

# Special Edition

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Special News About Special People

## Preschool

### Shop

Children's progressions from novice tool users to seasoned woodworkers continues to fascinate me as I immerse myself in another year of teaching Shop. The paths taken are as myriad as the artifacts produced along the way as each child brings his or her unique approach, vision and skills to the process of creation.

In the years that I have been fortunate enough to bear witness to this process, some broad patterns have emerged. Children do not generally take up every approach I outline below, nor should the methodologies listed be viewed as a developmental sequence. They are given to offer a glimpse at the styles at play during any given day in Shop.

As children are introduced to woodworking, their earliest efforts are generally centered on the tools in use -- and avoiding personal injury. Learning to balance the hammer to strike finishing nails instead of fingernails, to bear down and crank with the hand drill or brace and bit, to trust that they can wield the crosscut saw (and that Mom and Dad won't mind), are the matters at hand. The wood involved is a mere vehicle or adjunct. The classic "project" at this stage consists of two pieces of wood (hastily snatched from the scrap box) flat-stacked one upon the other with a single nail driven through the center to hold them together. Children verbalize little about the purpose of their efforts at this level as their efforts *are* their purpose.

Once a certain degree of proficiency with the basic tools is attained, a child may begin following a predictable routine:

- Step 1 - Get two or three pieces of wood from the scrap box
- Step 2 - Nail them together and color them with crayons
- Step 3 - Ask if there is more time in the period
- Step 4 - Return to Step 1

Many a family has had its year's kindling requirements filled in a single day by this method.

Moving from flat-stacking to "three-dimensional" work, exploring alternative ways to configure and join wood, is a common guidepost which often presages the next significant change that may occur in a child's woodworking. In a typical scenario, one child in a group announces that his or her two pieces of flat-stacked or otherwise assembled wood *are* something (a house, a spaceship, a physical representation of world angst). At this point, other children in the group generally get the idea that their work too has the potential to be viewed as representational (if not by their parents and grandparents, at least by their peers) and each two-piece configuration becomes ripe with possible interpretations. Once a child has grasped that the medium of wood can be used to convey meaning, he or she may roam through four general approaches to woodworking:

*Non-representational tool work* - The child focuses on the processes of tool use. He or she operates independently in selecting wood and setting up to saw, drill, hammer, etc. The child generally flat-stacks his/her pieces of wood. The work is completed in a single period. The child does not describe the product of his/her efforts as representational.

*Parents see a way to save money on the heating bill.*

*Serendipitously representational tool work* - As above. However, if the child's configuration of wood suggests a real-world counterpart to him/her, he/she may describe it as such. The child may also saw, drill or add additional pieces to the construction to make it more representational and seek help in doing so. The work is usually completed in one period.

*Parents see a way to save money on the heating bill - but feel a little guilty about it.*

*Informal project work* - The child works independently from internal plans. To minimize tool use, he/she will generally work with pieces carefully culled from the scrap box. If any measuring is needed, it is commonly done piece-to-piece with lines to be sawn drawn freehand. Plans are flexible enough to allow "close enough" fitting of pieces and for projects to evolve beyond initial concepts. The work is usually completed in one to four periods.

*Parents start doing detailed price comparisons of oil, gas and solar heating while assuring their child that his/her project is safely stored in the attic.*

*Formal project work* - The child works with varying degrees of assistance on personally developed or commercial plans. Materials are selected, measured, marked and cut to specifications. Work can extend from one week to several years.

*Parents request that their child's next project be a wing on their house to be named The Rose Valley Shop Project Annex.*

There is something truly awe inspiring in the way a three-year-old comes to handle a 16 ounce hammer, comes to be a tool user. From the initial shock of the tool's heft, through the unconscious search for the exact point where strength and balance find tenuous agreement, through the faltering arcs and spasmodic thrusts of raw potential seeking guided purpose, into the exact moment when hammer meets nail in the first symphony of minute muscle movements that form the chord of control and the child sings in the voice of the metal on metal, "I am! I can!"

*It's not just me -is it?*

For those of you struggling to make sense of the unique vocabulary your children are bringing home from the Shop program, I offer the following glossary:

## *The Preschool Shop Glossary*

**Baby Nails** – Brads, tacks and wire nails shorter than number 3 **Finishing Nails**.

**“Beedy-beedy-beep”** – The sound my watch makes to signal time to finish up for the day.

**Crackers** – See **“Making Snack.”**

**Finishing Nails** – Slender nails with small heads designed to be driven below the surface of finished wood, used primarily because they work with

**Nailspinners**. The majority of your children’s projects are joined with size 3, 4 or 6 **Finishing Nails**.

**Fuzzies** or **Lumpy Bumpies** – Rough or splintered edges on a piece of wood that would benefit from sanding.

**Giving a nail a headache** – Hammering a nail squarely on its head.

**Jacket Tree** – The branch of a sycamore tree outfitted with dowels and mounted vertically towards the rear of the shop. This is where one hangs his/her jacket upon entering the shop. Sometimes jackets are made to “fly” to the upper pegs with a flapping motion.

**Making Snack** – Nailing too close to an edge or through too thin a piece of wood so that it produces **Crackers**.

**Mousie** – A wooden rodent that climbs the wall near the door by means of a rope and pulley to feast on a block of Swiss cheese whenever the shop's door is opened.

**“Metal nails, not fingernails!”** – The cry sent up by the Shop teacher when a child has misdirected a blow of the hammer.

**Nail Nursery** – The organizer drawers in which **Baby Nails** reside.

**Nailset** – A commercially available tool designed to allow cabinetmakers to drive **Finishing Nails** below the surface of their joined pieces to be covered over and hidden.

**Nailspinner** – A commercially available device that, when mounted in a drill chuck, allows the user to spin/drill a **Finishing Nail** into wood. Developed by a finishing carpenter who was looking for a way to stop cracking delicate molding. In the SRV shop, **Nailspinners** are mounted in eggbeater-style hand drills. This pairing of drill and **Nailspinner** is generally referred to simply as a **Nailspinner**.

**Pokey-Outies** – Nails that protrude from pieces of wood. Generally caused by mismeasuring what size nail is appropriate for joining pieces together. Short protrusions are ground off at the bench grinder providing an opportunity to teach about hardness, friction and the nature of sparks. Nails that protrude too far to be ground down are bent over or replaced by shorter nails.

**Sandwich Wood** – Plywood. So named for the layered, sandwich-like appearance the wood presents when viewed on edge.

**Sleepy Nails** – Nails that have suffered an overstrike, understrike or sidestrike from a hammer, bending them. These nails are said to be “trying to take a nap.”

**“Through the small one into the tall one”** or **“Through the thin one into the thick one”** –

A mnemonic reminder that, when joining two pieces of wood of unlike thickness, the best hold will be achieved by nailing through the thinner piece into the thicker one.

**Whale Tail Nails** – Nails whose tips have not been properly cut to points during their manufacture often resulting in excess metal to either side of their points making the tips resemble whales' flukes.

**Wood Wobbles** – A condition suffered by wood being sawed when the section to be cut is mounted too far away from the vise's jaws.

**“Top hand pushes down, bottom hand goes round and round, yanko-cranko-ittilianko-round-and-round-and-down-it-goes!”** – The sing-song rhyming phrase which often attends a child’s use of the **Nailspinner**.

**Happy Teacher** – Yours truly.

*Treasure your children's work as you treasure them.*

*Until next time,*

*Mike*