

Girls Dress Patterns

Step-by-Step Sewing Guide

From first measurements to finished hem:
how to choose, cut, and sew a girls dress
that fits and holds up through every wash.

FREE DOWNLOADABLE GUIDE

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STEP 1: MEASURE BEFORE YOU CUT

The number on a commercial pattern envelope is a finished garment measurement, not your child's actual size. Measure your child first. Match those three numbers to the finished garment dimensions printed inside the pattern. That is where the real size information lives.

CHEST	Measure around the fullest part of the chest. Tape parallel to the floor. Do not pull tight.
WAIST	Measure at the natural waist, the narrowest point above the hip.
LENGTH	Measure from the top of the shoulder straight down to the desired hem point. Never skip this one.

SIZE UP RULE

If your child's measurements fall between two sizes, always cut the larger size. Children grow fast. A dress that is slightly too large can be worn longer. A dress that is too short has no easy fix.

SIZE SELECTION BY BRAND

Pattern sizes vary more between brands than in any other garment category. A size 6 from Butterick, a size 6 from an indie PDF designer, and a size 6 from Simplicity are three different garments. Always read the finished garment measurements chart, not the size number on the front of the envelope.

BRAND / PATTERN TYPE	SIZE SELECTION TIP
Simplicity / McCall's / Butterick	Size by chest measurement. Add 1 size for knit styles.
PDF indie patterns (Etsy, designer)	Read the finished chest measurement. Do not use the size label.
Burda Style	Size by body measurement only. No ease included in size label.
Free online patterns	Measure the pattern pieces before cutting. Sizes vary widely.

GRADING BETWEEN SIZES

Many children are narrow through the chest but tall for their age. Cut the smaller size from shoulder to underarm, then taper smoothly to the larger size at the waist. This is called grading between sizes. It is a standard adjustment, not an advanced technique.

STEP 2: CHOOSE THE RIGHT FABRIC

The fabric you choose determines every construction decision that follows: which seam finish to use, whether you need a zipper, and how the finished dress will behave after washing. Choose the fabric before selecting the pattern, or confirm the pattern's fabric requirements match what you have.

FABRIC TYPE	BEST FOR	BEGINNER RATING
Quilting cotton	Pullover shifts, A-lines, gathered skirts	Excellent
Cotton lawn	Lightweight shifts, summer dresses	Excellent
Chambray	Casual everyday dresses	Very good
Cotton interlock (knit)	Pullover knit dresses, no zipper needed	Good with stretch stitch
Linen-cotton blend	Warm-weather gathered dresses	Good
Rayon challis / silky poly	Advanced only. Shifts while cutting.	Not recommended for beginners

PRE-WASH RULE

Always wash and dry the fabric on the same settings the finished dress will be laundered on before cutting. Cotton shrinks 3 to 5 percent in the first wash. A dress that fits on Saturday will not fit on Sunday if the fabric was not pre-washed first.

SEAM FINISHING: WHY IT IS NOT OPTIONAL

An unfinished seam on woven cotton will fail at the underarm within 20 washes. Choose one of these three methods and use it on every stress seam:

French seam	Sew wrong sides together at 1/4", trim, turn, sew right sides together at 3/8". Best on lightweight cotton and lawn. No serger needed.
Serged seam	Run all seam edges through the serger before or after sewing. Fastest method. Requires a serger.
Zigzag finish	Set machine to zigzag at 3.5mm width. Sew 1/4" from the seam line on each seam allowance edge. Works on any machine.

STEPS 3-8: SEW FROM CUT TO FINISHED HEM

Sew in sequence. Complete each step before starting the next. Press every seam before the next seam crosses it. Pressing is construction, not finishing.

1

Machine Readiness

Re-thread top thread and bobbin from scratch. Insert a fresh needle: 80/12 for quilting cotton, 75/11 for lightweight lawn. Run a test seam on a scrap of the actual project fabric. If loops appear on the underside, the tension needs adjustment. Fix the machine before cutting any pattern piece.

FIX-IT:

Loops on the underside of the test seam: top tension too loose, or thread not seated in the tension discs. Re-thread completely before adjusting the tension dial.

2

Cut Accurately

Cut on a flat, hard surface. Use fabric weights on tissue patterns to reduce distortion. Cut notches outward from the seam allowance, not inward. Inward notches on a 5/8-inch seam allowance leave almost no margin for correction.

FIX-IT:

Fabric shifted while cutting: secure with more weights or fine silk pins through all layers before cutting the next piece.

3

Sew Shoulder Seams

Place front and back bodice right sides together. Sew at the marked seam allowance: 5/8 inch on commercial patterns, 1/4 inch on most PDF indie patterns. Press the seam open or toward the back. Finish seam edges before crossing them with another seam.

FIX-IT:

Seam puckers after pressing: the fabric was not cut on grain. Re-cut and resew.

4

Attach Skirt to Bodice

Divide the skirt top edge into quarters with pins. Divide the bodice bottom the same way. Match the quarter points pin to pin. Distribute gathers or ease evenly between pins. Sew. Press the joining seam toward the bodice.

FIX-IT:

Gathers bunching in one spot: re-pin, distributing gathers more evenly between the quarter-point pins before resewing.

5

Add the Closure

Pullover and tie-shoulder styles require no closure. For a back opening: finish both back edges with a double-fold hem (fold 5/8 inch to wrong side, press, fold again, topstitch). Attach snaps or small buttons with hand-sewn thread loops.

FIX-IT:

Button loop too loose: a loop that stretches under tension will come undone. Make the loop just snug enough for the button to pass through with slight resistance.

6

Hem

Turn up the hem allowance as marked on the pattern. Press the fold carefully. On lightweight quilting cotton, a double-fold 1/4-inch hem topstitched from the right side lies flat through repeated washing. On heavier fabric, fold once to 1 inch, press, and hand-sew with a slip stitch for a cleaner finish.

FIX-IT:

Hem ripples after topstitching: the hem was stretched while stitching. Press flat, clip the stitching, re-press, and restitch without pulling the fabric.

PRE-CUT CHECKLIST

- Fabric pre-washed and dried on the same settings as the finished dress
- Three measurements taken: chest, waist, shoulder-to-hem length
- Pattern size confirmed against finished garment measurements inside the pattern
- Grading between sizes noted if child is tall for her chest size
- Machine re-threaded and test seam run on project fabric scrap
- Fresh needle inserted (80/12 for quilting cotton)
- Pattern pieces laid on grain and secured with weights
- Notches marked outward, not inward

CONSTRUCTION SEQUENCE CHECKLIST

- Machine test seam complete. Tension even on both sides.
- All pattern pieces cut and notched. Notches cut outward.
- Shoulder seams sewn and seam edges finished.
- Shoulder seams pressed open or toward back.
- Skirt gathered or eased evenly. Skirt attached to bodice.
- Waist seam pressed toward bodice.
- Closure sewn and pressed (or confirmed not required for pullover).
- Hem turned, pressed, and stitched.
- Final press of entire dress from wrong side.
- Dress tried on child before declaring complete.

More Girls Dress Patterns

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