

CIRCUS STILTS

“Stilts!” my daughter cried, rushing into the living room, “I need stilts!”
I didn’t know she was even *aware* of stilts, let alone harbored frantic, half-panicked desires for them.

“And *why* do you *need* stilts?”

She looked at me as if I had just landed on the planet for the first time.

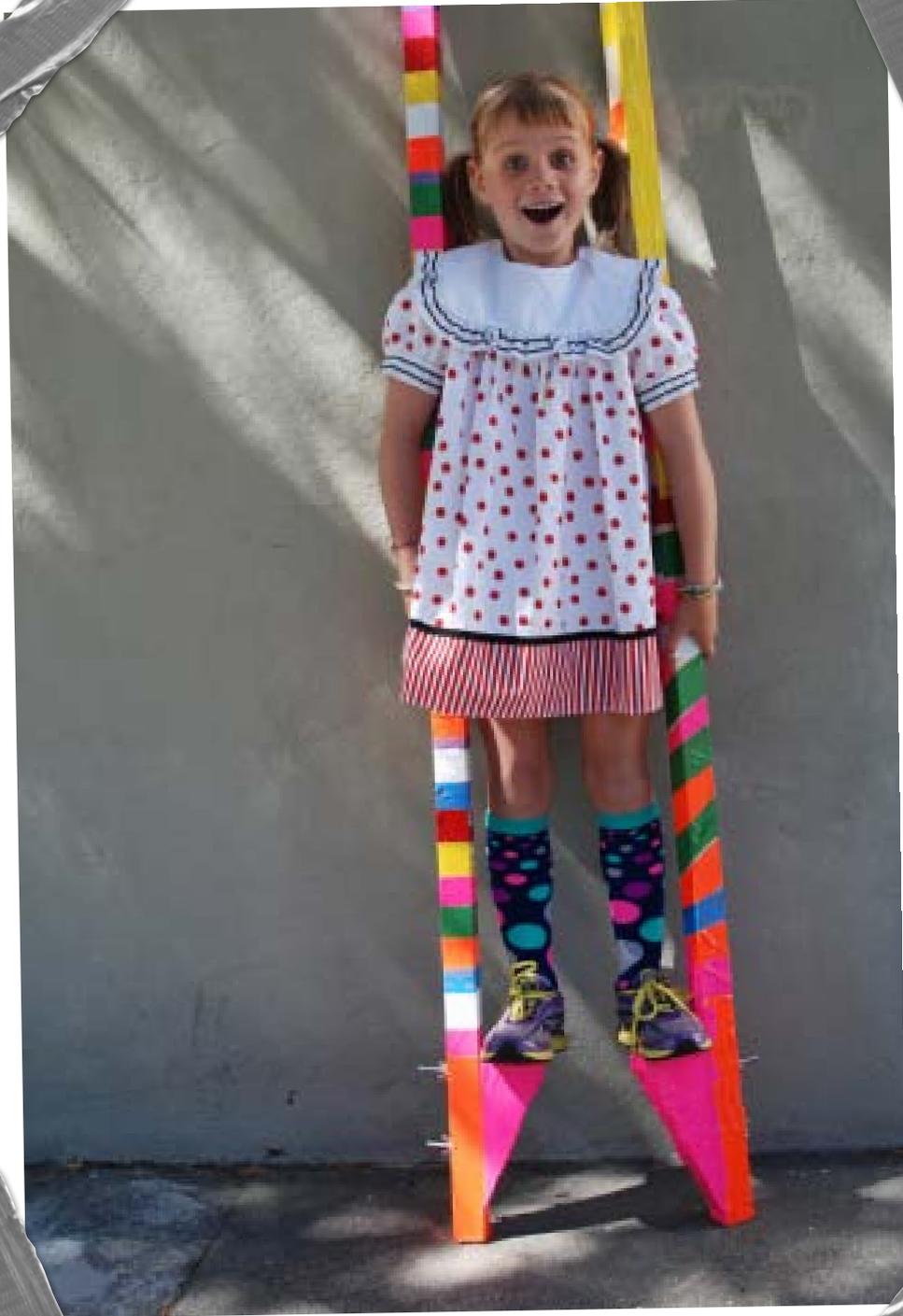
“Because I’m going to join the circus!”

Of course.

I once planned to run away and join the circus as well. Just substitute lion tamer or high-wire walker for stilt aficionado, and we share the same deep-seated circus dreams. (We also share the same paralyzing, soul-crushing fear of clowns, so even if she *does* join the circus, I’m confident she’ll be back by nightfall.) It must be a phase. Every kid wants to join the circus at one point or another. So of course every kid needs stilts.

