

## **Setting Up and Running a School-based Knitting Group**

School-based knitting groups can vary in their aims and target audiences from those involving teachers, parents and governors to actual educational groups which may form part of the school curriculum. After-school clubs are an ideal setting too. As in the health service, therapeutic knitting groups based in schools could be used for the actual treatment and management of problems, such as behavioural issues or special needs, or be social and involve children only or a mixture of teachers, parents, governors and children and be primarily concerned with building supportive networks within the school and wider community.

Such social groups can be used to successfully build and improve communication pathways between governors, teachers and parents. Children-only groups can encourage interaction, promote a bully-free culture, the growth of self-esteem and peer-to-peer learning. These groups can evolve to include participants from the wider community to promote awareness and understanding of school activities which, in turn, can help to integrate the school and promote community cohesion. This is particularly useful if families are from mixed backgrounds and ethnic origins. It's also an excellent way of encouraging inter-generational communication, learning and mutual respect.

Knitting gives the knitter a sense of purpose; teaches goal setting and planning skills; facilitates emotions such as anticipation, excitement and pride; teaches patience and perseverance in a world of instant gratification and enables active participation in a creative activity which encourages involvement in a 3D world rather than a 2D screen-based existence. Anecdotal evidence also suggests it can aid learning, constructively occupy kinaesthetic learners, those with ADHD and improve organisational skills and coordination in those with dyslexia and dyspraxia. All of which pose problems in our modern, fast-paced society. The calming properties of knitting can also be used to manage disruptive behaviour and open up pathways of communication between challenging pupils and those in authority.

### **The Venue**

Finding a venue for a school-based group is the easiest bit as groups can be run in classrooms, school halls or staff rooms. The health and safety aspects, access, lighting and heating should already have been sorted, but it's always a good idea to remain vigilant. If your group takes place after school hours then the caretaker will need to be informed and this may incur costs (see Timing).

***Star tip – If you're holding a group in a staff room or office be aware that confidential material may be lying around on desks, notice boards and floors!***

If you're thinking of setting up an inter-generational programme (see page 7) try to find a room which isn't too far from the entrance as older participants may find it difficult to walk longer distances. Also, check out the insurance status with the head teacher.

## **The Group Leaders**

Group leader requirements will vary according to the type of group you set up. If it's a social group designed to improve communication between governors, teachers, parents and the community then our Core Pack will have all the information you need to get started.

Once you include children in your group the format needs to become more formal for legal as well as practical reasons. If you plan on running a knitting group for children only we'd definitely recommend having two leaders and ideally a ratio of 1:3, certainly until the group is established. It's best if one of these has had experience as a teacher or teaching assistant.

This professional can also provide vital feedback to teaching staff and carry out any evaluation or assessment of progress, which the school (or funding body) may require. It could be a perfect role for a retired teacher or for one who is at home with children at school and who wants to maintain contact with the teaching profession.

Although many knitters learn when they are very young, we would recommend keeping your age group to seven and above. Children younger than this need more supervision and teaching time so they are best taught on a one-to-one level.

The group needs to operate with minimal to no disruption to the school it is attached to, so equipment needs to be put away and stored safely. The second leader can step in to run the group when you are away. We also recommend you establish a standard routine for running the group and clearing up afterwards and encourage the pupils to help with this.

## **Volunteer or Honorary**

If you're involving children in your group and you're not already employed in education, we recommend you ask about an honorary contract if this is possible. To get an honorary contract set up you will need to go through the same process as if you were being employed. This involves a police or Criminal Records (CRB) check. It also means you will be covered by insurance whilst on the premises.

When the value of knitting groups for wellbeing, improved communication and learning is recognized, we're hoping it will be possible for group leaders to negotiate funding for their time and running of the group. Having an honorary contract already in place will make the shift to employment much easier.

If the school you're involved in doesn't recognise honorary contracts you will still need a CRB check to work with children of any age. The school should cover the cost of this. The check itself involves filling out a fairly simple form which seeks to confirm your identity, and asks about previous criminal convictions.

## Setting Up and Building up Numbers

In our experience, children are eager to join a knitting group, so you may find you're over subscribed. However, we'd recommend starting up in a series of steps to gradually build the group. This will enable you to better manage the group as a whole, plus those individual pupils who may be more demanding or disruptive.

