

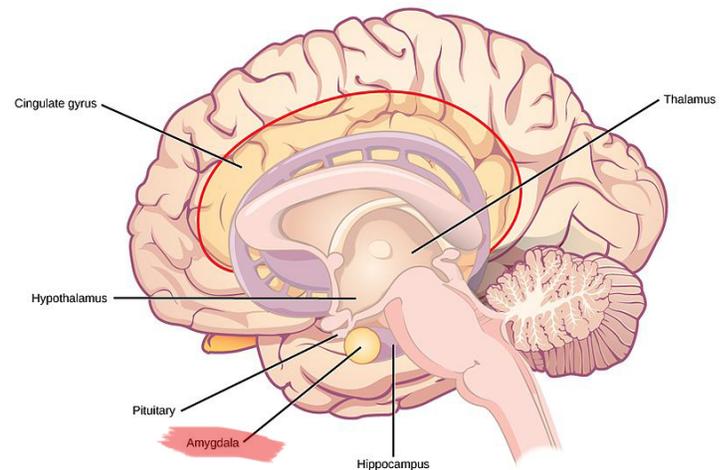
Stress Relief by Amy G. Dolla/Andy G. Dolla



Background:

Perhaps you have heard of the amygdala. It is a small, almond-shaped part of your brain that is known for the “fight or flight” response. When you are feeling scared, it is this area of the brain that tells you to freeze, run away, or stay and fight against the danger. When someone is “seeing red,” they are acting from the amygdala.

The idea behind the Amy G. Dolla is to help children when they are in this “amygdala state.” We all, at times, get into the fight, flight, or freeze state, and part of growing up is learning how to handle this feeling, and how to move from this state to one that uses more of our brain, where we can think about the consequences of our actions. All children go through this process, but some children, for various reasons, have more trouble with this than others. This includes children on the **Autism Spectrum**, those with **Emotional Impairments**, those with **Sensory Processing Disorders**, with **anger management issues** or **anxiety**, children who have suffered from **trauma**, and also children who are **highly sensitive**. If you have or work with children like this, you probably know exactly when they are in this “amygdala state.” However, most of us don’t know how to help them get out of it.



As a special education teacher, I have worked with kids who have all of these issues. As a mother, I have seen my own children in this state. And as a highly sensitive person, I have been there myself, both as a child and as an adult. The design for the Amy G. Dolla is based on everything I have learned about helping people move from the fight or flight response to one where we are in control of our emotions, not the other way around.

The Doll:

When creating the design for the doll, I considered many factors:

1. The first requirement was that the doll was strong enough to handle a beating. When a child is angry, they often want to lash out at something. Wouldn't you rather your child beat up on a doll than on their sibling, another student, or even you? The design calls for the use of duck cloth canvas for the entire body. (I first learned about duck cloth canvas when I was researching how to make strong beanbags for corn hole games.) I also avoided adding anything hard to the doll (buttons, zippers, etc.) that could hurt the child or others around them.

2. The doll, of course, is also designed to be hugged. If a child is scared, having something to hold onto and hug can be very comforting. It gives them the feeling that they are not alone, even within the storm of emotions they are feeling.

3. The third thing that I considered when making this design was the need for tactile input. In other words, it needed to have fabrics with different textures to it. There is a technique for dealing with anxiety called "grounding," where you focus on what your five senses can perceive. One of the strongest senses for this, I believe, is the sense of touch. When you touch something and really pay attention to how it feels, it pulls you out of your emotions and into a more concrete reality. This is a wonderful way to self-soothe. I have included the following different textured fabrics for just this purpose:

- Duck cloth canvas
- Terrycloth
- Fleece or felt
- Velcro
- Denim or corduroy
- Grip-tight cloth (the kind with dots on it for the bottoms of pajama feet, etc.)

4. Originally, I planned to put a face on the doll, but I've decided against that. Since the doll does not have an expression of its own, the children can project whatever feelings they are having onto the doll. As an adult, you can use the doll to indirectly talk about the child's feelings. You can ask questions like, "How is Amy feeling right now? What would her face look like? How can we change that? How could we help Amy to smile?" It is often easier for children to talk about the feelings of others than their own feelings.

