

# Girls' 1780s Portrait Dress Pattern Photo Instructions

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## Notes:

I have long loved the beautiful, pastoral portraits of the Georgian Era. Family groupings set in fields and beneath trees painted by artists like Thomas Gainsborough marked a departure from the stiffer, more formal portraits of a generation before. Children in these paintings gradually made an amazing transition from miniature adults to playful, happy youngsters in relaxed poses. Some of my favorite paintings are by George Romney and Élisabeth-Louise Vigée-Le Brun. Inspired by these lovely, classic portraits, I decided to create this pattern for my own girls, who adore the full skirts and ruffled sleeves of the time.



The construction of the dresses offered in this pattern come from the study of dozens of portraits (see my website for examples), plus close-up scrutiny of extant gowns for women from this time period. In the late Georgian Era, women's clothing followed children's clothing, becoming more relaxed and less formal (especially compared to early and mid-Georgian styles!). This transitional period between the Georgian and Regency eras offers a lot of truly wonderful options for a girl's wardrobe—whether it is a formal flower girl's gown or a fun, full-skirted play dress for dancing and twirling.

I've created two bodice options—one smooth-fitting that opens down the back and one gathered-front that slips over the head. In Appendix I, I've included instructions for the more authentic drawstring closure gown for older girls (please note that federal safety regulations prohibit the use of drawstrings in garments for children under 12—thus the elastic used instead in the gathered bodice option for younger children). The skirt gathers all the way around with lots of fullness. There are two sleeve types: the elbow-length sleeve with optional ruffle and the fitted long sleeve. You will note the skirt panels are simple rectangles. Front and back pieces are identical, with one exception: the skirt front for the gathered dress option has a different fold line. It is important to double-check the skirt length for your individual child, as no two children are the same. To determine the proper length for your child, measure her from natural waistline to desired hem length (adding in 5/8" for a seam allowance and at least 1" for hem) prior to cutting out the skirt panels. I also recommend double-checking the sleeve length. No "standard" pattern size is going to be perfect for a variety of girls. A taller girl will have longer arms. Even if she is a perfect "6" in the chest, she might need a size 10 sleeve. Just measure from shoulder to elbow or wrist to determine the proper length. Measuring your unique child is key to sewing success!

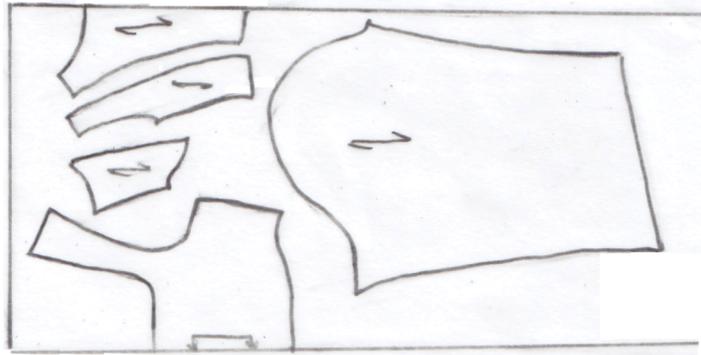
You will notice that the bodice and sleeve pieces have been broken up into separate "nests" on the pattern sheet for sizes 1-4 and 6-14. This makes it easier to see which lines go with which sizes. When you are ready to begin, trace all of your pattern pieces onto interfacing or tracing paper. This keeps your original pattern intact, so you can use other sizes later if you wish.

For play dresses, cotton and lightweight linen are good fabric choices (you can view and purchase authentic cotton prints for this time period at [reproductionfabrics.com](http://reproductionfabrics.com)). For special occasion gowns, I recommend English muslin, voile, and organdy. Even though little Georgian girls did not attend balls, I know how modern girls love fancy ballgowns! For those, silk taffeta, voile, organdy, and Irish linen all work well. Embroidered net lace is marvelous for sleeve ruffles, and narrow cotton lace can also be used inside the neckline (to peek out above) or at the wrists of the long sleeves. Finally, if you opt for a sheer fabric (like voile or organdy), you'll interline the bodice and line the skirt (or create a separate petticoat—see Appendix II). ***As always, please read these instructions through in their entirety before cutting into your fashion material!***

You'll see that this pattern runs up to size 14. I used to cut off girls' sizes at 10, but I am including larger sizes now for girls who have not yet hit puberty but are too big for little girls' sizes. As my own daughters have grown up, I've noticed a dearth of beautiful, feminine clothes and patterns for the over-8 crowd. So any future girls' patterns will go up to 14, and I have plans to revise the older patterns to go up that high as well ... all as time permits!

