstrate stitches for child
#7 crewel needle (threaded, knotted and inserted into the next pleat after having done 4-5 stem stitches on row #2)
27" 1/8 satin ribbon
brass safety pin (attached to top of pleated piece, the end opposite the half space row)
3 large colored head pins (stuck through the rosettes into the egg)
10 sequin pins (stuck into styrofoam egg)
embroidery floss, 2 colors, 2 yards of each
2 lace medallions (4" of 5/8" edging gathered into a circle, raw edges whipped)
2 1/2" styrofoam egg

Objectives
After this program, each child will be able to:
1. repeat some history of and uses for English smocking.
2. identify pleats, hills, valleys and gathering threads on pleated fabric
3. execute at least four stitches, stem, outline, cable and wave
Program activities:

1. Oral introduction, **no longer than 5 minutes**, including information on
   a. **History of work smocks** — Even though there is some controversy
      over the accuracy of reports that work smocks were in fact,
      fabric billboards advertising an occupation (woodcutter,
      gardener, shepherd, etc.) children seem to find this interesting
      and memorable. It seems worthy or repeating for this reason.
   b. **Longevity of smocking** — People have been smocking for more than
      100 years before Grandma was born!!!!!! WOW!
   c. **Applications of smocking** — Since the children are probably already
      familiar with wonderful finished garments, have a small display
      of other smocked accessories (tote bags, barrettes, etc.) or
      engage them in a brief discussion of other accessories they have
      seen or can imagine.
   d. **Sample of finished project**

2. **Hands-on introduction, no more than 7 minutes**
   a. **Examine kits**
   b. **Learn basic vocabulary by examining and identifying items in kit**
      1) pleats
      2) hills
      3) valleys
      4) floss (not "thread" or "string")
      5) gathering threads/rows

3. **Children stitching**
   a. **Demonstrate stem stitch.** If a smocking demonstrator is available,
      show groups of 5-7 children. Otherwise, have adult with each
      child demonstrate for them on the practice piece, not on the
      egg. Have children stitch no more than half the row before
      going on to the next stitch. Pull remainder of floss to back.
   b. **Demonstrate outline stitch in like manner. Children stitch.**
      Continue stitching until 10 minutes before the meeting is over.

4. **Demonstrate the completion of the egg, weaving the ribbon through the**
   waves, seaming the side, covering the ends with lace rosette.

Sources and references:

1. **Supplies should be readily available.**

2. **Bibliography**
   a. "Children's Projects—Smocked Barrettes," Janice Ferguson,
      **Creative Needle**, SEPT/OCT 1985
   b. "Teaching English Smocking to Children," Janice Ferguson, **Sew**
      **Beautiful**, Holiday 1990
Keepsake Smocked Egg

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Kit contents:
batiste 22" x 8"
Use quilting thread in same color as fabric to pleat 9 full space rows, one 1/2 row (10 pleating threads). Center pleating on the piece of fabric, leaving nearly equal amounts of unpleated fabric on either end. #7 crewel needle (threaded, knotted and inserted into the next pleat after having done 4-5 stem stitches on row #2)
pleated practice piece on which adult can demonstrate stitches for child, needle, contrasting floss 27" 1/8 satin ribbon
brass safety pin (attached to top of pleated piece-- the end opposite the half space row)
3 colored head straight pins (stuck through the rosettes into the egg)
15 sequin pins (stuck into styrofoam egg)
embroidery floss, 2 colors, 2 yards of each
2 lace medallions (a 4" length of 5/8" edging gathered into a circle, raw edges whipped together)
2 1/2" styrofoam egg

Directions:
Begin each row on the 3rd pleat. End each row with 3 pleats unsmocked.
NOTE: If time is short or child seems to be tiring, stop with #4, the one-step full-space wave.