**Step 1** – Choose three conscientious pupils who you can rely on to behave. The teachers will be able to help you here. Spend some time teaching them to knit.

**Star tip** – *Set out some basic rules about setting up, clearing up and handling of materials/needles right at the start and ensure they are adhered to.*

**Step 2** – When they have grasped the basics you can expand your group a couple at a time. At this stage, your second adult can become involved.

**Step 3** – Train the first three to help you teach newcomers and set up a mentoring scheme whereby new knitters are teamed up with someone who is able to knit. This will help to build group cohesion and open up communication pathways between pupils from different year groups and backgrounds.

**Step 4** – Gradually build a core group of around 6-9. When this is established you may then like to encourage one or two less able pupils or those who are considered more disruptive to join. With the core established you and your helper can pay these more demanding pupils the attention they will need. Draw them into group conversations and encourage participation. With your help, this core will have established group 'rules' and values, which will be followed by the majority thus encouraging newcomers to behave in more appropriate ways.

As we mentioned in the Core Pack, conversations become intimate quickly and as a result emotions may bubble to the surface. Having two leaders present means you can deal with these more efficiently and, if necessary, one of you can take an individual pupil to one side and counsel them privately while the rest of the group get on with knitting. Similarly, if one becomes disruptive, you have a second pair of hands to deal with them immediately. In our experience disruption breeds disruption and is contagious, so deal with it quickly.

**Star Tip** – *If a pupil is being disruptive, remind them of the core values of the group and that if these aren't adhered to, they will be required to leave.*

You may also find that one or two pupils demand more of your time as some find knitting more difficult to learn than others, so without another adult at hand you could have more than you can manage alone. Boys don't necessarily find it more difficult than girls to learn, although they can find it harder to concentrate fully and may be a little embarrassed, which may, in turn, lead them to behave disruptively. In our experience it's more down to individual personality than gender.

## The Materials

Your material requirements will vary according to whether you're running a group for adults or children and the age of the children involved. See Core Pack and Troubleshooting – Knitting for ideas on gathering materials.

Small balls of wool in bright colours are good for children. Winding smaller balls of yarn is a great activity which enables the children to become accustomed to handling yarn and it's also a great icebreaker. Many of us will remember holding skeins of yarn for our grandmothers – it provides a valuable space where two people can become engrossed in a mutual task and encourages conversation, particularly if you have one or two shy children in your group.

For children under 12 we would recommend using plastic / acrylic needles. They're available in a range of bright, fun colours in a range of lengths. For children, it's a good idea to have a starter pack for each child with some spare kits for newcomers. After completing this first project it's a good idea to allow a child to choose from a few suitable projects and yarn colours. This can be seen as a reward / treat and it also begins the journey of developing a creative mind. The Stitchlinks shop will have affordable kits and spares available. Please keep checking the website.

Parents could be asked to provide these, or indeed they are affordable enough for the children themselves to buy with pocket money. Asking the children to contribute in this way can increase their sense of belonging to the group and their desire to learn.

Have a small supply of spare yarn and needles available as there will always be one or two who forget to bring their knitting along! Double knitting yarn and 4mm or 4.5mm needles are a good standby.

Speak to the head teacher or PTA, as there may be a small amount of funding available to buy a stash of starter packs to get you going. Alternatively, you could organise a cake sale to raise start up funds for the group. £50-£100 is a good amount to aim for and should ensure each person in your group has a kit to get them going, plus pay for some extras.

**Health and Safety** – This is a good point to mention health and safety issues. It's vitally important to find somewhere safe and secure to store your needles and wool. Speak to the head teacher as this needs to be a locked cupboard which pupils have no access to. Knitting needles can be dangerous in the wrong hands so rules need to be laid down right at the start of the group and with any new members. Children attending need to know that any misuse of knitting needles will be reported to staff and will lead to immediate barring from the group.

Children should be encouraged to take kits home so it's important that they understand these safety rules apply at all times. Speak to the head teacher about informing the teaching staff so any breach of safety guidance is reported to you.

If you are dealing with disruptive children and teenagers or those with behavioural problems then we would strongly recommend that you develop a safety policy with the head teacher. In extreme cases this might mean having a school-based project as well as a home-based one so that needles aren't transported around, or arranging for kits to be handed in to form tutors when the child comes into school and collected at the start of the group. The arrangements will very much depend on the specific problems you are dealing with.

