

Making Soft Dolls © 2020 Steffi Stern

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Making Soft Dolls

Steffi Stern



Simple Waldorf designs to sew and love



Hawthorn Press

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my late mother, Mutti whose hands I have never seen without knitting needles or a crochet hook and who has taught me to use my hands to their best ability, keep my mind open that anything is possible and most of all the importance of not taking yourself too seriously!

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Foreword

What is a Waldorf Doll?

Waldorf, or soft, dolls are much loved with children keeping them long into adulthood, often to be handed down to children or grandchildren, along with their story. But what explains our love for and attachment to such dolls? A Waldorf doll has some disadvantages for current tastes: it can't be bought, it is modest looking and not always beautiful, one has to make it oneself, it is never simply available and may look somewhat unfinished compared with a Barbie doll.

Waldorf dolls can be bought in Waldorf schools, in some toy stores, and of course on the internet. There are even a number of manufacturers that have applied for 'Waldorf doll' patents. But are these commercially available dolls actually the real, original Waldorf doll? In this comprehensive book, *Making Soft Dolls*, Steffi guides us through the process of making our own dolls for ourselves, for our children or for our grandchildren. The point is to make it yourself and imbue it with love that you can pass on.

Rudolf Steiner often spoke about the special qualities and needs of the young child, as well as the inner attitude and soul qualities that the adult needs to acquire in order to support the development of the child. However, if one is looking for a detailed description of what a Waldorf kindergarten should look like and the concrete activities that should take place there, these are not to be found in Steiner's work. No programme and no recipes!

There are, however, a few exceptions that Steiner described quite concretely and the doll is one of these. In his first book on education Steiner described what the original Waldorf doll could look like:

'You can make a doll for a child by folding up an old napkin, twisting two corners into legs, the other two corners into arms, a knot for the head, and painting eyes, nose and mouth with blots of ink.'

An old 'doll' napkin will look different each time and thus the Waldorf doll will look completely different each time, and can adapt to the context of each family, the capacities of the educator and the desire and imagination of the children. It is flexible, open and multicultural – very modern!

Steiner was keen on promoting these lively doll companions and explains why they are so important for the development of the child. 'With the so-called beautiful doll we hinder the child from developing the unfolding of a wonderfully delicate, awakening imagination.'

The French psychologist Régine Démarthes once said, *'It is the way a child plays with a toy that makes it alive in the child's eyes. But when the toy imposes its complexity on the child, it cripples the child's creative imagination.'*

'Closed' toys determine the course and the outcome of play, while toys that are open-ended leave the child free to independently shape the course of play, fostering creativity and the capacity for problem-solving. The simple cloth doll relies on the child's creativity. It is open-ended and complete only through activity, so those delicate imaginations can develop freely.

Philipp Reubke is a senior Waldorf kindergarten teacher and member of the International Association of Waldorf Kindertages (IASWECE)

Introduction

I have crafted and created throughout my whole childhood and continue to do so to this day. The projects in this book are easy and accessible for everybody. I am not a dressmaker and only sew by hand. I love knitting and crocheting but complicated patterns leave me confused. The purpose of this book is to introduce you to doll-making and to help those who already make dolls to try other methods and ideas. The dolls in this book are relatively simple projects that enable you to create something beautiful, practical and tactile; something of good enough quality to be used every day. The process of making the doll can be as important, if not more important, than the finished project. I sincerely hope that any doll you make from this book will be loved, squeezed, and played with, tucked into bed or into a pocket to keep safe, cuddled and kissed! Perhaps they will look worn and torn and have dirty faces and in years to come, maybe they will need mending, or maybe they will look perfect forever! So long as the doll has filled a space in someone's heart, the purpose of the making and the doll itself has been fulfilled.

