

Teaching Kids Woodworking -- reaching for success

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Over the years I have had the occasion to teach working with tools to kids as young as 3 years old. At whatever age the secret is to know the individual kids attention span and prepare the work to give them a feeling of completion and success within those limits. Regular sessions of success and completion, no matter how short will actually develop their attention span rapidly. If necessary divide projects into modules -- so that although they may not complete the whole project in one session, they do complete a specific recognizable module in one session.

I don't generally put segments from my long ago TV shows on this web site, but in this particular show we had 8 year old Amada as a guest. So many people have asked me to pass on some of the tips I have for working with young kids, I thought I would illustrate them with my visit with Amanda. Aside from being pretty nervous and unable to speak (I am sure her parents would contest that) she did really well. By my calculations she is about 22 today. I hope her kids enjoy watching this!

1- Always plan so that the task at hand is finished before the kid's attention span is finished. That often means looking at a segment of a project and timing back from completion how long they can work on it -- then do the up front work to that final starting point. You will discover with time that you can move further and further back on a project as the kid gains confidence and interest.

2- Always use real tools, small but real. Yes they will get scratches, maybe even cuts -- but the real risk of hurting themselves comes from semi-sharp toys, not real tools. Tools that are sharp cut and quickly demand respect. Tools that are unable to cut get pushed too hard, things go wrong, frustrations arise and interest and attention spans go out the window.

3- Teach clamping and bracing as an essential and constant first step. Secure pieces of wood or other material are not dangerous as only the tool is moving. Early teaching might be nothing more than having the kid clamp things for you -- helping them to feel that this is important for everyone, not just kids. When things are completely clamped, you can demand that they have both hands on any somewhat dangerous tool -- like a utility knife -- so that they don't have any fingers sitting around looking to get cut.

4- For any tool that is difficult to control, start the cut for them. For instance a hand saw in a piece of wood is difficult to start the cut and get started in the right direction both. If you cut deep enough into the wood, you not only make the end of the cut more achievable, but the kerf can serve as a comfortable guide.

5- New pull saws are far easier for kids to use than the old push saws. They don't bind so much -- although they are more difficult to cut straight with -- and they require less force to move through the material.

6- Use Hack Saws for very young children. It is difficult to cut yourself with a hack-saw (scratch yes, but not cut) and yet they are "real" saws like the adults use and they do cut, although slowly. Hack saws in styrofoam blocks, with the cut already started, can be accomplished by 3 and 4 year olds far more quickly than you might imagine.

Examples: That racing car with dowel axels, knob wheels and a styrofoam body: for a very young kid, just let them finish cutting the assembled car off the longer piece of styrofoam; for a more experienced kid just shaping the body could be one project -- then assembling the wheels a second one. Cutting the dowels and drilling holes in the knobs could be a task for an even older kid. One simple car that can be used as a teaching device for the whole family.

For another entry about kids and shop safety, follow the link to [Safety in the Workshop -- the Kids Version](#).

jon

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