

The Back-to-School Clothing Pattern Guide

Draft, fit, and sew shorts, a tee, and a dress from four measurements. Start to finish.

What's inside

- A printable measurement chart for up to three kids
- A fabric and notions shopping list with yardage estimates
- Elastic-waist shorts: full pattern draft from four numbers
- Basic tee: the trace-a-tee method, no drafting math
- Simple dress: extend the tee block into an A-line dress
- The reinforcement map for every school-clothes stress point
- Growth room checklist and quick troubleshooting fixes

From Sewing.com

Done and worn beats perfect and pinned.

Step 1: Measure the Kid, Not the Age

Kids' bodies vary as much as adult bodies do. Measure over a light layer of clothing, keep the tape snug but not tight, and write the date next to every set of numbers. Re-measure every three months during the school year. Most kids grow up faster than they grow out, so expect length to change first.

How to take each measurement

- **Chest:** around the fullest part of the chest, tape level front and back.
- **Waist:** around the natural waist, where the body bends sideways.
- **Hip:** around the fullest part of the seat.
- **Height:** standing flat against a wall, no shoes.
- **Rise:** have the child sit on a hard chair; measure from waist to chair seat at the side.
- **Length:** for shorts, waist to the point on the leg where you want the hem.

Measurement chart (print me)

Measurement	Kid 1	Kid 2	Kid 3
Name			
Date measured			
Chest			
Waist			
Hip			
Height			
Rise (seated)			
Shorts length			
Dress length			

Step 2: The Fabric and Notions Shopping List

Fabric is the durability decision. Stitching is the insurance. Yardages below are estimates for roughly sizes 4 to 8 in 44 inch wide fabric. Buy an extra quarter yard for larger sizes, directional prints, or shrink insurance. Prewash everything twice before cutting, on the hottest setting the garment will ever see.

Garment	Best fabrics	Yardage (est.)	Notions
Elastic-waist shorts	Cotton twill, midweight denim	3/4 to 1 yd	1 inch buttonhole elastic, all-purpose thread
Basic tee	Cotton jersey or cotton-spandex (5 percent+ spandex)	1 yd	Ballpoint needle, all-purpose thread
Simple dress	Cotton jersey or cotton-spandex	1 1/4 to 1 1/2 yd	Ballpoint needle, all-purpose thread
Reinforcement	Fusible interfacing or self-fabric scraps	1/4 yd	Scrap fusible for knee patches

Skip these for school clothes: loose weaves, delicate finishes, anything labeled dry clean, and slippery synthetics if this is your first garment. School clothes live in the washing machine. Pick fabric against a 40-wash year, not against how pretty the bolt looks in the store.

Also grab: pattern paper (or taped printer paper, or a cut-open paper bag), a pencil, a ruler, a measuring tape, fabric scissors, pins or clips, a fabric marker, one old bedsheet for test garments, and a safety pin for threading elastic.

Part 1: Elastic-Waist Shorts from Four Numbers

You need: waist, hip, rise, and shorts length from your chart. Skill learned: casings and flat-fell seams.

Draft the pattern

1. Write the four measurements directly on your pattern paper so they travel with the pattern.
2. Draw the front piece as a rectangle. Width: one quarter of the hip measurement plus 2 inches of ease. Length: rise plus shorts length plus 3 inches for the hem and the waistband casing.
3. Shape the crotch curve. At the top inner corner, trace along the edge of an overturned dinner plate to cut a smooth curve from the side toward the inseam. A gentle curve is all a loose elastic-waist short needs.
4. Trace a back piece from the front, adding 1 inch of extra width and scooping the crotch curve slightly deeper. The seat needs more room than the front.

Test before you cut

5. Cut the pattern from an old bedsheet first. Sew the two side seams and the inseam, thread scrap elastic through a quick casing, and have your kid sit, squat, and reach. Mark anything that pulls with a fabric marker. Fix the paper pattern, not the fabric.

Sew the real pair

6. Cut the final fabric. Sew inseams first, then side seams. Flat-fell the inseam: trim one seam allowance by half, fold the other over it, press, and topstitch flat. It is stronger than a serged seam and needs no serger.
7. Fold the top edge down 1/4 inch, then 1 1/4 inches, and press. Stitch the casing, leaving a 2 inch gap. Thread buttonhole elastic with a safety pin, secure it, close the gap. Hem with a deep 2 inch double-fold hem.

Press every seam before you cross it with another one. Pressing as you go is construction, not cleanup. It is the single habit that makes handmade clothes look store-bought.