I made my first doll 15 years ago. I will never forget the total empowerment I felt of being able to make a toy,

not just a toy but a doll for my baby who was not even one year old. The doll itself was such a simple one, just a soft head with a little hair, a sewn-on hat and a triangular body stuffed very loosely with carded sheep wool. The sense of pride it gave me is hard to put into words. It was a feeling of freedom and liberation that I was able to give to my children a tiny bit of myself forever captured

in the shape of a toy that would be by their side. It was as if my love was there with them, even when I was not. There's a difference between buying a toy from a shop shelf, perhaps a mass-produced product, and the love you feel when you make something yourself. I remember the feeling of passionately filling every stitch with my love and hope and feeding that into that first doll.

My wish is for everybody to experience that feeling of warmth and satisfaction when sewing a little love into a handmade doll, whatever the reason you are making it.

My hope is that you as the reader of this book will find the confidence and motivation to make your very own soft doll, with the results perhaps beyond what you imagined.

Steffi Stern



Why Waldorf Dolls?

If you are not familiar with a Waldorf doll it might be useful to explain first of all what defines these dolls.

Wikipedia online has this as its interpretation:

A Waldorf doll (also called Steiner doll) is a form of doll compatible with Waldorf (or Steiner) education philosophies. Made of natural materials, such as fine woollen or cotton skin-toned fabric, generally filled with pure wool stuffing; hair and clothing materials are also made from natural fibres. The doll makers use techniques which draw on traditional European doll-making. The doll's appearance is intentionally simple in order to allow the child playing with it to develop the imagination and creative play. For instance, it has either no features, or a simple neutral expression. The legs and arms are soft and if flexible allow natural postures. They are ideally entirely natural.



This does not mean that a Waldorf doll is only suitable for people who educate their children the Waldorf way. If you are a lover of natural materials, handmade toys, and keeping features simple and innocent, then this is a great way to create dolls for people old and young, including yourself!

If there was a spectrum of dolls where one end represents 'handmade, timeless, classic and unique' and the other 'contemporary, cartoonish, mass produced', Waldorf dolls would be at the timeless and classic end. In our modern world we find plenty of assembly line-produced dolls, often with exaggerated features (huge eyes, highlighted mouths, hard bodies made from plastic, hair from man-made fibre) – all made to look the same. The handmade Waldorf doll fits into another space in a child's or adult's life: something to cuddle, to keep as an

heirloom, to appreciate through the years, to know that only one of its kind exists into which one can pour love. A doll that means so many different things to so many different people: a brother, a sister, a lost child, a lost childhood, fond memories, a baby to nurture, a child to care for, a comforter, a friend and companion.

The beauty of handmade Waldorf dolls is that the meaning of the dolls starts as soon as you gather the materials to create one! The journey starts with the making, the care and thought that is put into it, the personalisation, the materials you choose, the reasons why you are making it and how you feel whilst creating one. These reasons can be so manifold and can even change in the process. The fate of the doll may change too: you may decide to keep it when it was meant to be a gift or you may make it a gift when you had not planned to give it away.



Maybe you decide to make a doll for a baby or child (your own or someone else's). Perhaps the doll is for you and you take great pleasure in designing it to sit on your sofa for you to admire. Another reason could be that you are making it for a friend or family member who is in need of such a gift, perhaps a person at the end of their life or somebody who suffers from dementia? Perhaps the doll is made to heal yourself or somebody else. Maybe you are helping another person (child or adult) to make a doll.

I used to ask my children what colour hair and eyes they would like on their dolls, whether it should be a boy or girl. The making of the doll can be as powerful as the handmade doll itself. It is important to take a moment and be aware of why the doll is being made; with every stitch a little of that significance is added.

The meaning of a handmade doll changes over the years. I have found that a handmade doll has many stages in its life as the years go by. It may be that they get more appreciated as the years pass (by children growing older or adults going through different stages in their lives). They may get passed on and become meaningful in other ways. I treasure the doll 'Peter Püppi' that my grandmother originally made for my father: it was a loved toy for my cousins and me and then for my children and who knows what may be in store for Peter in the future? Little did my grandmother know that her 'after the war' doll, made with the few materials that she could find, would become such a treasured heirloom.