Last note: **5/8" seam allowances are used everywhere except the neckline seam on this dress, and that is 3/8".** Have fun sewing!

## Pattern layout:



Here is the suggested layout for the bodice and sleeve pieces on 45" wide material. The remaining fabric will be used for the skirt pieces. The long sleeve can be placed where the elbow-length sleeve is in the illustration.

## Assembly Instructions:

- OPTION 1: Smooth Bodice with Back Closure** (Note: In the illustrations, the fabric with hash marks is the dress lining. If you desire to make a gown of sheer fabric, please see Appendix II before proceeding further.)
  - Pin Side Back 1 and Side Back 2 pieces together, matching notches and easing stiffer fabrics if necessary. You will notice that the upper edges at the armhole create a little "V" notch when the pieces are properly pinned. The point of the "V" comes right at the 5/8" seam allowance, and this is normal. (There is also a much shallower "V" at the lower edge.) Stitch.



B. Clip curves and press seam toward the side.



C. Pin Side Back 1 to Bodice Back, matching notches. Stitch, clip curves, press toward side seam.



D. Pin bodice front and back pieces together at shoulder and side seams. Stitch. Press all seams open..  
**[Important Note! The “shoulder” seams on this gown are that in name only. They do not hit the top of the shoulder at all; rather, they drop behind the shoulder of the wearer about an inch and a half. ]**



E. Repeat all of these instructions for the bodice lining.





- F. Pin bodice to lining, right sides together. Stitch from back opening all the way around the neckline to opposite back opening, leaving  $\frac{5}{8}$ " free at the bottom of each side. **Remember to change to a  $\frac{3}{8}$ " seam around the neckline!**



Lining pinned.



Bodice stitched to lining, leaving  $\frac{5}{8}$ " free at bottom of back closure.

G. Grade seam allowances and clip curves.



H. Turn bodice right side out and understitch lining as far around as possible and down the back closure.

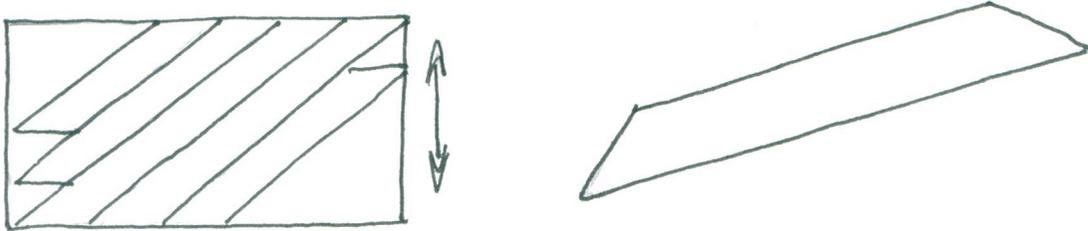


I. Press bodice and set aside.

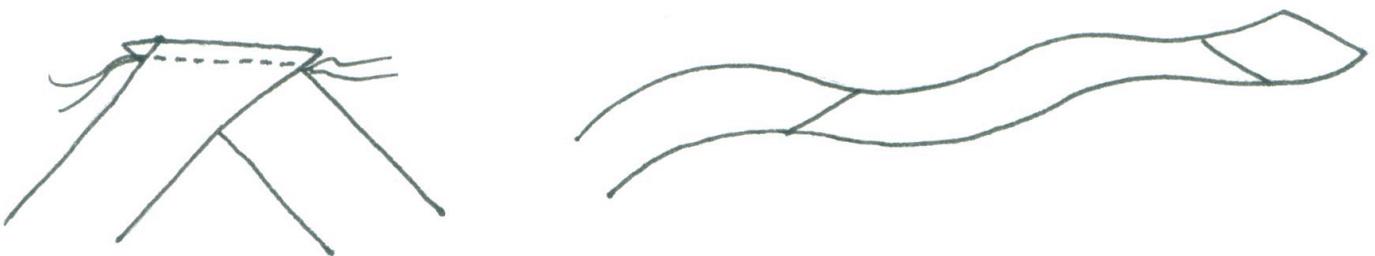


2. **OPTION 2: Gathered Bodice with Center Back Seam** (Note: Make sure you have followed the correct cutting and fold lines for the gathered-front bodice and non-overlapping bodice back!) [**Note: There are no photos for the main constructions steps for this option, since they are identical except for the lack of a center back opening.**]