5. Finally, the nice thing about using this pattern, instead of buying a pre-made doll, is that you can customize it to your child. You can control how the doll looks. Give it darker skin or lighter skin. Give it black hair or blond hair or red hair or purple hair. Make it in your child's favorite colors. Or with your child's favorite fabrics. Depending on the child, you could even take them to the store with you to help pick out the fabrics. Plus, seeing you make the doll for them (even if you struggle at it) will mean more to them than if you just bought it pre-made.

6. Oh, and the doll is 100% machine washable!

Materials:



The following list of materials give you enough to make **two** full-sized dolls* (plus **two bonus mini-dolls**):

- **Patterns for full-sized and mini-dolls**

(created to be printed off at 100% on standard 8½ by 11 paper)

- **Duck cloth canvas** – 11 inches** (I paid: \$3.06)
- **Terrycloth** – 8 inches (I paid: \$2.44)
- **Fleece or felt** – 8 inches (I paid: \$2.44)
- **Denim or corduroy** – 6 inches (I paid: \$1.52)
- **Grip-tight cloth** – 6 inches (I paid: \$2.50)
- **Sew-On type Hook and Loop Fastener (Velcro)** (I paid: \$1.99)
- **Thread** (I recommend Heavy Duty. I paid: \$2.49)
- **Stuffing** (you can buy it new. I got some from an old pillow...)

I was able to purchase all the materials at full price for under \$17.

You will also need the following basic tools:

- **A sewing machine** (or you can hand-sew the doll)
- **Scissors**
- **Straight pins**
- **A needle** (for any finishing work needed.)

There are, of course, ways to make it even cheaper.

- Keep a lookout for coupons and sales (fabric stores love to do this.)
- Shop the remnants section (small pieces at the end of bolts that fabric stores often sell for ½ off. Since you don't need a lot of fabric, this could be just perfect for what you need.)
- Recycle old clothes and household items. An old washcloth could work for hair, a pair of old jeans would give you plenty of denim. You could even use the fabric from your child's favorite shirt (you know, the one that they don't fit in anymore or has a huge stain right on the front.)
- I would still recommend using duck cloth canvas for the body of the doll, to ensure sure the doll is strong enough.

* Since you have to buy fabric in predetermined-width strips, you will end up with twice as much fabric as you need for one doll. This is a good thing—it mean you can make two copies of the doll, which I **highly recommend** doing. Why? So you have one for at home and another one to keep at school, Grandma's, the babysitters, the non-custodial parent's house. One to take on trips and one to keep safe at home. One to use while the other one is in the washing machine. Or one to keep safe until the other one has been "loved to pieces" or lost. It is always good to have a "back-up doll."

** Did you know that you can buy fabric at the store in any length you want? I always thought I had to ask for a fraction of a yard (1/2 yard, 1/8 of a yard, etc.) but you can just tell them the length you want in inches and they'll give you that amount, in whatever width the bolt comes in.

