

Felting as Handwork in Early Childhood: A Will That Works in the Limb Janene Ping, Hawthorne Valley School

One of the last gifts that Astrid Barnes left for the Peachblossom Kindergarten was a large basket filled with felted hats that the children had made during Advent. Lovingly finished off with a blanket stitch and topped with bells that tinkled merrily as they were carried back to the kindergarten, the hats were a beautiful testament of creative experience that had given the children a sense of wonder and accomplishment.

Wool felting is a dynamic activity for the young child. It combines a connection with the element of water and repetitive motion working in the limbs - the interaction of friction between the two makes the fibers lock on a molecular level. We can realize and give thanks for the gifts of mother earth and our animal brothers and sisters as we experience shearing in the spring or plant gathering for dye in the fall. Fleece can be washed out of doors and dried in the sun by many busy hands. Carding is a rhythmic and peaceful ongoing activity that is very satisfying to the sense of touch in the young child. In the felting itself, there is the magic submersion of limbs into warm water and soapy bubbles that fills the need for true sensory experience.

The finished project often reveals much about the child who worked it - a simple felt ball can remain soft and fleece-like, or be packed as tight as a golf ball. The will working within each child leaves a mark on the end product, but this is not to say that we enter in to the activity for the end product! It is the process of becoming that is paramount in the young child's experience and development. All activity must be taken up with great joy and purpose.

Through the years in the Peachblossom Kindergarten, we have developed a series of seasonal projects that embrace the sensory experience of working with wool. All projects take preparation that the children participate in - and all involve activity that each child, whether 3 or 6 years old, is capable of doing himself. Sometimes we make a simple, impressionistic fleece form, sometimes I spin the carded wool to make bracelets or small balls of finger knitting yarn. Sometimes we felt over a finger as a form (a finger puppet!), we use our hands or our feet! Astrid was particularly fond of foot felting as a means to bring forces within the children right down to earth (incarnation drawn to the tips of the toes). Combining Astrid's deep understanding of the child's need for movement in the limbs with my enthusiasm for children's hands-on experience, we embraced seasonal felting projects with renewed interest and inspiration.

With Astrid's passing, I would like to make a gift of these insights that others too may find such activity enriching to their kindergarten or Nursery programs. Following are general instructions for a fall, winter, and spring fiber project. (See the Michaelmas Star Ball article) Caution to all teachers though - first, experiment yourself before embarking on this journey with children. All wool fibers have unique character and felt in varying degrees. Fast felting fleeces are best for kindergarten projects - Merino and Corridale, particularly fine and crimped wool work well. Long, hairy "worsted" types of wool do not. Recommended reading is the book, *Felting by Hand* by Anne Einset Vickery, Craft Works Publishing.