Part 2: The Basic Tee, No Drafting Math

You need: a tee that currently fits the child well. Skill learned: sewing knits. Use cotton jersey, a ballpoint needle, and a narrow zigzag or your machine's stretch stitch.

Trace the pattern

1. Fold the well-fitting tee in half lengthwise, sleeves tucked inside, and lay it on pattern paper with the fold along a straight drawn line. Smooth it flat.
2. Trace around the body: shoulder, armhole, side seam, hem. Add $\frac{3}{8}$ inch seam allowance on the shoulder, armhole, and side, and 1 inch at the hem. This is your back piece, cut on the fold.
3. Trace the same shape again for the front, then lower the neckline about 1 inch deeper than the back neckline. Front necklines always sit lower than back necklines.
4. Flatten one sleeve and trace it, adding $\frac{3}{8}$ inch seam allowance around the cap and underarm and 1 inch at the hem edge.

Add growth room, then sew

5. Before cutting fabric, add 1 inch of length to the body pieces and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch to the sleeves. Knits forgive width, but a tee that is too short is done for good.
6. Sew shoulder seams, set in the sleeves flat (before sewing the side seams), then sew the underarm and side seam in one pass. Finish the neckline with a band cut about three quarters the length of the neck opening, stretched evenly as you sew.
7. Hem the body and sleeves with a zigzag or twin needle so the hem stretches with the fabric.

If the seam pops when stretched: your stitch has no give. Switch to a narrow zigzag, and check that you are using a ballpoint needle, not a universal one.

Part 3: Turn the Tee Block into a Simple Dress

You need: your traced tee pattern and the dress length from your chart. Skill learned: combining everything from the shorts and the tee.

Extend the pattern

1. Lay the tee body pattern on fresh paper and trace it from the shoulder to the waist.
2. Extend the center fold line down to the dress length measurement plus 1 inch for the hem, plus 2 more inches if you want a let-down hem for next year.
3. Flare the side seam. From the waist point, angle the side seam outward so the hem is 2 to 3 inches wider per quarter than the waist. Connect with a straight ruler line, then square the hem corner so it meets the side seam at a right angle.
4. Repeat for front and back. Keep the same necklines and sleeves as the tee.

Sew it

5. Construction order matches the tee: shoulders, sleeves in flat, one pass down the underarm and side seam, neckband, then hem. Use the deep double-fold hem so the dress grows with the kid.

Twirl test: before hemming, have your kid spin. An A-line hem should lift and settle without the side seams pulling. If it pulls at the hip, let the flare start 1 inch higher on the pattern next time.

The Reinforcement Map: Where School Happens

School clothes fail in predictable places. Reinforce these five points during construction and skip the couture everywhere else. Total added time: about 20 minutes per garment.

Stress point	What fails	The fix
Knees	Abrasion holes by mid-year	Fuse a patch of matching fabric inside each knee during construction, before any hole appears
Seat and inseam	Popped seams from squatting	Shorten stitch length to 2.0 on these seams; flat-fell the inseam
Pocket corners	Torn corners from stuffed hands	Sew a bar tack (dense zigzag) at each pocket corner
Waistband	Twisted or dead elastic	Use buttonhole elastic and anchor it with a vertical stitch at each side seam
Hems	Outgrown before worn out	2 inch double-fold hems you can let down mid-year

Growth room checklist

- Size by chest, never by age
- 2 inch hems on everything
- Buttonhole elastic in every waistband
- 1 inch extra body length on knits
- Re-measure every three months and update the chart

Quick Fixes When Something Goes Wrong

- **Puckered seams:** re-thread the machine from scratch first. A large share of stitch problems are threading problems. Then test tension on a scrap of the project fabric.
- **Skipped stitches on knits:** wrong needle. Switch to a fresh ballpoint needle.
- **Wavy knit hems:** the fabric stretched as you sewed. Lower the presser foot pressure if your machine allows it, and let the machine feed the fabric instead of pulling.
- **Garment came out too small:** check whether the fabric was prewashed twice. If not, the next one will be. Add the current garment to the hand-me-down pile early.
- **Everything measures right but fits wrong:** trust the bedsheet test garment over the numbers. Bodies are not rectangles, and the test garment tells the truth.

You Now Own the Pattern

A purchased pattern fits an average kid. These patterns fit yours, because you built them from your own numbers. When the school year stretches your kid an inch taller, you do not need a new pattern. You need a pencil, five minutes, and the chart on page 2.

For fabric guidance, more free patterns, and project walkthroughs, visit Sewing.com.

Happy sewing. Finish one outfit this week.