

# Whittling with Children

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“Creativity is Intelligence at Play” Albert Einstein

## Come and Whittle something wonderful!

Once you have learnt to control your knife you can get really creative. On show you saw wooden whittled: *Spoons; Knives; Dragonflies; Bees; Flowers; Trees; Jewellery; Animals; Dampers/Cooking Sticks; Patterned Sticks*. Whittling means taking off a tiny bit at a time and when we let children play we allow them to reveal their potential layer by layer. The process of choosing materials, whittling and carving are in themselves wonderful.

## Choosing a Knife or Peeler

**Table 1: Choosing Knives: Carbon Steel vs Stainless Steel**

	<i>Carbon Steel Blade</i>	<i>Stainless Blade</i>
<i>Sharpening</i>	We tend to choose Carbon Steel knives as these are easily sharpened.	Stainless steel keep sharp longer but are hard to sharpen well.
<i>Care and Weather</i>	Have to be put away dry. Keep best when oiled (any oil eg linseed, cooking, vaseline) before sheathing in wet weather.	Minimal care to keep the blade in good condition.

**Table 2: Choosing Knives Pros and Cons of a Variety of Features. Read up on the current knife laws in the UK before buying knives.**

<b>Types</b>	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>
Folding Knives locking	Penknives that lock, such as Opinel do not close on your hand so long as you lock them. New generation Opinel can be locked shut which is useful. Carbon steel versions are available. Stainless steel models have inox written on the blade (French abbreviation for non-oxidising).	Lockable knives are illegal to carry around. Read the law on knives. It is fine to carry them safely to and from a whittling session. Not ok to walk round the supermarket with one in your pocket. It is not designed to be used unlocked and closes easily.
Folding Knives no lock	Penknives such as Swiss Army style folding knives are fully legal pocket knives. They are generally on sale with a legal size blade. Short blades are nice and manageable.	These need to be taught slightly differently as they are so dangerous if the point is used to push down with. Encourage practicing closing the blade and using the point tool. Only stainless steel available generally.
Fixed Blades	Wide choice of metals for blade. Never folds accidentally on fingers. Available	Illegal to carry around. Store and transport safely out of reach.

	with finger guard to ensure hands stay on handle. Strong makes available (eg Mora) which can be used with a mallet for splitting small pieces of wood and rough shaping.	The blades are rather long for basic whittling. The blades are often fairly rounded and whittling is best done with a straighter blade.
Pointed Tips	Excellent for fine work. Points become essential for fine detailed work such as animal ears and features; spirals and holes.	Sharp points can cause little cuts when you are concentrating on work with the centre of the knife.
Blunt ended	For beginners and for simple whittling the point of the knife is rarely used and can get in the way. You can grind down the points on some of your knives or buy rounded ends.	If all your knives are round ended your experienced whittlers can not create detailed fine work.
Flat blades	A lot can be achieved with the simple flat blades of the folding knives. However traditional wood carving is done with a Scandinavian cut on the blade coming to the point without a further change of angle to the edge.	A flat blade takes a lot longer to remove a large amount of wood. Fine for removing small amounts of soft wood.
Scandinavian cut blades	The traditional cut for whittling. Easy to angle and move through wood removing fine to slightly thicker layers of wood.	Watch out that there is not a second angle right by the sharp edge as this does not allow the blade to be laid flat along the surface to make smooth controlled cuts.
Vegetable Peelers	Choose a really strong good quality make. With comfortable handles and blades that are firmly held in place a couple of cm into the solid handle. Great for taking off bark. Great for learning the basics of safe whittling. We use them as if they are knives with full safety observed and so far have had no accidents. Allows a higher ratio of children to participate in a whittling activity. Enthusiastic children can whittle wood amazingly well with a good peeler. Invaluable for introducing safe knife use when working with more than one child.	Easy to pick up cheap ones that hurt hands, bend or break on use. Easy to think that they are safe – they have sharp blades and can cut badly – some forest schools have had peeler use banned (with knives allowed) by insurers due to claims. They are designed for soft vegetables not for wood. Can be frustrating.

