

Simple Gifts
by Doreen Greenstein, Linda Buettner, and Charlotte Coffman
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Introduction

My mother Paula Brenner died of Alzheimer's disease a few years ago. *Simple Gifts* is a project that began one day, not many months before her death, while I was sitting next to her bed. A volunteer brought in a small cross (it was Easter time). She had obviously taken care in making the cross: it was outlined in gold thread and included a small stand so that it could be put on a bedside table.

I spent many hours in those months sitting next to my mother, holding her hand or talking to her, although she no longer recognized me. As I sat that day, I looked at the small cross and thought to myself that the woman who had crafted it didn't know the kinds of things that are attractive to people with dementia. After all, how could the volunteer know to make an item that felt nice, had bright colors and soft textures, and that "did" something when it was manipulated? I started to wonder what sorts of things my mother might appreciate, might enjoy—what sorts of things could be made by volunteers for people like my mother.

My thoughts took me to a conference workshop led by a recreation therapist whose specialty is people with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. Linda Buettner is a professor at Binghamton University's Decker School of Nursing in Binghamton, NY. It is through her talents and organization that the *Simple Gifts* project now exists. Linda told me about some of her experiences and ideas; I told her about my involvement with 4-H and my experience in creating items for people with disabilities and in writing instructions to make them.

Together we wrote a grant proposal, an ambitious project in which we would create and test a variety of sensorimotor items with nursing home residents. The proposal was funded by the New York State Department of Health. It was called "The Simple Pleasures Project," and we created and tested more than 30 items. We called them "sensorimotor" items to differentiate them from "toys." Our goal was to develop items that would be:

- age-appropriate
- inexpensive to make
- engaging for people with dementia
- attractive to both men and women
- easy enough for youth to make

Our research hypothesis was that many behavior problems seen in special units of nursing homes (units designed for people with dementia) are the result of boredom and lack of opportunity to engage in self-initiated activities. We wanted to see whether agitation and acting-out behaviors would decrease if residents' environments included plentiful and attractive sensorimotor items. Our idea was to enrich a unit's environment

so that aides would have items within easy reach to use in distracting residents who were becoming agitated and for residents to find by themselves.

We were also sensitive to the nursing homes' dilemma of difficult residents and diminishing resources. By creating several sensorimotor items that were inexpensive to make and "guaranteed" to be attractive to residents with dementia, we were supporting the nursing homes and the staff as well as the residents. Nursing homes would have an alternative to expensive items purchased from "therapy" and recreation catalogs. Volunteers would know what they could do to help residents and nursing homes. Residents with dementia would have an enriched environment and items they would enjoy.

Linda spent time at nursing homes and conducted the rigorous data collection. I designed the items, decided on materials, made patterns, tried the construction with 4-H clubs and scout troops, and wrote the final instructions. As I worked, it was natural for me to turn to sewing and fabrics as the principal material to use. People with Alzheimer's disease love bright, rich colors. They love stroking and feeling fabrics, especially some of the newer "fleecy" and "silky/satiny" fabrics that are not only colorful but washable.

My mother never had a chance to enjoy *Simple Gifts* but I know that she would have liked many of the items we created. That's the special part of making things for people with Alzheimer's disease. These folks are our parents and grandparents. They are people who were our teachers, doctors, and auto mechanics. We want to be with them in a respectful way, yet it is so hard to relate to people with dementia. It can be hard for family members to spend time with nursing home residents who have dementia and even harder for volunteers who do not know the people they are visiting.

Simple Gifts allows volunteers to reach out and help people with dementia at whatever level is comfortable. If a volunteer wants to help but is uncomfortable visiting in person, she or he can make items and deliver them to the nursing home recreation director. If a volunteer wants to bring a Simple Gift item to a nursing home resident, she or he can use the item as a way to start a conversation or at least a way to interact nonverbally with the resident. It is a "win-win-win" situation for everyone—the nursing home, the resident, and the volunteer.

It is often confusing, and sometimes depressing, for an elderly person with dementia to live in a nursing home, away from family and with strangers. Volunteers can make a big difference, and *Simple Gifts* is a way for youth to connect with people with whom they might otherwise be uncomfortable.

About Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive, irreversible brain disorder. Its symptoms include memory loss, confusion, impaired judgment, personality changes, and loss of language skills. As the disease progresses, the person becomes more dependent on others to perform even the most routine tasks such as bathing and dressing. The average length of the illness is 7 years, but it can last 15 years or more.

Research indicates that the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease are caused by the death of nerve cells in distinct areas of the brain, but scientists do not know what causes the loss of those cells. Genetic factors, environmental factors, a virus-like agent, and infectious proteins are all being investigated as possible causes.

