

# Sharing the Joy of Carving Wood

## Build self confidence and provide a life-long hobby by teaching kids to carve

By Dave Brock

More than 40 years ago, my dad made a surprise stop at a local hobby shop and bought me a small carving set. Looking back, I realize woodcarving played a major role in building my confidence and character. That little carving set, and the hours my dad spent teaching me how to use the tools, sparked my enthusiasm and marked the beginning of a trail. That trail has led me to teach woodcarving as a valuable coping skill for troubled kids.

As a counselor at a camp for at-risk kids, I discovered the true therapeutic value of woodcarving. At first, I simply carved during my spare time while working at camp. I noticed the kids would focus on my hands as I carved. After observing the calming effect my carving had on the kids, I began teaching them the basics of woodcarving. Carving soon became one of my group's favorite activities.

After 13 years as a wilderness youth counselor, I joined the camp's education department and opened up the first woodshop program. As we saw how woodcarving improves the children's pride and confidence, we incorporated it as a big part of the curriculum. I have about 50 kids pass through my woodshop each week and I have seen the positive change it can create. You don't have to be a counselor or teacher to have an impact on a child's life. Share your passion for carving with your grandchildren or kids in your neighborhood. I developed the following tips for teaching a group of kids to carve, but they are just as applicable in a one-on-one setting.

**Enthusiasm:** If you want to get kids interested in carving, you must first create a strong atmosphere of excitement. I always have my latest project in the cargo pocket of my pants and my Carvin' Jack (see page 29) on my belt loop. No one is more excited about carving than me and my main objective is to make my excitement infectious! Show enthusiasm, not only with your words, but with your actions.

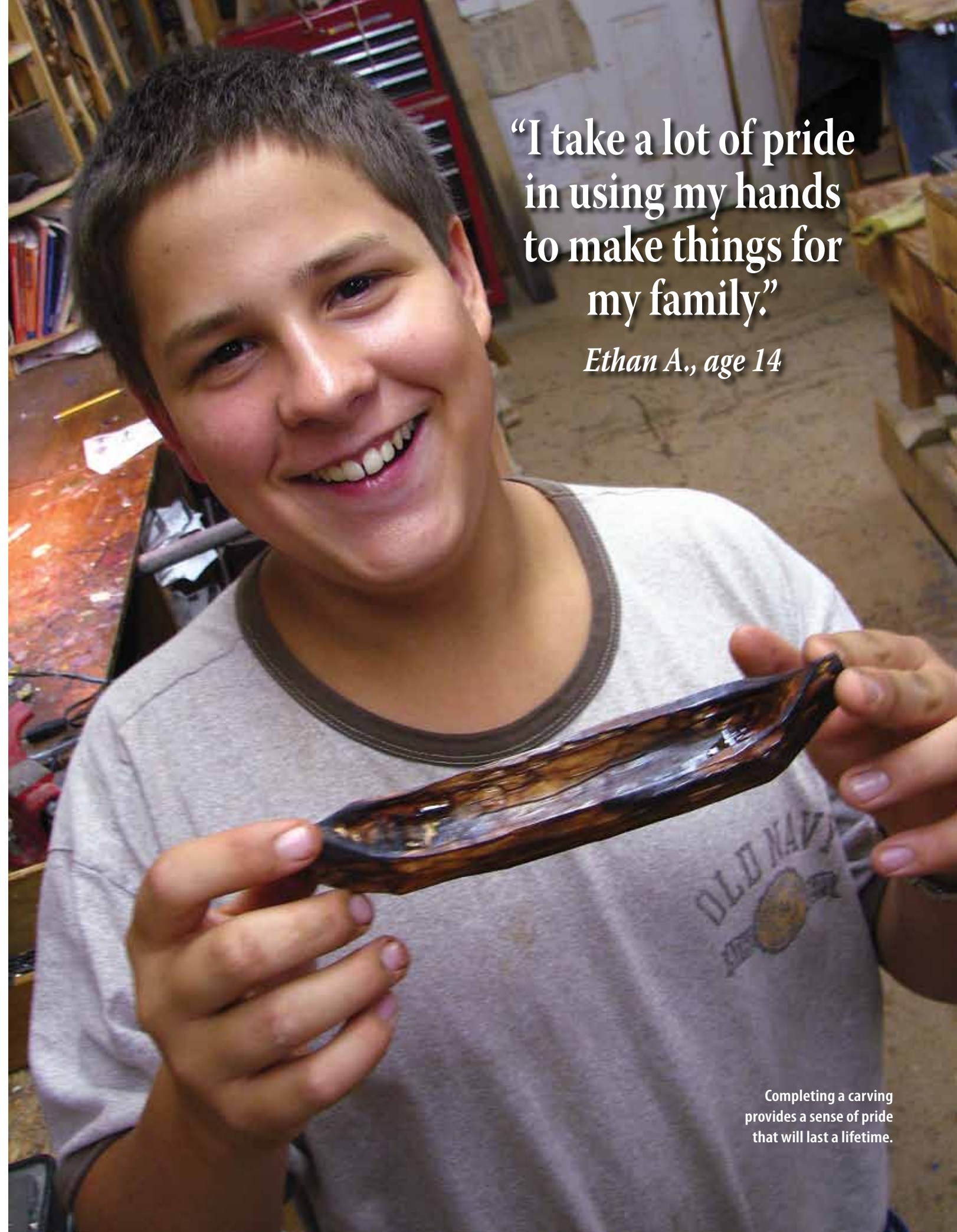
**Safety:** A visit to the local emergency room to get stitches doesn't help create an atmosphere of enthusiasm, so take every precaution before you bring out the knives. Begin with an upbeat lesson on carving safety which includes basic first aid, safety rules, and a practice session using controlled cuts. If the project isn't held in a vise or clamped to a table, have the child use a lapboard. A lapboard can be as simple as a piece of plywood. Be sure to wear a Kevlar glove on the non-carving hand and teach the kids how to sharpen a knife correctly.



