

Hints and tips for making the most Beautiful softies – ever!!



I love making softies – usually from scraps of felted knitwear or old blankets that might otherwise be discarded. Although the process itself is not difficult (though it can sometimes be fiddly) too often the results can be disappointing. I hope that you will find the following notes useful, some tips were handed down to me, and others I have learned the hard way!

Choosing your materials

Making softies need not be an expensive craft. I make most of mine from scraps that would otherwise be thrown away. If you are watching costs though, don't try to economise using cheap materials. A recycled piece of good quality fabric will make a much nicer, longer-lasting softie than a flimsy, poor quality piece of fabric bought especially for the purpose.

Look for old woollen or cashmere knitwear in thrift shops or jumble sales – when felted these make wonderful softies – felted cashmere is particularly lovely for baby toys as it keeps its super-soft feel. Old blankets are also good and of course felt is the classic choice. Be sure to choose a good quality wool or wool-mix felt though – cheap acrylic craft felt is likely to tear at the seams and lose its colour in washing.

Man-made fibres are mostly unsuitable for softie making. Shiny materials such as silk, satin and heavily glazed cotton are also unsuitable. They fray too easily, pucker when sewn together and do not stuff or wash well. Cotton prints should always be washed if you're using new fabric – this will remove any dressing and avoid future shrinkage of your softie.

Cutting your pattern pieces

This is a very important part of the process – it's worth taking a lot of time and care over as you'll reap dividends later on. Bad cutting will result in misshapen softies and pattern pieces that don't fit together properly.



Many people think that they should use small scissors to cut out fiddly pieces, such as the comb on the hens above – but this isn't necessarily the case. Felt pieces for these details must be cut out with a continuous action, so giving a nice smooth line to the edge. A series of short cuts with small scissors will give a jagged, unattractive looking edge. I often use my dressmaking shears to cut out these more detailed shapes.

Whatever scissors you're using they must be nice and sharp. Don't be tempted to cut out the cardboard bases with your fabric shears as this will ruin their cutting edge. If you're using a woven fabric, then make sure that the grain runs up and down the piece, not diagonally as this will cause it to stretch and distort. Often it's nice to combine different fabrics as in the hen on the right who is created from vintage blanket, felted cashmere, feedsack scraps and wool mix felt for her comb and wattles.

You can either draw round the shapes on the wrong side of the fabric then cut out along the lines, or pin the pattern to the material and cut around the edge.

Sewing your pieces together

You can join your pieces by hand or by machine stitching. Each will give your softies a completely different look. Compare the two hound dogs below.... one is joined using machine stitching, right sides together and then turned out, whilst the other is joined with wrong sides together and the seams stitched with half-cross stitch in two directions using 3 strands of cotton embroidery floss.



The thread you choose can either match your materials (the best choice for machine stitching) or contrast/complement them – great if you're hand stitching and want to make a feature of the seams.

If you're new to softie making you may well wish to tack your pieces together before you begin to stitch. It's not a good idea to use pins as they could accidentally be left in the toy. Obviously it's quicker to machine stitch the pieces together, but this does give a less handmade look, and of course you can't relax on the sofa with a good movie if you're using your sewing machine.



When hand stitching, use either blanket stitch or – preferably – half cross stitch worked first in one direction, then back to the starting point in the other direction to complete a full cross stitch. This adds strength to the seams since if the thread is broken or pulls loose at one point, then the stitch coming back the other way should hold everything in place.

(Check out the hound's contrast ear lining above and the embroidery on his muzzle.)

Stuffing your Softie

This is a very important part of the process, one which is well worth taking time over. The amount of stuffing you use and how you insert it will determine the final shape.

You must be happy with the shape and feel of your softie before you close the final seam as it's impossible to rearrange the stuffing once that seam is closed. The only way to change things at this point is to open the seam, take the stuffing out and start again!

If making a softie for a child, then you should always use new stuffing that meets legal requirements for toys, particularly in respect of fire.



If the softie is going to be for decorative purposes only, then you can economise by using chopped up old tights, old cushion filling or even cotton wool if you're really stuck!

If your softie has a flat base like the pin cushion mice or hen, then begin by inserting a piece of cardboard into the base so your softie will stand nicely. You can also insert rice or polybeads into the base to weight your softie (but not if it's for a young child).

Always stuff the extremities first, using very small quantities of stuffing to begin with to avoid gaps and lumpiness. I like to stuff and sew the seams as I go for hard to reach places, but others prefer to use the blunt end of a knitting needle or pencil to push the stuffing into place. It's much better to have an over rather than an under-stuffed softie. If it's too soft it will soon develop a wobbly head and floppy limbs if played with. Stuffing will always compact rather than expand"

Finishing Details

Positioning detail such as eyes and ears will give each softie an individual character and moving them only slightly will completely alter your softie's expression. Make sure these parts are very firmly attached, and if giving to a child do not use items that

might cause choking such as buttons, ribbons and bells (the lambs above had their bells removed before they were given to a child).

I like to embroider my toys' eyes using cotton floss, but felt is good too. The lambs and bunnies above show different ways of treating eyes. Embroidery or applique can also enhance the appeal of your softie – it's entirely up to you!

And finally



Have confidence and don't give up!! Many softies won't look good until they're finally completed with all the little details so important to create their characters finished. The little elephant above looked really ugly until his beautiful patterned ears were attached and I nearly discarded him. I'm so glad I didn't.

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Thank you.