Luckily, stilts are ridiculously easy to create. You can make these in just a few hours, including all the measuring, cutting, drilling, cursing, recutting, and—my daughter’s favorite—the duct-tape decorating.

Then you can spend the rest of the afternoon thinking about just how awesome it would have been to actually *join* the circus. Until you remember the clowns.





HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED

WOOD

- ❑ Two 2" × 2"s, and one scrap piece of 2" × 4" (We scored one for cheap in the scrap bin.)

BOLTS

- ❑ Two 3" bolts that look sturdy (don't go crazy; 5/16"s worked for us), and two 5" bolts of same diameter (make sure they're all threaded the whole way)
- ❑ 4 washers
- ❑ 4 wing nuts (make sure they're the same diameter as the bolts)

DUCT TAPE

- ❑ Or paint, but then you have to wait for it to dry before you get to play with the stilts (And how tantalizingly horrible is that? To be done with a project and then wait to use it? No thanks.)

TOOLS

- ❑ Handsaw
- ❑ Drill
- ❑ Drill bit (same size as bolts)
- ❑ Sandpaper
- ❑ Measuring tape
- ❑ Pencil



HERE'S WHAT YOU DO

- 1 Saw the scrap 2" × 4" into an 8"-long chunk. Then cut it diagonally until you have two triangles.
- 2 Place the triangles against the 2" × 2" so that they look like footrests. See how it works? (See Fig. 1) The thin part of the triangle points toward the bottom, and the thick part forms the footrest. Boom. You've got stilts. Well, almost.
- 3 Drill two holes in each triangle—4" apart. Be precise.
- 4 Now switch to the 2" × 2" and start drilling holes, starting about 3" from the bottom. (See sidebar for tips.) Just keep going up, drilling a new hole every 4". Again, be precise. These holes should match up to the footrest holes as you adjust height. (You can drill as many holes as you like and who knows? Maybe your kid actually *will* join the circus. But take note of how high each new hole will make the footrest during later height adjustments, and just stop drilling where you feel comfortable.) (See Fig. 2)
- 5 Line up the footrest triangles to the holes in the 2" × 2"s and insert the bolts, washers, and wing nuts. You don't have

to go bananas tightening them at first. Just make sure everything is lined up and mostly straight. (See Fig. 3)



6 Fit-test them for proper pole height. Circus clowns might have a precise measurement for how high the hand poles should be in relation to how high the footrests are placed, but we just eyeballed it and then cut the tops of the 2" × 2"s to a height my daughter felt comfortable with. Remember, as the kids get better, they may want to move the footrests higher, so make sure you leave enough of the 2" × 2" for future growth and then saw accordingly.

7 Decorate. Or not. We used colored duct tape because it's fun and easy and quick and lends a bright, circus feel to the whole project—plus it's something even a young kid can totally do on her own. But use whatever you like. Or don't. A nice smooth sanding on the wood is all you *really* need.

8 Start walking. Young kids will need a lot of balance help at first. It's almost like riding a bike: Once they get that balance right, they'll be walking all day.



DAD TIP

If your triangles turn out to be different sizes, don't worry. It's freaking hard to cut on the diagonal sometimes. But there's an easy fix. During Step 2, just place your triangle footrests on the 2" × 2"s and make sure the flat footpad parts—the tops—are even with each other. Then start drilling holes on the poles to make sure the footrests are always even with each other. It's not rocket science. Have fun. If you don't get everything right at first, figure it out. Even better, let the kid figure it out. If you really want, just skip the whole triangle business and turn the 2" × 4" into blocks, each about 6" long. This will give the stilts a chunkier look but could save on measuring and drilling time, especially if the triangles are different sizes. And honestly, kids don't care. They just want to walk on stilts. *Now!*

BALANCE BOARD

I'm always surprised at what a big hit it is when we make balance boards for friends. It's such a simple device—a board of wood and a cylindrical fulcrum underneath—but it contains some gravitational, almost magical pull of joy that is just too hard to resist.

When I'm working upstairs in our craft room, my daughter sometimes pulls out her old balance board and occupies herself for hours, trying to master the balancing act. Friends say their kids do the same. Heck, my wife and I pull it out every now and then and give it a try, long after the kid has gone to bed.

All told, it probably took us an hour to make and decorate our balance board, but it's the craft that keeps on giving.

SAFETY NOTE

This is potentially dangerous. I should tell you that from the start. The finished product will include sharp edges and the distinct possibility that you or your cherished loved ones will—gasp—fall.

Most likely on their rear ends.

Over and over again.

If you can get behind the idea that kids should live with a little danger mixed with a lot of fun, this is your project.

I kid you not: This is so much fun.

So there you go. You now have stilts.

Just think: For about \$20 worth of materials, you just saved on *four* years of college. If, that is, the kid actually does go join the circus . . .