1. Row 2----work stem stitch.
2. Rethread needle--show child how to begin row.
3. Row 9 work--- outline stitch.
4. Rows 4 and 7--- work cable stitch.
5. Between rows 5 & 6 ---work one-step, full space wave.
6. Rows 3 & 8---work one step, half space wave.
7. Remove gathering threads ONLY if caught in smocking stitches.
8. Remove gathering threads from seam allowance (three pleats) to right side of egg and tape away from seam line (toward smocking).
9. With wrong sides together, seam (by hand or machine) together short sides of piece, taking care not to catch gathering threads in seam. Make sure smocking rows match up to one another. Turn right side out.
10. Using brass safety pin from top of piece or large tapestry needle, weave ribbon under wave between rows 5 & 6, beginning at center front.
11. Slip styrofoam egg inside smocked tube. Fit fabric to egg by drawing up and knotting gathering threads at seam line.
12. Trim excess fabric from top and bottom and pin flat with sequin pins.
13. Tie 1/8" ribbon in bow at center front and secure with pin.
Optional: Pin ribbon loop at top for hanging.
For a more ambitious design:
1. Row #3 and #8--mirror image half-space waves, forming diamonds.
2. Row #2 and #9--work outline and stem stitch against previous row, forming wheat stitch.
3. Work satin stitch in baby wave diamonds.
4. Work flowerettes between rows #4 and #7.
5. Work double cable on rows #4 and #7.
Sharing The Joy
By Janice Ferguson

When my daughter Rebecca was three she loved to pull the needle through the fabric for me when I was smocking. It was slow going at best, but it made her happy for a while. At four she was not so easily placated. “Mama, I want my own smocking,” she announced. So I gave her a pleated sampler, a needle and floss, and rethreaded her needle with nearly every stitch. But she did learn to smock from left to right, to insert the needle into the pleat from right to left, and to speak conversational Smockese. “My floss is tangled, my needle is unthreaded and I caught the gathering thread again, Mama. I skipped a pleat and my tension is too tight. Now I want to do waves and smock hearts, Mama. Show me how, Mama.” She was happy for shorter and shorter periods of time.

By the time Rebecca was five, my mother, a wise and wonderful woman, suggested that Rebecca needed a real project to work on. Practicing for a year could kill anyone’s enthusiasm for needlework, she pointed out. “Have her work on a bonnet for Alice (her favorite doll),” she suggested. “With lace and ribbon rosettes and one row of smocking it will be pretty no matter how her stitches look.”

How right she was. Those words of suggestion became my principles of smocking with children. And now, after teaching some 60 children from 4 to 13 years old to smock, I have discovered some teaching fundamentals which I hope you will find helpful when you share the joy of needlework with your children and grandchildren.

And surely you will, surely you must share the joy, just as you share your love of reading and music and art with them. As they observe you happily stitching away, they want to join in the fun. When Rebecca was given her sampler, my son Ryan, then eight years old, insisted that he have one too. He tried smocking and was smug with his understanding of the basic principles, but he found more satisfaction in needlepoint and his G.I. Joe collection. But he wanted the opportunity to learn what it was that I enjoyed so much. And Rebecca wanted to learn how to make that bonnet for Alice.

Rebecca was so pleased with herself and the bonnet that we made a matching bishop for Alice. When the set was entered in the Creative Arts division for youth at our wonderful Volusia County Fair, Rebecca won Best in Class and a $15 cash prize. For first graders there are no greater motivators than cash and prestige. All of her little friends wanted to learn to smock. Then their older sisters wanted a class, as did the 4-H groups.

But let me get back to the basics of teaching smocking to children.

The principles are all just corollaries to the fundamental rule—GUARANTEE THEIR SUCCESS—IT MUST BE A NO-FAIL PROJECT.

1. Give them a project—not just a practice piece. They want their first stitches to count for more than practice.
2. The project must depend on the child’s smocking for neither structural integrity nor attractive appearance.

For a beginner, it is hard enough to work on the right direction and keep the floss from tangling. If proper tension and perfect stitching are necessary for the project to work, failure is possible. Eliminate that possibility.

3. The project must be genuinely attractive, apart from the smocking. Then Aunt Bertha can say “It’s beautiful!” and both Bertha and the smocker will know that it is true.

By embellishing the project with lace and/or ribbon, making it from nice goods, and finishing it as you would a project of your own, you are assuring your child of a quality project. You are also assuring her that her workmanship merits the attention you are giving it.