If a project is handheld, have the child use a lapboard for safety.

"I take a lot of pride in using my hands to make things for my family."

*Ethan A., age 14*



Completing a carving provides a sense of pride that will last a lifetime.

**Project Selection:** Keep the project simple, yet challenging. Start out with a basic relief carving for their first project. If you want to compound the learning experience, choose a practical project the child can actually use for something when completed. Children can race carved canoes in a small stream or challenge each other to be the first to fill a glass of water using only their carved spoons.



Create a visual reference so kids can see each step of the carving process.

**Sequential Carving Models:** Learning to carve is a visual experience for most people and especially so for kids. I use step-by-step models to show the project at various stages of progression. The models break down the carving process to remove the mystery and can be used as a reference while carving.

**Assistance:** Children need varying degrees of personal assistance, so I'm always giving hints and suggestions while ensuring safety. Remember, kids can easily become frustrated when learning new skills. I've found it effective to let the child watch me as I explain the technique and carve one side of a project. I then allow them to complete the other side. This is especially helpful when carving a symmetrical in-the-round project. Similar to the way step-by-step models provide assistance, this tag-team carving style gives the kids a reference point to consult as I move around the classroom helping other students.



Adding a personal touch, such as a woodburned design, strengthens the child's sense of ownership and independence.

**Extend the Carving:** Encourage students to extend their carving project by adding something extra. This personal touch can be a creative finish, woodburning, additional decorative carving, or add-ons, such as beads on a walking stick wrist strap. Extensions effectively teach kids to step outside the envelope by challenging them to create a project that stands out from the crowd. The kids take ownership of the project and will surprise you with their creativity. If you have great expectations for your students, they will rarely disappoint you.

**Finishing the Project:** Be sure to teach the kids the benefits of preparing and applying the correct finish. Educate yourself first, and then teach what works for you. I teach my students how to layer thinned coats of acrylic paints so the natural look of the wood can be seen through the finish. We then lightly sand the painted carving to add an aged antique look. Have the kids practice their finishing experiments on a piece of scrap wood until they are pleased with the result before applying it to the completed carving.



Encourage young carvers by offering specific praise, such as "those are nice smooth cuts" instead of the generic "good job."

**Praise and Recognition:** Kids need a lot of encouragement when learning new skills. Compound this positive reinforcement with specific praise. For example, you might say, "You sure have good hand-eye coordination when it comes to carving a canoe" as you hold it up for inspection. If a student has come up with a creative way to do something, point it out. Specific praise gives a child something to build upon. Look hard for what they're doing right and you'll take teaching to a new level. At home, be sure to give your child the recognition they deserve by displaying their completed carving at a prominent spot in the living room. I always inform students that all artists sign and date their work, and I encourage them to do the same. To sign a project as the original artist is to bring everything full circle, providing the student with a feeling of completion and ownership.

**Make Them Partners:** Another way to get kids excited about carving is to involve them in a group project. One of my most successful group carving projects was a 14' totem pole, which is now displayed outside the camp's dining hall. Kids can help cut the tree, learn about drying the log, perform research, and decide on the design and the story of the totem. The kids helped chisel out the huge chunks of waste wood and carved some of the details. The project does not have to be large scale. Anything that gets the kids

and you working together is a great idea. Design and carve your own totem pole or create a coat of arms to represent your family. Carving a Pinewood Derby car has been the perfect father/son carving project for more than 50 years. Making kids a partner on a project is a good way to ensure success, build strong relationships, and keep them interested in carving.