Doll Stories

When I started making dolls I found that many doll-making patterns were quite challenging and confusing, especially as you had to make all the body parts separately and then sew them together. I was so intimidated by the details in these patterns that I designed my own 'all-in-one' doll. As I shared my template with people, I was privileged to hear their 'doll stories' and I began to realise that making dolls holds a special place in people's lives and for far more profound reasons than I ever imagined.

I remember Sandy, a mother of six, a grandmother and even great-grandmother who, sadly had lost her only son when he was small. Making a doll brought her a little comfort. She talked to the dolls she made and they became little people with characters – I loved seeing how they evolved. She told me once that she had made a little doll for her own mother, who was then in a dementia care home, and how her mother loved holding the soft doll and squeezing it. She ended up making a whole load of dolls for other people in the home. She also told me that she had made a little doll for her grandson who was bullied at school, to keep in his pocket so he could feel loved when he was frightened and worried. She sewed a heart or special symbol into the body of each doll, which I found very charming and thoughtful.

On another occasion I had a lady visit me who was making dolls with women in prison who had lost a baby. The dolls were simple – a small pouch doll that would fit into a pocket – and they always had something glittery or glitzy on them. It made them extra special for these women, a real treasure they could hide away and keep safe when they weren't able to do this with their real babies.

Another woman uses doll-making as a therapeutic process with young women who suffer from anorexia. What better way to experience making a body so totally free of shape while also soft and comforting?





Once I made a doll for one of my children and they rejected her. I was heartbroken and it took me a while to learn that sometimes it is not love at first sight but it might take a little longer to grow. Now that my children are growing up, the handmade dolls have grown in value and esteem and they all remember that these were a very special gift. They are kept safe and have become heirlooms.

I believe that boys need dolls to play with too and remember one story about my own family. My three girls were playing very sweetly with their babies and it was all about nurturing, caring and organising the daily routines to keep their babies fed, warm, clean and amused. My son joined in their game with his doll and instantly he announced that there was an emergency. A fire had broken out in the house and he was the fireman who promptly initiated that the 'babies' were to be lowered from the window on the first floor via a rope into the garden, where he then transported them very carefully on his digger shovel (aka ambulance) to hospital. The whole dynamic of the play shifted from peaceful to action adventure, but all parties concerned seemed happy to join in and play their roles.

Though I was rarely allowed to mention it to my son, he always had his dolls tucked up in bed beside him when it came to bedtime, even at an age when he would have been positively upset with me if I had ever told anybody! He loved his dolls in his quiet heroic way and I would not have wanted him to have missed

out on this. The girls, on the other hand, were far more expressive about their love for their babies.

In her book *Flour Babies*, Anne Fine gives us an insight (albeit fictional, but it could be real) into a child's mind and why they might find an ally in a doll.

'I'll tell you what I like about you,' he said, staring into her big round eyes. 'You're very easy to get on with. You're not like Mum, always telling me to put my plate in the sink, or shut doors more quietly, or pick my shoes off the floor. You're not like Gran, always telling me how much I've grown, and asking what I'm going to do when I leave school. You don't want me different, like all my teachers do. You don't tease me, like Sue. And you don't run off and leave, like my Dad.'

You never know what deeper meaning a doll may have to somebody.

Reflecting on the many stories I have been told and the reasons why people engage in doll-making, I have come to believe that dolls are for everyone, not just for children. The making of the doll is often as important, if not sometimes more so, than the finished doll and all of us can benefit from a first, and a last, doll to complete the circle of life.



What You Need: Materials and Skills



Materials

You can source a lot of materials using things you already have and upcycling old garments; however there are some things that it would be a shame to compromise on and that includes the fabric for the skin for heads and bodies. The jersey I use has a natural colour and stretchy texture while being super strong.