Alzheimer's is the fourth leading cause of death among the elderly in the United States, claiming more than 100,000 lives annually. The disease affects an estimated four million individuals in all segments of the population. It is not restricted to any one race, gender, or socioeconomic class. Most cases occur after age 60, but younger individuals are also affected. About 10 percent of people who are age 65 and over suffer from Alzheimer's. The incidence increases greatly with advancing age. Nearly 50 percent of those 85 and older have the disease.

Things to Remember When Making Simple Gifts Items

Please Follow the Directions Exactly

Many features were designed into the items for safety. No buttons are included in any items, even though there are times when using buttons might seem logical. **Never use buttons** ^{3/4}**they can be dangerous.** Use the same safety precautions you might use if you were making items for a toddler, but remember that a person with Alzheimer's has the strength of an adult. **Watch out for straight pins. Make sure that they are all removed from the item before it is handed over. Pins with large, colored plastic heads are easier to see and remove.**

Please Do Not Improvise^{3/4}Don't Change the Items or the Materials

Keep in mind that these items are proven through testing with many nursing home residents. We had many ideas that did not work out, that we thought would be attractive but weren't. An item is not likely to be successful if you change it drastically.

Please Use Materials That Are Attractive

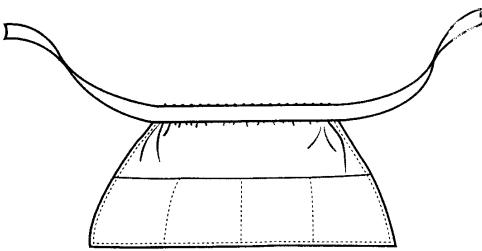
People with dementia tend to enjoy bright colors. You probably know that as a person ages, colors become less vivid. If you add dementia to age, bright colors are really necessary. Patterned fabrics, however, can be visually confusing to a person with dementia. Thus, for example, it is not a good idea to use black and white striped fabric for an apron. Washable fabrics are always best.

Finally, Please Make These Items as Though You Were Making Them for a Relative^{3/4}Make Them Carefully and with Love

Youngsters are sometimes hasty in their workmanship, wanting to get the item done quickly. Perhaps thinking about people with Alzheimer's being grandparents will help as your congregation members make the items.

Simple Apron

Medium: Fabric
Sewing Level: Beginner
Usefulness: Good
Production: Individual



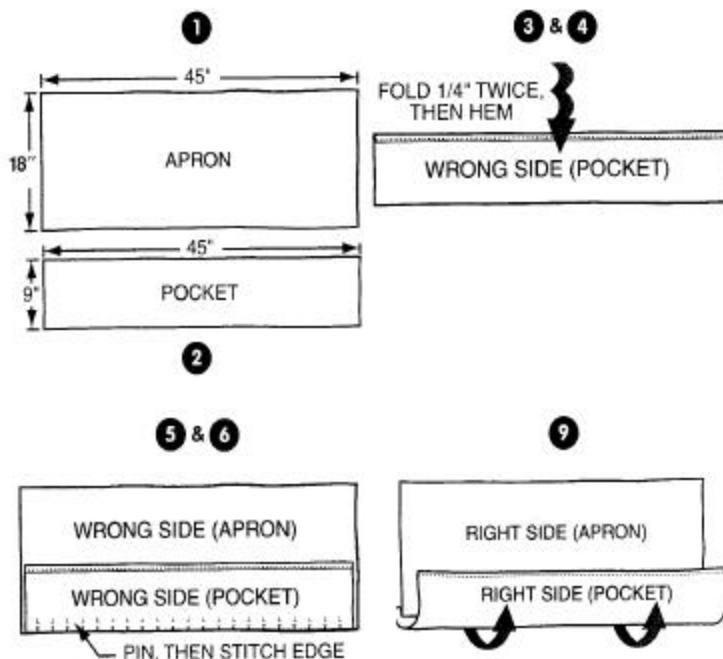
How to Make

1. Cut apron piece 18 in. x 45 in.
2. Cut pocket piece 9 in. x 45 in.
3. Fold under 1/4 in. along one side of pocket fabric. Press.
4. Fold under again, pin, and stick.
5. Pin right side of pocket to wrong side of apron, matching raw edges.
6. Stitch using 5/8 in. seam allowance.
7. Open pieces flat and press.
8. Understitch pocket by sewing through seam allowance and apron close to seam.
9. Turn pocket to right side and press.
10. Pin pocket sides to apron sides matching raw edges. Baste.
11. Divide large pocket into four to six smaller ones by stitching from Bottom of pocket to top, sewing through both pocket and apron fabric. Reinforce seam ends.