4. The project must be small enough to be completed in a few settings no longer than the child’s attention span.

Children, like adults, are anxious to complete a project so they can show off their new-found skill to friends and family. They should have a quick, simple, and successful project completed to feed their enthusiasm.

5. Plan to teach no more than a few skills per project, and add no more skills to subsequent projects until the child feels comfortable and satisfied with her level of achievement.

Smocking stitches are one skill and threading a needle is quite another skill. She doesn’t have to learn it all on the first or second project.

My goals for my five and six year olds were:

a) learn terminology: floss, pleat, hill and valley, gathering thread, and raw

b) execute stem stitch
c) smock on or near line of gathering thread
d) complete the project

Note that I did not expect them to thread their needles, tie their knots, strip their floss or make a bullion rose. Their first project was a Christmas ball, and they were given a kit with the first six stitches of the first row done. The needle was inserted into the next pleat ready to pull through. However, some of the 7’s and 8’s did learn to thread their needles and 9’s and 10’s could do the outline and cablestitch and knot off with little difficulty. If the child is ready for more, give it to her.

6. Make it a fun and special time.

Choose a time when you won’t be in a hurry, when you can make this a leisurely, rich experience. I like atmosphere, so I put on some soothing music, prepare a pretty tray with a pitcher of juice and two of our best glasses, and settle in on the wicker couch on the back porch with my little daughter.

It is nice to have your own smocking there so you won’t be looking over her shoulder with every stitch. But don’t expect to get any real smocking done yourself or you will be disappointed.

And do praise the child. There is surely something she is doing well enough to praise. Once a little 7 year old had smocked two and sometimes three pleats to a stitch, had travelled the gathering thread like a winding road, and left loops like chenille at each stitch. As I searched for something to praise, I saw that she had really persevered. "Sara," I said, "You are so diligent. I can see that you are a little girl who sticks with a job until it’s done." Sara was as proud as her neighbor Jill, who smocked each stitch perfectly.

Jill was praised for that.

At six, Rebecca is a happy and accomplished little needleworker. She has completed enough projects that she thinks she should be able to come to SAGA meetings with me, but in lieu of attendance she sends her show-and-tell projects with me.

Rebecca often takes her smocking bag along on trips or visits to the homes of her grandmother or Aunt Jacqueline.

We have a common bond— we are two needleworkers sharing the joy, just as my mother shared with me.

Why not start a project to share with your youngster now?

Editor’s note: Janice Ferguson is currently co-owner of the retail shop, Keepsake Smocking in Glenwood, Florida. With a Master’s degree in special education, she spent six years teaching before becoming a correspondent for the Deland Sun newspaper. Her published patterns and plates include "Rebecca’s Bow Dress" and "Tulips & Lace".
ARTISAN POINTS AWARDED FOR PARTICIPATION IN A SAGA STITCHES PROGRAM

It is the responsibility of the Group Leader or individual member to use a copy of this form to notify each participant of the Artisan point that has been rewarded to her.

Please make a copy of this form for each SAGA Artisan member who has participated in a SAGA Stitches Program. The SAGA member should keep this form with her Artisan documentation as proof of participation in the SAGA Program. It is the responsibility of the Artisan enrollee to document her participation in the SAGA Program.

One Artisan point will be earned for participation in a SAGA Stitches Program.

Name of SAGA Program

Group Leader’s Signature

Date of Participation

Participant’s Name

SAGA #

Artisan #

Note: Artisan Handbook Revised Edition 2006, page 1, letter F, “An Artisan participant may apply points that were awarded up to 30 days prior to enrollment.”

Dear SAGA Program Participant:

Thank you for participating in this SAGA Program. For those of you who are enrolled in the Artisan Program, it is no longer necessary for you to send a copy of the Artisan point form to the Artisan Committee Chair for verification at the time SAGA Program is undertaken.

Each participant must keep a copy of the completed form with her Artisan card as documentation. When the Artisan Program participant sends a copy of her card to the Artisan Program Chair for verification of the points attained, a copy of all documentation must accompany the card.