If you have pupils who really struggle with knitting – perhaps they have learning difficulties, dyslexia, dyspraxia or simply find the whole learning process frustrating – it may be a good idea to try a little French Knitting using bobbins. These are cheap to buy, come in a range of colours and are easily portable.

### **Other Materials to Consider**

See your Core Pack for ideas.

We recommend having a laptop or computer available with internet access (speak to the head teacher about access to the internet). This will enable you to show participants the range of materials and patterns available to inspire them further. It's also a good way of linking knitting to computers and technology and can be used as an effective learning tool with children in particular. There are many 'learn to' videos on YouTube for example, so take this opportunity to use a medium the children are already familiar with.

Unfortunately most school internet systems in the UK will block access to social networking sites. If you find this is the case then give the children the necessary information about YouTube knitting videos and the free 'Learn to' material on the Stitchlinks website. It's highly frustrating being taught how to knit in a class and then going home and finding you've made a mistake or have forgotten how to cast on and having to wait until the next class. It's important to maintain their interest and participation in the times between the group, and the internet is a valuable tool for achieving this.

This is also a good opportunity to talk about, and educate participants about, the importance of copyright.

### **Refreshments**

Water or squash should be sufficient for groups of children and teenagers. Groups of parents would appreciate a cup of tea or coffee and biscuits, particularly if you hold your group after school. Discuss how this can be achieved with the teachers, as you will probably need access to the staff room to boil the kettle. Some schools may allow you to use their supplies, otherwise it may be necessary to ask participants for a small donation towards a box of tea bags and a jar of coffee!

## Timing

This is again dependent on the type of group you have in mind. UK school curriculums are tightly organised and scheduled so it is unlikely that we will be able to integrate these groups into the school day at present. As our research develops there may be potential to do so at a later date. In the meantime, if your group contains children, a lunchtime or after-school group is the best option.

Parents who are at home may like to meet up an hour or two before they pick up their children, whilst others may prefer to come to a group while their children are at another after-school group. This timing will enable teachers to attend too.

***Star tip – Be aware of the added health and safety implications if parents bring toddlers or young babies. Knitting plus hot cups of tea and boisterous toddlers don't mix!***

Ideally, try to encourage parents to make alternative arrangements for younger children as this will have the added benefit of giving them a relaxing break. However, this may be impossible for some, so organise a corner of the room which can be cordoned off. Place some gym mats there with a small selection of toys and books. Store all unused materials and knitting needles away safely and ensure that mugs of hot tea are placed safely away from inquisitive hands and bags are stashed safely under chairs. Toddlers should be taught not to touch the knitting materials and this message should be carried into the home. If bad behaviour becomes an issue the parent needs to be taken aside and reminded that the wellbeing of group members has to be paramount. Parents should be aware that the behaviour of their child is their responsibility, not yours. Preferably, don't have toddlers at your knitting group because you will have to be extra vigilant and they can be noisy and will certainly detract from the relaxing effect of the group.

Whatever time you decide to hold your group it needs to be run when there are other activities 'happening' in the school building, otherwise the caretaker will need to be employed to open / close up, leading to extra expense and responsibility. Many schools are open in the evenings and at weekends for other activities so this may be an option too.

Weekly groups during term-time are good because it then becomes a 'regular' activity to reinforce lessons learned. Meeting less regularly can cause confusion as to whether a group is 'happening' or not, particularly if a group is missed due to holidays or illness. Two hours is a good length of time for an adult group whilst one hour is usually long enough for children to sit still and concentrate. It's helpful to give adults links to social knitting groups in your area as they may like to go to these during the school holidays – parents need the extra stress relief in these times too! You'll find a growing list on the Stitchlinks website.

If you have a group of younger children (7-12 year olds), you may find half an hour is as much as they can sit still for at first! Gradually as their skills and interest develop, you can increase this to an hour.

## Teaching Children to Knit

There is lots of information available for you to use on the 'Learn to' page of the Stitchlinks website. Adults and children learn to knit more quickly, more effectively and with less frustration if shown on a one-to-one basis. Mistakes can be corrected and frustrations addressed immediately.