Always have children wear a safety glove on their non-carving hand.

**Getting Started:** A woodcarving class doesn't have to be formal, but you should always begin by spending 10 to 15 minutes on first aid and safety rules. Take a look at the woodcarving tools, including how to properly sharpen and care for them, and then demonstrate the three basic cuts: pull or paring cut, push cut, and stop cut. Help your student choose a project, and remember to offer specific encouragement throughout the class. Be sure to have the child help clean up and properly store the tools when the session is over.

## TOP 10 CARVING PROJECTS FOR KIDS

The most important thing to consider when choosing a carving project is the child's chance for success. Don't choose a project that is beyond their skill level.

Start with a simple relief carving and work your way up to the more challenging projects. Offer the child a couple of choices so they feel involved in the process.



A simple relief is a good choice for a child's first carving project.



### Simple relief

Have kids sketch a name, word, or object onto the wood and remove the wood around the sketch. Use aromatic red cedar or local soft wood, 4" to 5" long.



### Walking stick

Choose a theme, such as nature or sports. Kids can also carve a woodspirit face or simple relief designs. Use a dry stick, such as poplar. Kids will enjoy choosing their own stick.



### Talking stick

This project is inspired by a Native American custom where the person speaking holds the stick. Carve names, animal tracks, or designs. Use found wood about 1' long. Look for odd shapes with twists and knots.



### Mini totem pole

Help kids develop a story to tell. Part of the fun is designing your own totem. Use a 1½" by 1½" by 7" piece of soft wood, such as basswood.



### Standing bear

Cut the blank on a band saw and sketch the pattern on ahead of time. Kids can add fur with a woodburning pen. Use a 1¾" by 2" by 5" piece of soft wood, such as basswood.



### Dug-out Indian Canoe

Use a band saw to cut the basic shape with the bow and stern tapered upward. Sketch on guidelines and reference points. Use a 2" by 2" by 7" piece of soft wood, such as basswood.



### Ball-in-cage

This project is better suited for older kids. Provide a step-by-step model for a helpful reference. Start with a 1½" by 1½" by 5" piece of soft wood, such as basswood.



### Spoons

A great practical project. A carved spoon was my first successful in-the-round carving more than 40 years ago. I still have it today! Nearly any size and shape of assorted wood scraps or found wood will work.



### Pinewood Derby car

A perfect team project limited only by the child's imagination. Purchase a Boy Scouts official car kit or use a 1¼" by 1¾" by 7" piece of pine or other soft wood.



### Slip-bark whistle

This project is better suited for older children and is somewhat seasonal, when the springtime sap is flowing. Use a ½"-diameter by 5"-long smooth branch.

## Carving on the Trail

I love to carve and hate to be in a situation where I'm not able to do so for extended periods. I do a lot of hiking and always carry my Flexcut Carvin' Jack, which is a complete pocket-knife style carving set that fits in a sheath right on my belt. This enables me to carve anytime, anywhere. A used plastic 35mm film canister with several interchangeable X-Acto carving blades along with a couple of handles works too.

I love to share my passion for carving with others and enjoy teaching about the practical side of woodcarving. Without a doubt, the most popular project to carve while on the trail is a spoon. On more than one canoe trip, the kids have lost every single spoon while washing the dishes in the river. While this would constitute a crisis for some, I approach it as an opportunity to teach the kids how to be resourceful by showing them how to make their own spoons from found wood.

Many times, while on long-distance back-packing trips, I will lay over a few days to rest, and this is where carving really plays a big role in my trip. I have left behind several carved walking sticks at hiker hostels and shelters along the trail for anyone to pick up and use. I carve my name and e-mail address in the stick, resulting in many grateful messages from the happy recipients who found my walking sticks along the trail. Simple pocket-knife projects such as slip-bark whistles can also add a lot of spirit to a wilderness campsite.

When carving on the trail, you must put the necessary thought into making it a safe activity. Medical help can sometimes be days away, so take every safety precaution possible, especially with less-experienced children.



The Flexcut Carvin' Jack is a great compact tool for carving on the trail.



### About the Author

Dave Brock lives in the North Carolina mountains and has worked for the Eckerd Youth Alternatives Wilderness Camp for the past 28 years. In addition to teaching woodworking to kids at the camp, Dave is also a scoutmaster. For more of his work, visit his website at <http://members.tripod.com/gohike>.



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