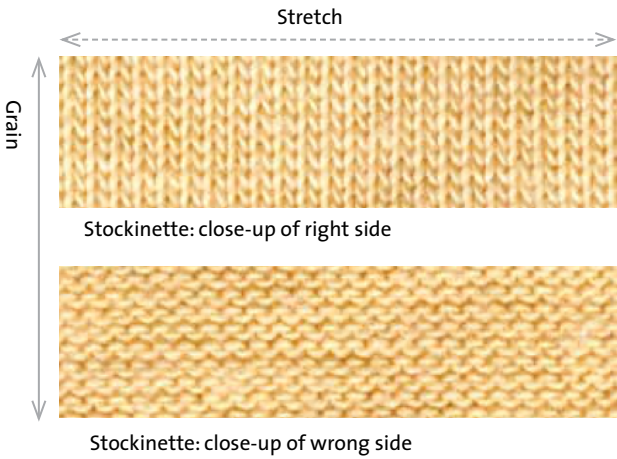
Fabrics

STOCKINETTE

The skin-coloured jersey fabric I use is a specialist fabric, a soft knitted stretchy jersey also called stockinette or tricot fabric. What's so special about the doll-making stockinette is that it is made from 100 per cent cotton and comes in different shades of skin colour. This fabric is produced for the medical industry and is used for prosthetic limb bandaging. It is relatively difficult to source in the UK, especially the heavier (double knit) quality.

In this book I use two types of knit:

1. A single knit, double-sided stockinette that is reversible and slightly stretchy. It is best used for small dolls such as the dolls' house dolls and for heads because of its slightly smoother finish.
2. A double knit, single-sided stockinette that has a right and a wrong side. The right side looks like stocking stitch, the wrong side like purl stitch. While this fabric is still stretchy, it is thicker and less elastic than the single knit stockinette and used mostly for larger dolls.



The main thing to remember for both types of stockinette is that the grain always needs to run lengthways on the head and body, which means the stretch occurs sideways, to the left and right.

It is possible to use other jersey or stretchy cotton fabrics, but inevitably their stretchiness will vary and it may be challenging to find natural skin colours.

COTTON TUBE GAUZE, DIFFERENT SIZES

When making double-layered heads, especially when an eye line is being tied, I use cotton tube gauze, which is produced for the medical industry. The two sizes I use in this book are 1.5cm (⁹/₁₆in) and 3.5cm (¹³/₈in). The tubular shape is thin and strong enough to contain the stuffing well. It is possible to use an old lightweight cotton T-shirt of a light or neutral colour to make your own custom tubes.

VELOUR – OR NICKI FABRIC

This soft fabric is not dissimilar to velvet but is also stretchy. Ideally the velour used on dolls should be at least eighty per cent cotton, which again can be hard to source.

FLANNELETTE

This is also referred to as brushed cotton and is a soft fabric with little stretch. It works well for the simple triangle doll style but less so for any other designs as it does not stretch. You may have some old winter bed sheets that you can repurpose.

FELT

I use a wool-viscose mix felt, an easy felt to work with, and thin enough to be flexible for the small dolls' house dolls. 100 per cent wool felt can be more expensive and often too thick to use for tiny dolls. Acrylic or synthetic felt is often very soft, does not stay in shape and can be prone to tearing when sewing close to the edge. The wool-viscose felt is easy to sew and holds stitches well.



Threads, wool and extras

WOOL BATTS FOR STUFFING

The wool batts for stuffing are a natural off-white or cream colour and feel very soft and bouncy. These work well for all the dolls, whether you stuff them really tightly, or keep them soft and squishy. The way it has been brushed (into a batt) means that it is a continuous sheet of wool (a little like batting) and therefore does not get lumpy. It can be torn off in a long strip, which works well to form a solid ball shape for a head, as you can wind it up on itself easily and tightly.

WOOL BATTS FOR THE NEEDLE FELTED HEADS

The best wool for making quick shapes and wrapping the pipe cleaners for the dolls’ house dolls is a lanolin-rich wool batt. I favour an organic South German Merino, which is cold-washed to retain as much of the natural sheep fat as possible while still cleaning the wool. It is lovely to work with and as an added side benefit, leaves your hands feeling soft. It also means that it is slightly ‘sticky’ in a good way in that it wants to adhere to itself and needs less felting down with the felting needle.