- A. Follow the instructions above to put the bodice pieces together. The only difference is that you will sew up the center back to create a seam. There is no lining for this option, so do not cut or sew one. If you are using sheer material, see Appendix II for special instructions.
- B. After all pieces are sewn together and neatly pressed, it is time to bind the neckline (which also creates a channel for elastic). If you opt to make your own binding from your fashion fabric (which is what I recommend), then this will be your first step. After cutting out your dress pieces, use the leftover material to cut bias strips, using the binding guide to get the correct width. Measure around the neckline and across the lower edge of the bodice front (since you'll need binding there as well). Now three inches to give you room for seams and turning under the raw edges  $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Cut enough strips to sew together to meet that length.



- C. Sew strips together along the angled ends until all strips are connected. To get a perfect seam, your stitches should run between the “>” and the “<” shown in the illustration at left below. These “notches” are created when you overlap the strips (right sides together, of course!). [Your seam allowance will be  $\frac{1}{8}$ " to  $\frac{1}{4}$ " only. A larger seam will make a crooked bias strip with odd angles, so stay between the notches and make a small seam.]



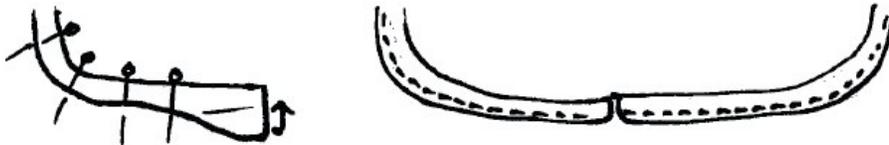
- D. Pin binding around the bodice neckline, beginning and ending at the center front and folding under the center front edges as shown:



- E. Stitch, taking up a  $\frac{3}{8}$ " seam allowance. Trim seam allowance down to  $\frac{1}{4}$ " and clip curves.

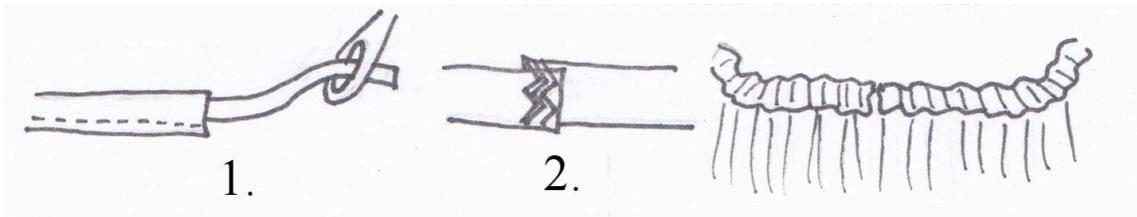


F. Fold under the raw edge of the binding, then fold the binding to the inside of the neckline to create the casing. Press neatly and pin in place. Stitch by hand, making small running stitches all the way around the neckline and making sure outside stitches are tiny, even, and neat (if you're not interested in authenticity, you can stitch by machine here).



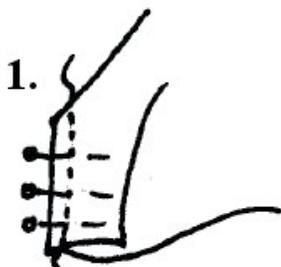
G. Cut your 1/4" elastic, using the neckline length guide provided on the yardage chart.

H. Use a bodkin or safety pin to run your elastic through the casing (1). Overlap the free ends of the elastic, then zigzag stitch over top to hold them together (2). Now you have a faux "drawstring" running through the neckline that will gather the top of the bodice. Go ahead and add the sleeves as explained below, then follow the special instructions in the skirt section to create the casing for the waistline elastic.



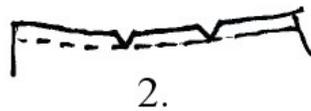
3. **Sleeves** (Note: Elbow-length sleeves are shown. Long sleeves are identical at the top and go in the same way. The only difference is that there's no dart—just a long, straight sleeve to the wrist.)