## Types of Wood

**Easy to hollow, wide soft pithy centres:** Buddleia is good, it always needs cutting back and is non-native or if you have it use Philadelphus the Mock Orange blossom. Elder is also good but is a vital source of nectar and berries for wildlife.

**For carvings:** from damper sticks to ornate pieces of work you can't go wrong with willow or

sycamore. Both grow in abundance and it is usually good to cut them back or remove saplings as site management. Willow is a very soft wood and perfect for first timers. Sycamore is a gorgeous wood to carve, easy and smooth.

Wood is easiest to carve when still green, ie recently cut. Have fun!

## **Risk Assessments**

We all know how essential it is to allow challenging and risky play. To support it we think through the planned activity and use our experience to fine tune the balance between

### **Benefits of the play : Dangers from the play**

Having decades of experience with children around camp and cooking fires and with penknives I am confident of my ability to judge these activities. I have for years watched children build their own fires and cook their own meals with no accidents. However I have seen a couple of nasty cuts from folding penknives even after much clear instruction (in a very free environment where children bring and look after their own pocket knives, which in past generations was the norm). So with folding penknives I keep the micropore close. Know your own ability and boundaries.

### **Your risk assessment can be individual. It should suit you. It can be changed as your confidence and experience develop**

When you first run a session with fire or knives stay within your own comfort levels. As your confidence and knowledge grow so your boundaries will expand. Keep yourself relaxed. If that means working with knives on a purely one to one basis do so. We use high quality peelers and we teach their use as if they are knives. The end product we want is children who are enabled to use a tool skillfully.

### **Let your risk assessment reflect what you actually do**

If you think it would be safest to only ever have one knife out at a time and a 1:1 ratio and you write this in your RA you must stick to it for your insurance to be valid. If you are likely to have a couple of knives and five peelers out at a time to enable more children to be involved and you can manage this by teaching carefully and only getting the second knife out once the first person is working consistently well then put that in your RA. After all it would be safer in the short term to not use a knife at all and stay in bed – however it is safer in the long term to learn to use tools. Keep the RA reflecting the reality of your choices. Keep the thought process going regarding risk assessing. If on a windy day the children are wild and loud and you feel it would be hard to establish the quiet concentration of the tool area, then yes! keep the knives locked up and go wild with the children.

### **Involve the children in risk assessing**

By talking through some of the processes of keeping self and others safe you teach children to manage risky play. An important transferable skill.

Another wonderful tool is to ask each child to teach the next one. Thus you get 1:1 or 1:2 initially

and you get to review their understanding as they teach the next to arrive. They will remember better having taught it. Children are not called but request to join as they become interested – thus learning becomes their own investigation and the true play of the child.

## A numeric risk assessment measuring likelihood and severity and combining these two measurements

**Table 1. Measuring the likelihood of occurrence**

Not likely. Less than once in a life time.	Possible. Once a year.	Occasional	Common. More than 3 times a year	Likely
1	2	3	4	5

**Table 2. Measuring the severity of a hazard**

Low, minor injury to one person	Slight. One person off work for 3 or more days	Moderate. Injury or disease capable of keeping more than one person off work for 3 or more days	High. Death to individual	Very high. Multiple deaths
1	2	3	4	5

**Risk factor is determined by multiplying the severity of a hazard with the likelihood of occurrence.**

**Table 3. Interpreting the Risk Factors**

Low	Medium. Improve as soon as possible	High. Address and reduce risk to an acceptable level before commencing activity or desist.
1-3	4-9	10+

*NB This system is extremely helpful in assessing risk and is well used. Common sense must prevail eg a risk factor of 4 could result from a low chance of death to an individual or a strong likelihood of minor injury to one or more people over time. A second category of medium for risk factors 4-5 could cloud judgement in managing risk for the former seriously concerning scenario.*

### Example from Whittle & Spark Whittling RA

Hazard	Harm	likelihood	Severity	Risk Factor	Measures put in place	Likelihood	New Risk Factor
Sharp blade of knife	Cuts	4	1	4	Teach good practice knife skills and only allow knives to be used by children when they demonstrate these well and consistently when using a potato peeler. Or when teaching 1:1.	1	