

SELECTING FABRICS FOR CHILDREN'S CLOTHING

by Liesl Gibson

Children's clothing patterns are rapidly becoming one of the quilting market's largest growth segments. Almost monthly, another boutique pattern company launches a line. Chances are your shop already carries children's patterns, and if not, it's time to give this some consideration.

Stocking cute children's patterns, designed specifically for quilting cottons, provides a natural cross-sell opportunity for quilt shops. But not all prints work equally well for children's clothing. As you head to Quilt Market this fall, you may want to keep the following guidelines in mind as you select fabric for use in children's clothing.

1. See the child before the outfit. I'm a professional designer. But when my daughter walks into a room wearing a dress made from one of my patterns, I would much rather hear someone say, "What a beautiful child," than "What a beautiful dress." Certain prints, when used for clothing, overwhelm the child wearing them — causing people to notice the outfit, rather than the person wearing it.

When selecting fabric for children's garments, I look for more subtle and sophisticated prints. Although it cuts against the grain of the market's current trend toward 10-color, extremely bright and bold prints, selecting subtle and sophisticated prints for garments works exceptionally well.

Tonal and two-color prints are a good place to start when looking for fabric that won't overwhelm the child. You may not see as many of them, and manufacturers may not be marketing them most prominently, but with a little persistence you'll be able to find a few good prints suitable for children's clothing.

2. Look at the supporting fabrics in a collection, not necessarily the central prints. Most designers' collections coalesce around a central print. This print is usually larger in scale than the others, has more colors and sets the tone for the group. As a result, the central print is often the one that attracts you to a collection.

The central print is also the one I tend to avoid. It is usually much busier than the other prints in the collection, again with more colors and a larger scale.

I find that the supporting prints in a collection — the not-so-bold, bright, and large in scale — are easier to work with. They have a little more staying power. They don't date as quickly or start to feel over-used as much as central prints do, and they will look more subtle and sophisticated.

3. Solid colors and neutrals can ground a bright, busy print. You don't always necessarily need to shy away from bright, bold prints or all central prints for children's garments. You just need to be sure you don't overdo it.

One way to do this is to ground your selections of bolder fabrics with coordinating solids or neutrals. A solid, or neutral, paired with a bolder design will help calm the visual activity in a central focus fabric. You may need to educate your customers on how to coordinate busier prints with more sedate fabrics for a successful, balanced garment.

4. Be eclectic and don't be afraid to mix collections. Think about how you can help your customers mix and match fabrics from different collections. I often find a print from one collection that will pair nicely (because of scale, color, or hand) with a print from a different collection. Think about interesting ways of pairing prints across the collections you are choosing. This is a great way to encourage your customers to play with fabrics and to express their personal tastes.

5. Approach juvenile prints with caution. I tend to be very careful about using juvenile prints for children's garments. While some juvenile prints can be cute, when they're made up into children's clothing, these too can tend to overwhelm.

However, customers often want cute juvenile and novelty prints, so selectively stock a few. Some of the Japanese manufacturers are very good at doing cute prints for children that are subtle and sophisticated, ones that aren't overly bright or saccharine sweet. Carry a few of these prints, then steer your customers towards them if they ask for something juvenile.

Use these guidelines to put together a small, focused selection of fabrics that will cross-sell well with children's patterns. Develop a strategy before you arrive at Quilt Market to help you buy smart and effectively. This will maximize the sales of both children's patterns and fabric.

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