A. Pin dart at elbow. Stitch, taking up a 3/8" seam. Press seam toward back of the sleeve.





B. With right sides together, pin sleeve seam, matching notches. Stitch, then clip curves (2):



C. Mark the crossed circle shown on the pattern piece with a pin or tailor's chalk on your sleeve pieces. Also mark the lines that indicate pleats in the upper curve of the sleeve.



**Note:** Don't treat the marking as if it's set in stone. ;-) My advice is simply to rotate the sleeve in the armhole until you get the best fit. This is actually what would have been done during the time period anyway, as sleeves were set by hand on a standing model. To pin the sleeves into place, pull the sleeve up the arm and rotate until the dart cups the elbow and the sleeve has a comfortable fit. That's where you pin it in for sewing, making the darts at the top/back of the armhole. Double-check the fit and placement of the sleeve on the girl for whom you're sewing, and you'll be fine!

- D. Pin sleeves to armholes as explained above. When you reach the top of the sleeve, you will have “leftover” fabric waiting to be pleated into the bodice between dropped shoulder seam and the first side back seam. Using the pleat lines *as a guide*, knife-pleat this material to fit into that area. Please note that there is no exact science to this! Back in the day, pleats were often set by hand while the bodice was on the wearer or on a model. The purpose of those pleats is to allow for ease of movement. The lines I’ve provided work nicely, but if you prefer to make six tiny pleats instead of three larger ones, go for it. There’s no wrong way to do this.



- E. Stitch sleeve into armhole, taking care as you go over your pleats. Press neatly. [Note: You can finish the armhole seam with a small overcasting stitch if you wish.]



- F. **Optional elbow ruffle.** You do not need a pattern piece to create this simple ruffle. Measure around the bottom edge of your completed sleeve and add half again. So, for instance, if the sleeve end measures 8”, your ruffle will be 12” long. The width of the ruffle is up to your personal preferences. For a self-fabric ruffle with no wrong side showing, six inches is a good width, so you’d cut two 12”x6” rectangles. You are going to fold the ruffle in half to hide the wrong side, so the final width will be 3” minus the seam allowance. [Note: you can also use wide embroidered net lace or eyelet to create your sleeve ruffles if you prefer.]

1. If you choose to make the self-fabric ruffle, you will first stitch the short ends of the rectangle together:



2. Now press the seam open, then fold the ruffle in half (right side facing out) and press it to make a narrow ruffle.



3. Run gathering stitches around the top (raw) edge of the ruffle, then pin the ruffle to the sleeve end, right sides together, matching the seam to the pleat on the back of the sleeve (you can also pleat if you prefer):



4. Pull up gathers and evenly distribute fabric around the sleeve end before stitching in place. Finish the raw seam by enclosing it in double-fold bias binding (this prevents any unraveled threads from hanging down and showing outside the dress when it is worn). Finally, topstitch the enclosed seam to the sleeve to prevent the ruffle seam from flipping toward the outside when the dress is worn:



**Long Sleeves:** Assembly is nearly identical (minus the pleat), but you will leave the sleeve ends alone until you have determined the hem width after trying the dress on the child.

### 3. Skirt

Note: If you would like to make tucks in the skirt (very period correct and absolutely darling!), you will need to add the appropriate amount to the skirt panel length at the beginning. If you want to add three half-inch tucks, you need to add three inches to your skirt panels, for example. See Appendix II for instructions to create tucks.

**Important:** If you are making the gathered bodice dress with center back seam, please ignore step A below. *You do not need a placket in the gathered dress, as it slips over the head.* Follow steps B and C, then skip to the special instructions under “Attaching the Bodice” in part 4.

- A. Cut skirt opening for back closure as indicated on the pattern.
- B. Sew skirt front to skirt back at side seams. Press seams open. Repeat these instructions for the skirt lining. **[Note: The skirt lining is optional. If you are using a non-sheer material and do not wish to have the extra layer, you can omit the skirt lining entirely. If you prefer to make a separate petticoat, see Appendix II. (There are no photo instructions for Appendix II, as the construction for a petticoat is the same as for a skirt, only with a waistband instead of a bodice.)]**
- C. If you are lining the skirt, pin the lining to the skirt, wrong side of skirt to right side of lining, matching side seams and back closure. Run basting stitches around the top of the skirt to secure it to the lining, breaking at the side seams (if you are going to gather the skirt, run two rows of stitches to use to pull up the gathers).