After the first lesson guide them to the Stitchlinks 'Learn to' page [www.stitchlinks.com/learn.html](http://www.stitchlinks.com/learn.html) and encourage them to knit at home using these tools.

They'll be able to access a comprehensive article containing excellent pictures and YouTube video links, which will enable them to practice during the following week.

When your group is more established you will be able to set up a mentoring scheme which will enable group members to contact a mentor with better knitting skills for help and advice.

Some pupils may benefit from learning to finger knit before moving on to using needles. A simple finger knitted chain / tube can help them to master making a slip knot and gives valuable experience of handling yarn, enjoying different textures and colours and seeing how stitches form and develop. A simple finger knitted tube can be used as a necklace, hair tie or colourful shoe lace. See the Stitchlinks website's ([www.Stitchlinks.com](http://www.Stitchlinks.com)) 'Learn to' page for comprehensive instructions on finger knitting.

Whatever you decide, aim for them to make something tangible as soon as possible. A scarf for a teddy bear is a good one to try. (See Projects, page 10, for more ideas).

## Inter-generational Learning

The head teacher or pastoral head may be interested in setting up an inter-generational learning programme where retired members of the local community and pupils can learn new skills from each other. The rift between generations has become more accentuated in recent years with many older people fearing youngsters and many youngsters having no access to grandparents and older people. Inter-generational projects are great for helping both sides to realise that each has a value and helps to restore an environment of mutual respect. This is valuable for the growth of a healthy, vibrant community.

## Advertising your Group (see Templates in your Core Pack)

There are a number of suggestions in our Core Pack for advertising your group. Teachers can also help you identify pupils who may benefit and you should also enquire about putting details into the school newsletter on a regular basis or perhaps the school website. Of course, we are happy to include details on our Stitchlinks Groups page so you can direct pupils and parents to it.

***Star tip – It helps to revamp the parent poster each term either from scratch or by putting a large 'WE'RE BACK' sticker over it as a reminder!***

## **The Meetings**

The Core Pack contains information for setting up a social group. We want our Stitchlinks groups to be safe and fun but the degree of formality will depend on the type of group you've chosen to run. Talk to the head about a police check and other formalities required.

Social groups should be as informal as possible and won't require you to keep a register of attendees or run a formal lesson plan and evaluation. However, they still require a degree of organisation, monitoring and guidance in order to run efficiently and to maintain and develop local interest. In social groups this structure lies very much in the background as far as individual attendees are concerned but should be at the forefront of your mind.

This structure comes more into the forefront when children are involved. It's a good idea to keep a register of attendees and to make them aware of the group's rules and values before you begin. You may also be required to provide an evaluation of progress – if so, talk to the head teacher about how this is best done. Formal evaluation will help to obtain funding for your time and materials, too. It's also interesting to track progress in subjects such as English Language and Mathematics as well as their general concentration and behaviour as anecdotal evidence suggests that pupils improve in other areas when they begin to knit.

Pupil-based groups may also benefit from a more formal 'learning' process, with a lesson plan. However, setting out a goal for each lesson (eg learning to cast on) may put those who have problems learning the movements at a disadvantage and create a hierarchy in the group, which is best avoided. Setting up your group using our step-by-step process provides a solution to this and enables each individual within the group to learn at their own pace. In this way you can help the more vulnerable members to gain in strength, confidence and self-esteem. Importantly, all groups should be fun.

***Star tip – Don't forget the value of praise. Encourage an environment of mutual praise in your group. It does wonders to raise self-esteem and social confidence.***

**Whatever venue you've chosen, group participants should show each other respect and confidentiality needs to be observed** – conversations can get very intimate when knitting so confidentiality is important. This is best said at the beginning of a group and new members should be made aware when they join. See 'Troubleshooting – People' for dealing with difficult situations.

***Star tip – Many sporting teams have a saying 'What goes on on tour, stays on tour'. So 'What goes on in the knitting group should stay in the knitting group!'***

**Housekeeping** – Ensure everyone knows where to find the toilet and fire escape, particularly if they are new to the school environment.

Name badges aren't normally required for social groups but it's something you could discuss with your group members. If your group has children from different year groups name badges might be a good idea to help break the ice. You should always ensure that introductions are made and that new people are introduced to everyone on their first meeting.