THREADS FOR SEWING, EMBROIDERY AND TYING

There are three types of thread that you will use in this book.

1. Thread for sewing the bodies and heads. These should be strong sewing threads and whilst cotton is a natural choice, polyester threads are stronger and longer lasting. The dolls are likely to be handled a lot and need to endure being pulled and dragged.
2. Embroidery thread or floss is multi-stranded and is great for embroidering facial details. The strands can be separated for fine detailed work. This thread can also be used to sew together the dolls’ house dolls’ clothes and a contrasting colour looks good in a blanket stitch as an edging.
3. Thread for tying heads, hands and feet needs to be extra-strong and you can test it by trying to break it with your hands. Once you have the thread tight around the head to make an eye line and pull as hard as you can, you will be grateful for a non-breaking



thread. I use a polyester thread specially designed for doll-making, though it has the appearance of a cotton thread. You can also use an extra-strong linen or button thread.

KNITTING YARN

I am a great lover of natural fibres, especially wool, and only use wool (or cotton) for the knitting and crochet projects in this book. Whatever you use, be mindful that you are quite possibly making a toy or something somebody will hold and cuddle, so the yarn should be soft. Merino and Blue Faced Leicester yarns and Alpaca are ideal.

TINY CARD EMBELLISHMENTS, RIBBONS, BUTTONS, LACE AND TRIMMINGS

I love tiny decorations such as flowers, satin bows, tiny buttons, stars, etc. I have a collection of these little decorations that have fallen off other toys or have been sold as card-making supplies. They provide such a wonderful opportunity to dress up your dolls’ house dolls. You can sew them onto their clothes to make pockets or other features, braces, hair decorations, bow ties; even a large satin flower could become a fascinator. However, be aware that they can become a choking hazard for small children and babies.





Hair

There are no limits to what you may find suitable to use for hair, especially on tiny dolls. Whenever I see a scrap of wool or yarn I always wonder whether it would work for hair on a doll. My favourite materials are:

BOUCLÉ FOR CURLY HAIR

If you can find a 100 per cent wool one, you are lucky, as most bouclé yarns have a tiny synthetic fibre running through them to add strength. This also means that the ‘curls’ will remain and do not get ‘pulled’ straight in time.

MOHAIR FOR STRAIGHT HAIR

Mohair knitting yarn is great at imitating hair as it is literally ‘hairy’. It can be unsuitable for very young children as everything ends up in their mouths. Again, as with the bouclé yarn, you may only find yarn with a little added synthetic fibre to give it strength. The other advantage is that this is the best hair to be brushed. I use mohair to crochet the base for hair to be knotted onto, especially if I’m using bouclé for the hair, though you will need to match the colour.

MERINO OR ALPACA TOPS

These unspun strands of wool work less well if you use them on large dolls as long, hanging hair, as they pull apart easily. However, I like using them to make tight short curls. It is quite labour-intensive as each strand needs to be twisted and sewn into place, but well worth it. They also work for the smaller dolls’ house people.

ORDINARY KNITTING YARN

You can, of course, use ordinary knitting yarn in any colour you like. I have seen some fantastic dolls made with multicoloured hair.

NATURAL SHEEP LOCKS

Long or short strands of natural sheep locks work well as hair. I love Teeswater and Wensleydale as they have long, soft and lustrous locks. Though they are mostly white, they can be dyed too.

There are many other options, not featured in this book, such as using fake fur or sheepskin pieces that can be sewn into place.

FELTING WOOL

Needle felting is useful in doll-making for shaping heads and for making eyes and mouths. You will only need wisps of eye- and mouth-coloured wool (my all-time favourites are wool batts instead of tops) and a fine or medium felting needle.

CREATIVE REUSE

I am a great believer in using what you have already – some things you may not even know you have. Here are a few things that you can ‘upcycle’ and turn into clothes and accessories for your dolls. Sometimes we have woollen clothes but annoyingly we have felted them by accident or they simply don’t fit anymore or, worse still, the moths have been at them. I dislike throwing items away, especially when they are not even fit to give to a charity shop or pass on to somebody else. Or maybe you just cannot part with them but their use is questionable otherwise.