D. Pin placket to right side of skirt back opening, catching the lining as well (if skirt is lined).



E. Stitch placket to skirt and lining, starting with a 3/8" seam allowance and gradually bringing the presser foot to the edge of the fabric at the center of the placket. When you reach the center, leave the needle in the fabric, lift the presser foot and pivot the fabric to head back up the other side of the placket. Gradually come back to a 3/8" seam allowance as you finish the seam.



Press under ¼” of the free edge of the placket or finish with a zigzag stitch. Press the placket as shown so the left side overlaps the right and makes an even closure



**The left side of placket is pressed completely under so nothing shows outside.  
The right side of the placket is turned under just enough to whipstitch over seam on the inside.**

#### 4. Attaching the Bodice

**To gather or pleat, that is the question!** The skirt for this dress is very full, and that means getting a lot of fabric matched to a comparatively small bodice. The easiest option is to run gathering stitches around the top of the skirt (breaking at the side seams). If you have the time and patience, small knife pleats are authentic and beautiful. This is vastly easier if you have a Perfect Pleater™ or another pleating tool. But the authentic method is to pleat by hand (and by eye!), taking time to create little ¼” pleats all the way around the skirt as you pin it to the bodice. Either method is correct for the period, so just decide which one you prefer and go for it. **Important:** If you are making the gathered bodice version, skip to the special instructions below.

- A. Pin bodice to skirt and lining, matching center fronts, side seams, and back closures and leaving bodice lining free. Pull in gathering stitches to fit the skirt to the bodice (or pleat to match). Make sure you leave the bodice lining free!



**Skirt pinned (inside view). Bodice lining is kept free.**

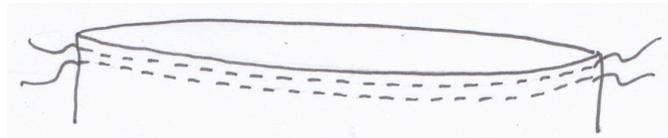
B. Stitch bodice to skirt. Press seam allowance up toward bodice.



#### **GATHERED DRESS SKIRT INSTRUCTIONS:**

Note: Since this dress is meant to look as though it fastens with drawstrings, you will gather the skirt to the bodice rather than pleating it. However, there is one key difference. Instead of gathering the skirt all the way around, the front of the skirt will remain smooth and will match exactly to the bodice from one side seam to the other. The elastic you add to create the “drawstring” effect is going to pull up the gathers in this area.

A. Run gathering stitches across the skirt back panel only, stopping at the side seams:

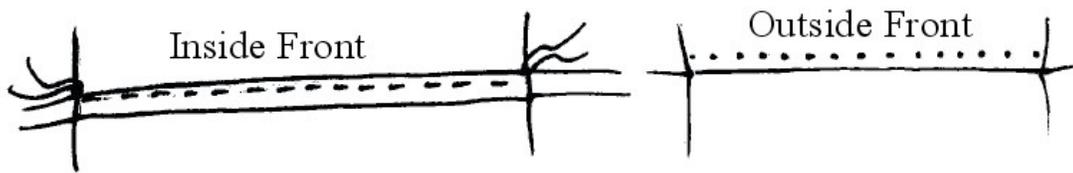


B. Pin bodice to skirt, matching side seams, center front, and center back. The skirt front will pin exactly to the bodice front from one side to the other. Pull up the gathering stitches across the skirt back and distribute fabric evenly as you pin to the bodice back.

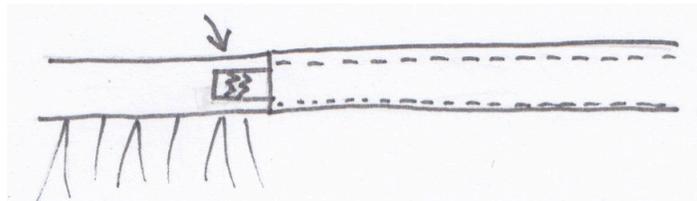
C. Stitch skirt to bodice.

D. Because there is no bodice lining, you will need to finish off the raw edge of the waistline seam. If you are using a non-sheer fabric, you can simply Serge or zigzag the raw edge to finish it off. If you are making a sheer gown, you will bind the raw edge with double-fold bias tape or self-fabric binding.