Materials

Apron fabric (cotton or cotton/polyester), 1/2 yd. 45 in. wide
solid color
Pocket fabric (cotton or cotton/polyester), 1/4 yd. 45 in. wide
Patterned fabric in color that coordinates with apron fabric

Measuring tape
Scissors
Iron
Pins
Sewing machine
Thread
Apron tie, 2 yd. 1-in. grosgrain or printed cotton ribbon
Chalk or marker



Treasures: small picture books, wallets, change purses, play dollars, small calendars, junk mail, grocery coupons, small scrubbers, notepads, greeting cards, inexpensive calculators (solar powered—no batteries), wooden spoons with short handles, and other safe items

Note: Consider theme aprons such as religious holidays, seasons, crafts, cooking, and so on.

Caution: Avoid trims that can be pulled off. Avoid treasures that have sharp edges or detachable parts or are small enough to be swallowed

12. Fold under $\frac{1}{4}$ in. along top and each side of apron. Press.
13. Fold under again, pin, and stitch hem along top and sides.
14. Place three marks on ribbon: one at center and one 10 in. either side of center.
15. Mark center of apron and gather to a 20-in. width.
16. Pin wrong side of ribbon to right side of apron, matching marks.
17. Stitch through ribbon and apron.
18. Fill pockets with treasures.

How to Use

Resident Level: Mid-range and higher functioning

Promotes: Use of hands and arms

Normalizing ways to provide recreational items

Opportunity to keep important belongings nearby

Sense of security

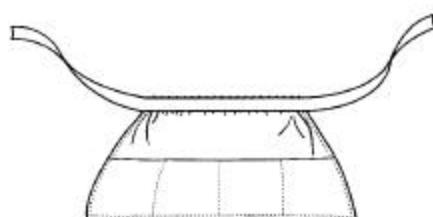
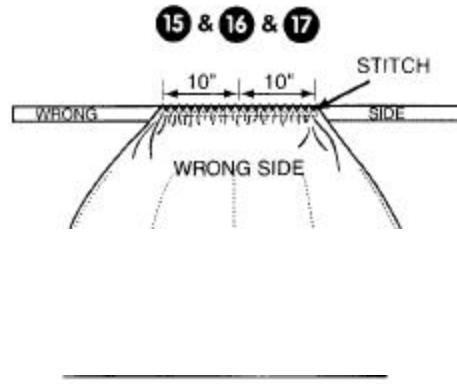
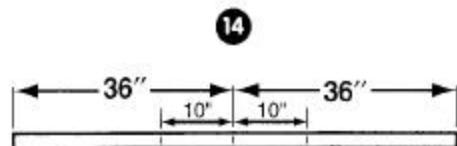
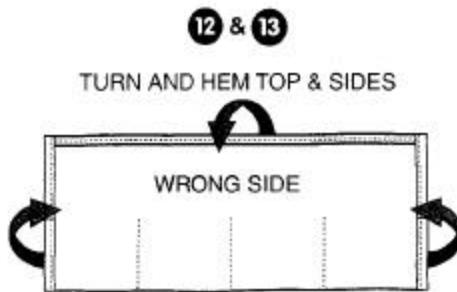
Encourage the person you're visiting to put on the apron and to look in the different pockets to see what items are inside. These aprons are especially appreciated by women who are restless and like to walk around a lot. Say, "This is an apron you can wear. It has lots of pockets with special things in the pockets for you." Then you put on the apron and take one or two of the items out of the pockets to show the person you are visiting. Give the apron to the person and say, "Now you try it." You will probably have to help the person put on the apron.

Talk about how you made the apron and ask the person you are visiting if she ever liked to sew aprons. You might also ask:

Did you wear an apron when you cooked?

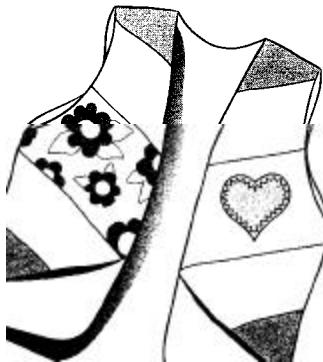
What did you cook?

What is your favorite thing about this apron?



Sensory Vest

Medium: Fabric
Sewing Level: Intermediate
Usefulness: Excellent
Production: Individual



How to Make

1. Purchase a pattern for a simple lined vest of appropriate size. Note fabric requirements given on pattern envelope (see estimate at right).
2. Gather fabrics and plan your design. It should have an interesting mixture of textures, coordinated colors, and an attractive appearance. Include pockets on both sides of vest front and inside vest. Use a diagonal piece of "silky" smooth fabric just above pocket to guide hand into pocket.