If you have such items consider that sleeves can become hats, other parts can become clothes, blankets, pillows or similar.

Knitted or woollen socks: in my house we have a notorious ‘odd sock syndrome’ and though my children now just wear odd socks (which actually makes the problem worse) occasionally I end up with a sock that is just odder than others! Socks make great hats for dolls – the rib at the top may fit a doll’s head and the toe part makes a lovely pouch or sleeping bag to keep a doll warm and cosy.

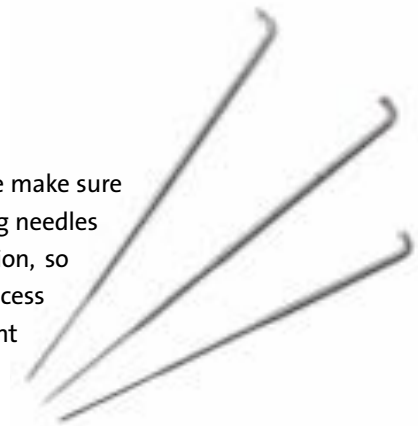
Skills

Needle felting

If you have never needle felted before, please make sure you read the following notes carefully. Felting needles were created during the Industrial Revolution, so needle felting is a relatively new craft. The process itself is not much different from the ancient process of wet felting – where motion, water, soap and heat create the felting – and the result is the same: wool that is soft and fluffy becomes matted, shrinks in size and becomes firm. With the help of a felting needle we can felt wool in a far more targeted and detailed way. Needle felting in this book is used to create the Featured Needle Felted Head (see pg6) and as an option to making the dolls’ house people. It is by no means essential to making the dolls in this book.

To needle felt you need at least one felting needle of a medium gauge #38 (a finer needle #40 might be useful too, but not essential) and a felting mat. As long as you use wool batts as recommended in the materials section at the beginning of each project, you will be able to needle felt. It does not require any specialist skill other than stabbing the needle in and out of the wool in a straight line. The tiny notches at the end of the needle will tangle up the wool fibres on the way in. Continuous stabbing will result in the fibres getting ‘knitted’ tighter and tighter together, therefore firming the shape. In the process you will be able to shape and sculpt the wool. The reduction of the size takes place where you stab with the needle. You will be able to attach either more loose wool or wool shapes to an existing shape and how to do this will be covered in the individual projects.

You will also be able to use the felting needle and tiny amounts of wool to add facial features to the dolls. Again, what you will have to do is explained in the individual project. The movement of the needle remains the same, in that you stab into the shape in a straight way in and out. Please be aware that the felting needles are very sharp, so be careful not to stab yourself and keep them in a safe place away from children. When not in use, place them in a secure container.



Making a cord by 'twizzeling' yarn

Cords are great to use as the tie on a hat or a dress, as used for the Tomke doll (see p67), or when you can't find a ribbon of the right colour or width. They are easy to make and once you get the hang of it you'll find other uses for them too.

YOU WILL NEED

Approximately 3m (10ft) of double knitting yarn, which will turn into about 68cm (27in) of cord.

TIP

Making a cord requires more yarn than you might imagine – as a guide, multiply the length of cord you want by four and a half times.

Double your yarn up and knot the two loose ends. Then either ask somebody to hold one end or secure it on a door handle or with a drawing pin on a wall or door. Then twist the yarn in the same direction keeping the tension tight, making sure the other end is secure.