You may need to stimulate conversation at times and steer it appropriately if it becomes inappropriate! Always encourage mutual respect and respect for the teaching staff and school. Don't get involved in gossip or speculation about pupils, school policies or staff and gently steer conversation away from these topics. Having said this, a group of teachers, parents and governors can provide an excellent arena to discuss difficult topics and promote better communication pathways between the school and the community.

### **Using the Group**

Our experience of knitting groups is that conversation becomes intimate and freer quite quickly. The mutual activity, learning process and interest provides a reason to attend and a topic for conversation. This makes it easier to communicate with strangers and integrate new members.

Groups also provide a level playing field for all. Those competent in other areas may not be so competent in knitting, whilst those less talented may master the skills quickly and end up teaching these skills to others in the group. This has the important function of breaking down walls and pre-conceived ideas of others within the group. Groups can be utilised to encourage communication between pupils who may not otherwise have anything in common, an important consideration in our multi-cultural society. They can also be used to deal with problem relationships and bullying and for integrating special needs or disruptive pupils into the school community. They are a great way of breaking barriers and building bridges.

Knitting groups in the United States are successfully dealing with disruptive, troublesome teenagers (even violent gang members). Many of these troubled children have lived with criticism all their lives, so learning to be constructive and creating an end product which can be worn proudly can be life transforming for them and their families. Building communication pathways through knitting groups can play a vital role to benefit the school community and the individuals involved.

With the support of teaching staff, special needs children can be invited to attend which can further help to build an environment of mutual support and respect within the school.

Groups can be used to raise self-esteem through praise and 'show and tell' sessions. They can become a platform for discussion of problems or achievements. Other educational ideas can be introduced and talked about. For example, the questions 'Where does wool come from?'

and 'How does wool reach our knitting bags?' can be turned into substantial projects covering a range of subjects. This can be combined with day trips to educational farms, for example.

All knitting patterns are designed mathematically, so basic maths lessons can be combined with knitting. Two ex-teachers and UK-based knitting designers, Pat Ashforth and Steve Plummer, teach maths through modular knitting. Design skills and use of colour can be incorporated, too.

### **The Projects**

Our Core Pack has a range of suggested projects. For children we recommend small projects using vibrant colours. Fashion items such as wrist warmers, leg warmers, fingerless mittens, beanies and scarves are very popular. Younger children might enjoy starting with a scarf for a teddy bear, garter stitch finger puppet or mobile phone cover. A team project could involve knitting squares, which can then be sewn together and donated to a charity or local hospital. Take in a knitted toy, fashion item or quirky object to show them that knitting can be fun and fashionable. If you don't have the items at hand, spend some time searching the internet and magazines for pictures to print off for inspiration.

### **The Teachers**

Stress is a common problem amongst teachers so consider running a staff-only-based group during a lunch break. This can help to bring down levels of stress and, like all work-place groups, can become a platform for communication and facilitate conversation on a number of levels. Team-building projects also work well.

### **Fundraising and Building Communities**

Selling your knitted items and running tombolas or cake sales at local events or school fetes can raise funds for materials or perhaps a group visit to a knitting show, textile art gallery or an educational farm where pupils can watch sheep being sheared or wool dyed and spun.

Pupils can become involved in the planning and design of the stands and taught basic money managing, organisational and advertising skills.

There are a huge number of potential avenues to explore with your group members.

### **Communication**

As always, good communication is key to success. As your group grows and communication between members improves, so you should endeavour to build and maintain communication pathways with staff members, the head teacher and parents. A newsletter detailing group activities and achievements is a great way of maintaining interest and boosting the self-

esteem of participants. An exhibition of work can instil a sense of pride and inspire others to join your group and be proud of being a member.

This school-based pack is an addition to your Core Pack, which contains all the information you need to set up a social knitting group.

Our experience is mainly UK based at present, but forum members from the US, Australia and Canada assure us that the basic legal requirements are the same in these countries. All require police checks when dealing with vulnerable people and children.

Good luck and enjoy your new venture.

**See also the Stitchlinks Guide to Good Posture available on [www.stitchlinks.com](http://www.stitchlinks.com), Your Health Matters page.**

**We will be continually developing information packs and would welcome your feedback and input particularly if you have any ideas for future content or packs.**

**If you require any further help or clarification of any of the above points then please contact Betsan at [Betsan@stitchlinks.com](mailto:Betsan@stitchlinks.com)**