- E. Once the seam allowance has been finished off, press it up toward the bodice. Now topstitch the upper edge of the seam allowance to the bodice front (either by hand or on the machine):

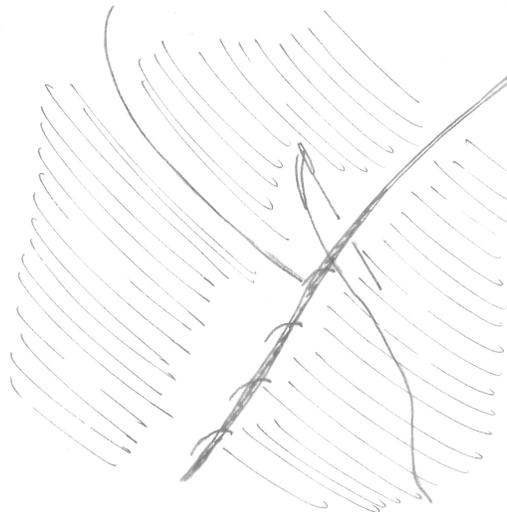


- F. Use the waistline elastic length guide to cut the elastic you will run through this casing. Using a bodkin or safety pin, run the elastic through the casing, starting at one bodice side seam and continuing to the other (you will need to pin the elastic at the first side seam to prevent it from pulling through to the other side). Stitch the raw ends of the elastic to the inside of the back waistline seam allowance, using a zigzag stitch to make it sturdy. Now the dress is fully “gathered” across the front and will easily slip over the head!



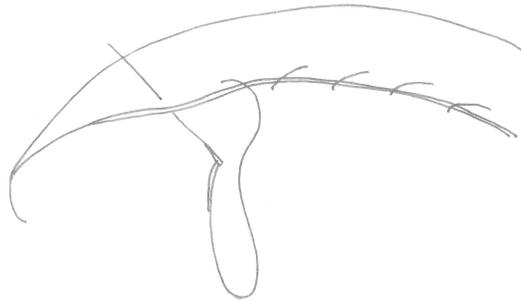
## 5. Finishing the Dress

- A. If you have made the smooth bodice with lining, turn under the bottom of the bodice lining fabric and pin in place over the waist seamline. Whipstitch the lining in place.



**Whipstitching the bodice lining in place over the waistline seam.**

- B. Turn under and press the sleeve ends to make a narrow hem (if you're not using a ruffle). Whipstitch in place. If you like, you can sew lace edging into the ends of the sleeves, securing stitches to the hem allowance inside so nothing shows on the outside of the sleeve.



**Whipstitching sleeve hem.**

- C. Dresses in this time period did not use buttons for closure. Instead, you will use hooks and bars to fasten up the back. Space them an inch apart and sew them on firmly. If you aren't concerned about authenticity and want to make a dress that is easy to put on and take off, use hook and loop tape instead!

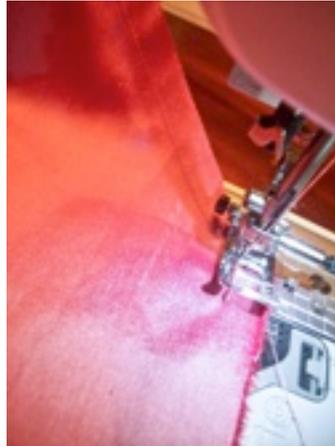


- D. To hem the dress, try it on the child and mark the hem (a one-inch hem is allowed). Turn up and hand stitch or blind stitch the hem in place. Press. Lining (if used) should be hemmed about 1/4" inch shorter. If you wish to make tucks in the skirt, see Appendix II.

## 6. Making the Sash

You can simply purchase wide grosgrain or satin ribbon if you prefer not to sew a sash. If you'd like to make a fabric sash, use the cutting guide on the pattern sheet to get the correct width. I recommend using 54-60"-wide material, cutting your sash all the way across the material. This will be long enough for almost any child (making a longer bow on toddlers and a lovely knot with ends hanging free on older girls). If you want a sash with long ends hanging down, just double the yardage requirements, cut out two sashes, then sew the short ends together before proceeding with the instructions below. [**Note:** You can cut the sash with squared or angled ends. In my photos, I've chosen the latter option.]

- A. Fold sash in half, right sides together, and stitch short end closed, then down the long edge and across two inches of the opposite short edge.



- B. Turn sash right side out, then turn under the open end and slipstitch closed, leaving no stitches on the outside of the sash. Tie the sash around the child's waist for a beautiful finishing touch!



Enjoy your new creation!