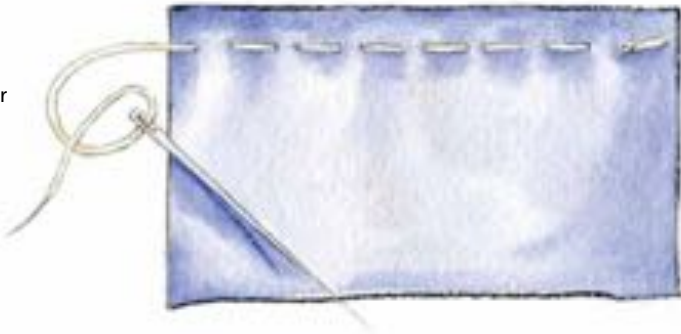
1. It sometimes works faster if you use a pencil: insert at the end you are twisting and spin the pencil.
2. After a while you will see that the yarn wants to curl up on itself. At this point stop twisting, reach into the centre of the twisted yarn and fold it in half. Let it 'twizzle' and just smooth over any lumps. Secure with an overhand knot at either end.
3. If you need to make this length into two or more, mark the length by putting two knots and cut between the knots. The cord will unwind itself if you let it.

Useful techniques

There are a number of sewing stitches that are used in this book. I love hand sewing and am no friend of a sewing machine. However, most projects are suitable to be sewn by machine, so feel free to use what suits you. If you are sewing by hand, these are the stitches used in the book.

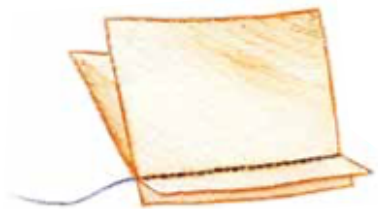
RUNNING STITCH

Use this stitch for gathering fabric when making heads and hands for your dolls. It is also useful when sewing on hair and for temporary stitches, such as tacking (basting).



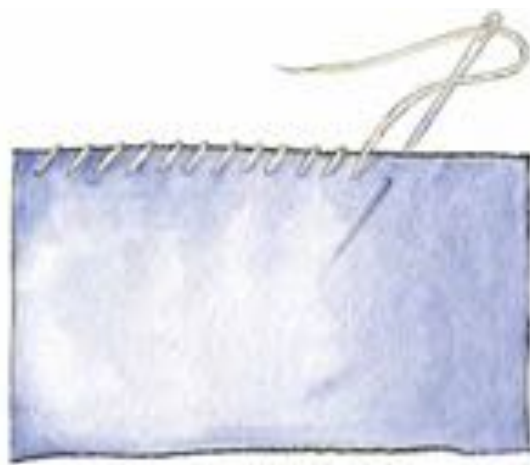
BACKSTITCH

This is a tight stitch that works for seams on bodies where you don't want the stuffing to leak out. It is also useful for making clothes and accessories.



OVER STITCH

When you can't access the other side of the fabric, over stitch is what you need. Useful for attaching heads to bodies and hands to arms, it stays on the surface only.



BLANKET STITCH

This is a great stitch for finishing the edges of fabrics so they don't fray. Blanket stitch is also decorative when used in a contrasting colour around a hat or other accessories.



INVISIBLE OR LADDER STITCH

Use this for sealing the small holes left for stuffing. Run the stitches along the edges on either side to conceal the thread in the seam. When you pull the thread the stitches will disappear.



TYING A KNOT: DOUBLE OVERHAND KNOT

This is a simple overhand knot but with an extra twist. This helps to stop it slipping and undoing when you are securing a head around the base or making a featured head.



Knitting stitches

You do not need to be a proficient knitter to follow the knitted projects in this book, including Max and Mimi doll (see p55) and some accessories. The only knitting skills you need are:

- Cast on at the beginning of a project
- Cast or bind off at the end of a project
- Cast or bind off and cast on mid-project
- Knit and purl stitch
- Increase or decrease mid-row

Here is a reminder of how the different knit texture is achieved:

- Garter stitch: knit every row back and forth
- Stocking stitch: knit one row, purl one row
- Rib stitch: knit one stitch, purl one stitch, repeat till end of row, on new row put a knit stitch on top of a knit stitch and a purl stitch on top of a purl stitch.

Crochet stitches

We have used UK terms throughout this book, followed by the US term in brackets:

double crochet (single crochet)

half treble crochet (half double crochet)

treble crochet (double crochet)