Note: You may cut the vest from one fabric, then overlay this foundation with remnant pieces for decoration or pockets. You might piece together several coordinating fabrics and then cut the vest from your "new" fabric.

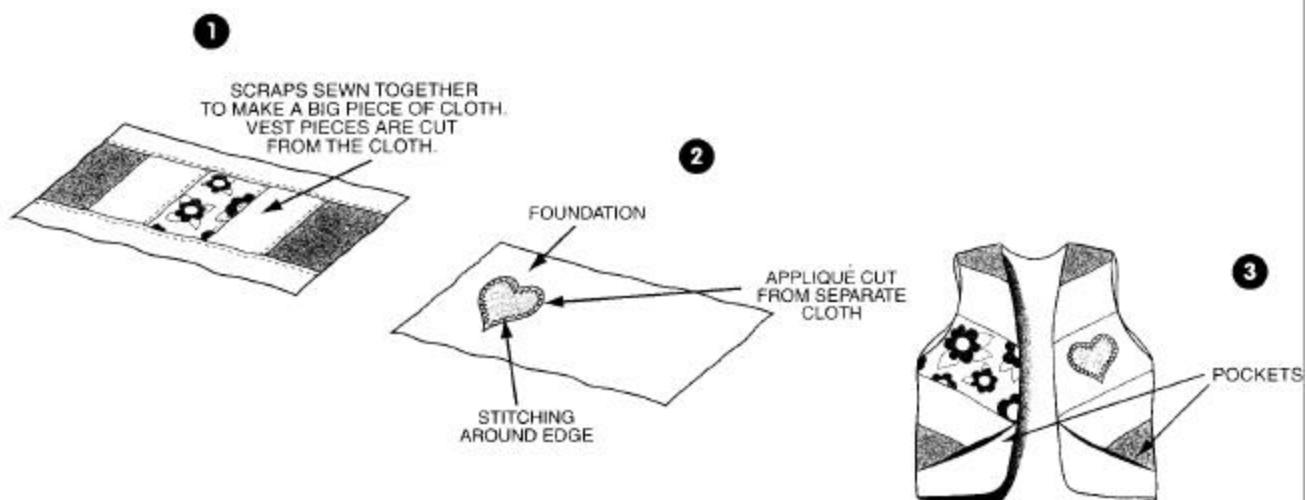
3. Pin pattern on fabric and cut vest and lining pieces.
4. Pin and stitch in place any fabric overlays, appliqués, or pockets on vest front.
5. Assemble vest according to pattern guide sheet. Press seams.
6. Stitch patch pockets to right side of vest front lining.
7. Assemble vest lining according to guide sheet. Press seams.
8. Join lining and vest according to guide sheet. Press.
9. Place small items in pockets.

Materials

Vest pattern with lining
1 ½ yd. vest fabric,
washable
1 ½ yd. lining fabric,
washable
Fabric swatches, ribbons,
or appliqués (optional)
Pins
Scissors
Sewing machine
Thread
Iron
Small items for pockets

Washable fabrics of different colors and textures are ideal. Remnants of washable fleece, satin, panne, terrycloth, or velour work well. Select the vest or lining fabric for warmth.

Caution: Do not use snaps, buttons, or any other closures that can be twisted off.





How to Use

Resident Level: Mid-range and higher functioning

Promotes: Tactile stimulation

Use of arms and hands

Security and comfort

Many older people you visit in a nursing home will enjoy the warmth and coziness of a sensory vest. Be sure to tell them that you sewed the vest for them. Encourage people you are visiting to try on the vest. Ask them to feel the different textures of the vest and to look inside the pockets for items you have put there for them. Say, "Here is a colorful vest for you to wear. It has lots of pockets with special things inside." Put on the vest and encourage the older person to touch it as you wear it. Take one or two items out of the pockets to show the person. Take off the vest and say, "Now you try it." You will probably have to help the person put on the vest.

Talk about how you made the vest, tell about your favorite colors, tell about your sewing experiences. You might also ask these questions:

What do you like best about this vest?

How does this vest feel?

Have you ever sewn your own clothes?

What are your favorite colors?

*In this clearinghouse packet, we have only included two of the many simple gift items that you can make. To purchase the resource, *Simple Gifts*, please contact:

Cornell University, Media and Technology Services Resource Center

7 Cornell Business & Technology Park, Ithaca, NY 14850.

Phone: 607-255-2080, Fax: 607-255-9946

Email: resctr@cce.cornell.edu

