

How to Use a Fixed Blade

Materials: Fixed blades, first aid kit, stocked with pressure bandages, branches for whittling, wooden boards, pre-made mallets

Procedure: This activity is for children 12 years and up. Knife use is a basic skill that, while risky, is incredibly empowering. Most adults have a non-existent knowledge about how to use a knife safely or efficiently and my goal with students is to make them competent and informed initiates who can correct their parents. This may seem like a reversal of responsibility but that is the point. Children and adults all exist under the same system of physics and yet we tend to treat children like they have no place in that order. Allowing them to take part in the world of responsibility is an important step toward their discovery of self.

Before we pass out knives we discuss knife safety carefully.

Understanding Your Knife

A sharp knife is a safe knife. A safe knife should also have a short (10cm), fixed blade, with a strong spine and a simple Swedish bevel. Ideally, it should also have a full tang.

Basic Rules

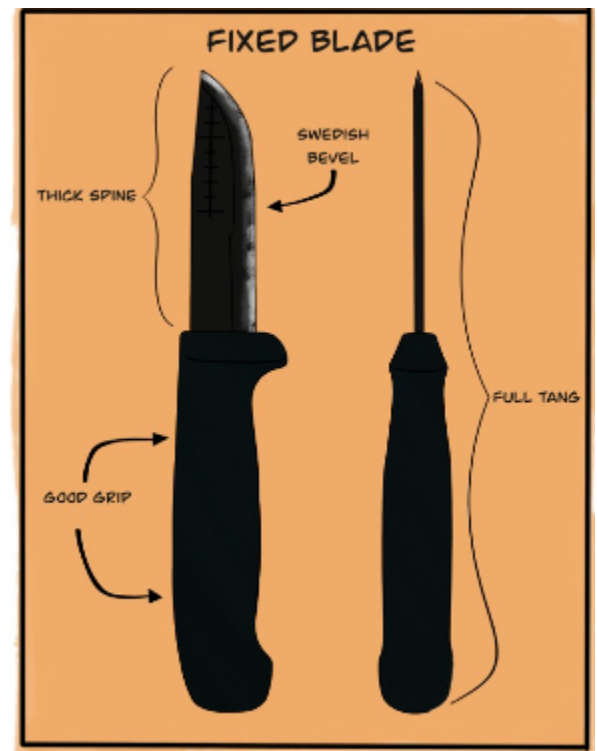
Knives are tools and are kept in their sheath, on the belt at all times, unless being used to accomplish a task. As soon as the task is completed it is replaced into its sheath. Don't walk with an unsheathed blade and remember not to swat flies with a knife still in your hand.

Grips

Grip - Forehand

There are only three approved ways to hold a knife: the forehand grip, chest lever, and backhand.

The forehand grip is the most commonly used. The knife is held with the blade facing forward with the thumb wrapped around the fingers. With this grip, the material being worked is always held to the side and



cutting happens away from the user. The best position for working with a knife is on your knees. It is good practice to use a board, stump or block of wood to brace the material being cut. If you are standing, your feet should be firmly placed, hip-width apart and the material should be, once again, held to the side.

Grip - Chest Lever

The chest lever is an incredibly strong grip, used for small controlled cuts. The knife is rotated 90° so that it is facing through your knuckles. The knife is then brought to the chest, while the material being worked on is braced under the opposite arm. The cut is made by using your chest as a fulcrum and drawing the knife and material away from one another in a short controlled cut. This method is essential for most fine work or cuts that require a lot of strength. Using this method prevents sudden, violent movements of the knife, should you attempt a cut that requires a great deal of force. You, your knife and the material are all braced and locked in a safe position.



Grip - Backhand

This grip is only used for cutting cordage and is the only time that the blade is held in a position facing the user. From the forehand grip, the knife is rotated 180°, so that the blade is facing the user. The cordage is then cut in a short controlled motion, cutting towards the user, who should maintain a long arm position. As soon as the cut is completed the user then rotates the blade to a forehand grip and then replaces the knife in its sheath.



NO MATTER WHAT GRIP IS USED, NEVER, EVER, EVER, EVER CUT TOWARD YOUR FLESH.

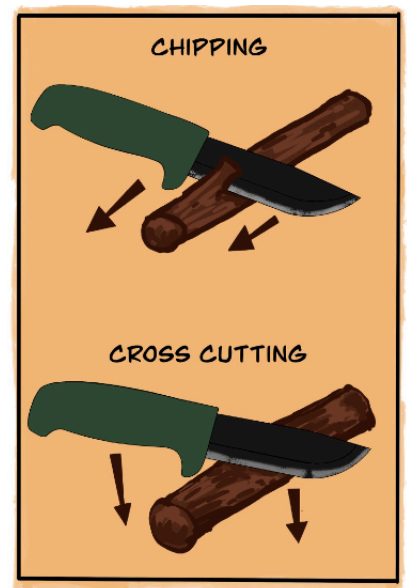
Useful Techniques

There are many useful techniques for making knife work safe and functional. We always provide beginners with a board to work on, or to support the material they are cutting. We also recommend the use of a short heavy branch that can be used as a hammer. Most cuts happen as a result of a dull knife being forced through wood with an excess of force. A sharp knife that is used in a controlled, patient manner is remarkably safe.

Chipping and cross-cutting

Chipping is the most common cut used in whittling. Chipping severs or slices through the wood in the direction of the wood grain and only requires the force necessary to break the chemical bond holding the wood fibres together.

Cross-cutting involves cutting perpendicular to the direction of the wood grain. It is very difficult to do, as each fibre must be severed individually. However, short shallow cross cuts, in combination with chipping cuts allow the safe removal of wood fibre. This combination of chipping and cross-cutting is a technique called "Stopper Cuts."



Stopper Cuts

Stopper cuts are made by placing the material on a work surface and holding the knife perpendicular to the wood grain. The spine of the knife is then gently tapped with an improvised mallet. This stopper cut should only be 1cm deep.

The material is then picked up and braced under an arm. Using a forehand grip in combination with a thumb push the knife slices or chips toward the stopper cut. Resulting in a precise removal of wood fibre.

This specific cut is called a 90° Latch. However, this technique can be used to create many different results. For example, it can be used to make beams, v-cuts, hooks and saddles. A stopper cut that is made around the circumference of the wood is the first step of a reduction.

Final Safety Considerations

When we are teaching a group of children to use knives, we always prepare for the worst and have a fully stocked med kit, ready and at hand. We have never had serious cuts but certainly have had lots of knicks and small cuts. That being said it is best to be prepared.

We also make sure that children are working at a safe distance from one another. A good rule of thumb is 2m. If a student wishes to enter another's workspace they first must ask permission, "May I enter your workspace?" The individual asked, then put their knife away, and responded, "All clear!" After that, they are both safe. It's a good habit with all things dangerous to respect each other's space and autonomy.

Children also like to sit to use their knives. However, it is much safer to work on their knees. That being said, anyone who is whittling in a sitting position must place their elbows on their knees. This guarantees that the knife is kept away from the arteries in their inner thighs.

Teaching children to use knives is challenging but the rewards are great. I love having my campers come back and show me the projects they have worked on at home, or with stories of helping their parents to use their knives correctly. The sooner we give agency to children the sooner they learn to respect themselves and others.

