



ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL— CAN BE PUT ON A

Pillow

By Karen Earith, OTR/L

I was invited to offer a weeklong artist-in-residency at A.L. Lotts Elementary School. Participants were 12 students from the CDC and CDCA classes. The students were second, third and fourth graders with a variety of disabilities including autism, Down syndrome, spina bifida and blindness. The project was designed to reinforce their lesson on animals.

Day 1

The students each chose an animal from a selection of simple coloring-book images. They traced their animals onto tracing paper with assistance provided as needed. All of their efforts were successful because the quality of the tracing could be improved during the sewing. The students were allowed to choose four fabrics from a large variety of colors and textures. It was interesting to see how the students instinctively chose fabrics that met their specific needs (soft, rough, fuzzy, bright, subdued). The pattern and fabrics were set aside for day 2.

Day 2

The pattern was pinned to three of the four fabrics. We sewed around the pattern. Then the fourth fabric was added to the bottom. The four fabrics were sewn together on three of the four sides.

Each student got to work one-on-one with me on the sewing machine. I operated the "gas" and helped "steer" the fabric through the machine. The children all enjoyed the opportunity to "drive." It was at this point that I was able to correct and improve on the



ABOVE: Here are some of the animal-design pillows the children completed.
RIGHT: A student cuts his animal design.

quality of the tracing from the previous day.

When the students finished sewing, they were able to tear away the paper pattern. Some enjoyed the freedom and energy of ripping the paper, while others were more comfortable carefully removing the paper intact.

One student from the CDCA class was unable to operate the sewing machine due to her disabilities. We adapted the machine with an Able switch. She then could participate by turning the machine on and off to command when we needed to turn a corner. A classmate manipulated the fabric through the machine and helped tear off the paper. This was a wonderful opportunity for her and her classmate to learn about cooperation, sharing, helping and patience.

Days 3 and 4

Children who did not get a chance to sew on day 2 finished sewing their projects. Students cut away the top two layers of fabric inside their animal designs. Then they clipped around the inside edge of the designs and the perimeter of the pillows. Several of the students required hand-over-hand help to accomplish this. I relied on students who enjoyed cutting to cut the projects for their classmates who were unwilling or unable.

Getting the pillows ready to stuff was a big project that took two days. Children who were not working on their pillows worked on animal-related lessons with the classroom teachers.

At the end of day 4, I washed and dried the pillows to help fray the edges.

Day 5

The children stuffed their pillows with fiberfill. This was a very tactile and sensory-pleasing activity that all the children enjoyed. Hand-over-hand assistance was provided to the children with motor difficulties. After the pillows were stuffed, I sewed them closed on the sewing machine.

Everyone loved his or her pillow. Several of the children used them immediately as a source of comfort when agitated. Many of the children took the opportunity to show outsiders their finished projects and talk about their experiences. ■

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