2

4

6

8

BODY and SHIRT BACK

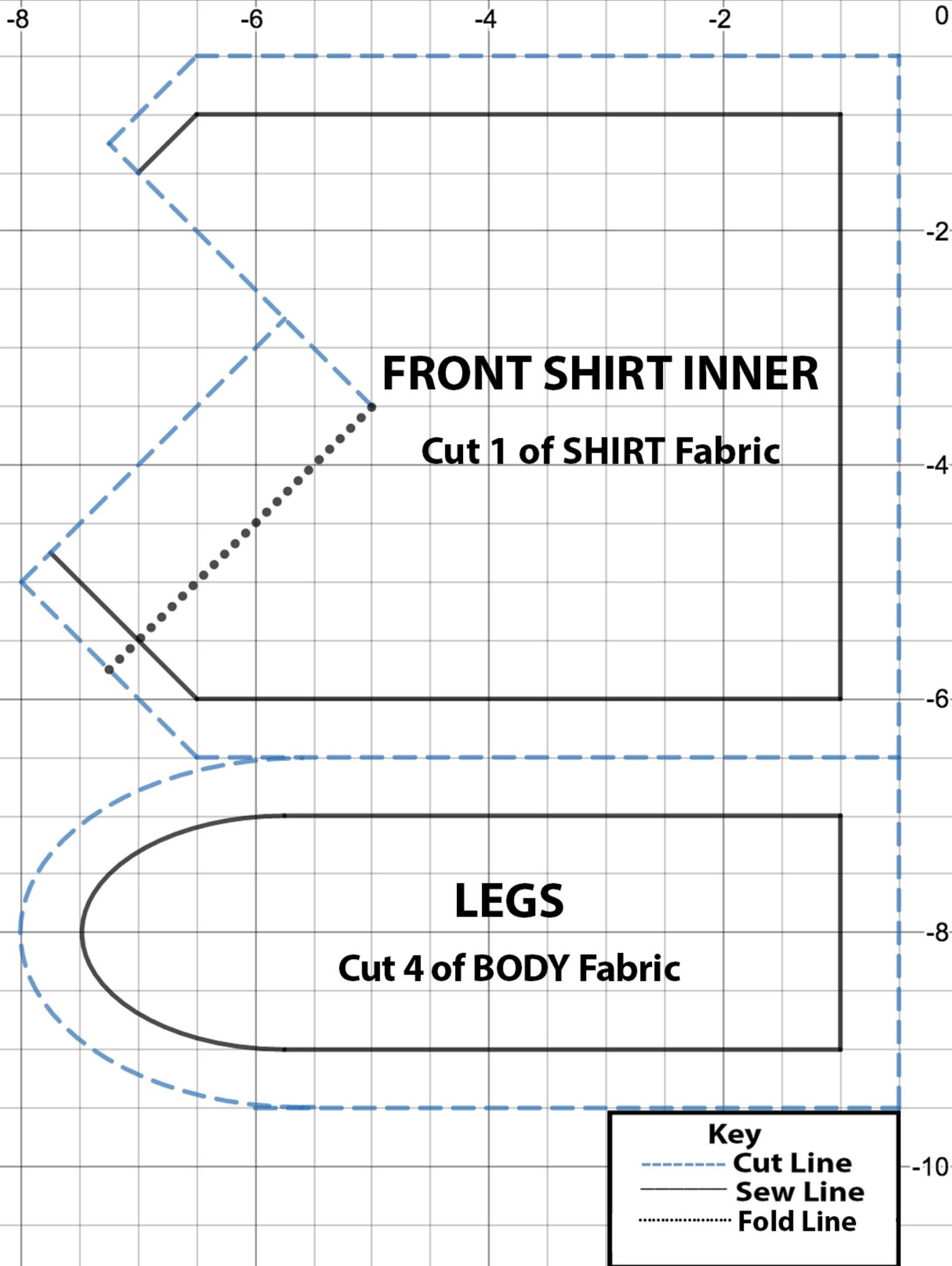
Cut 2 of BODY Fabric

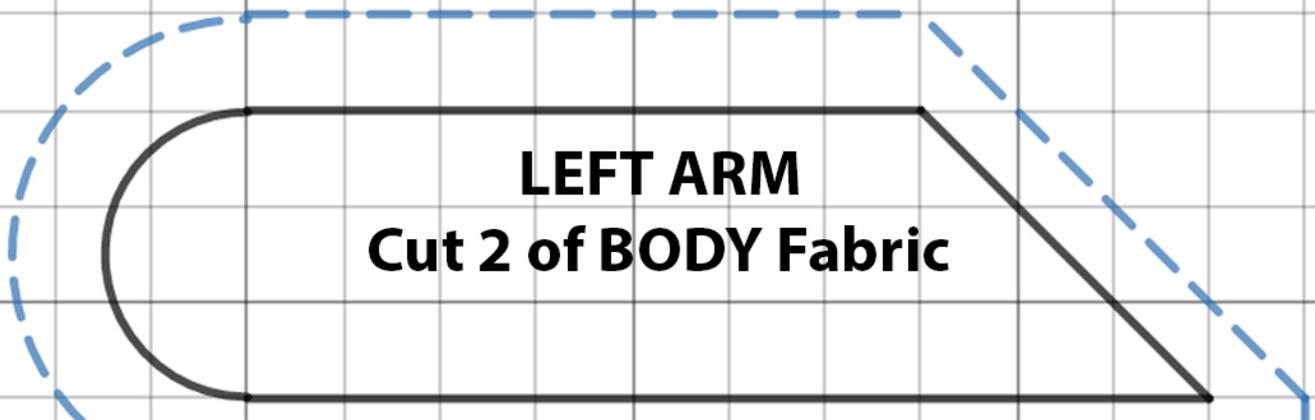
Cut 1 of SHIRT Fabric

RIGHT ARM

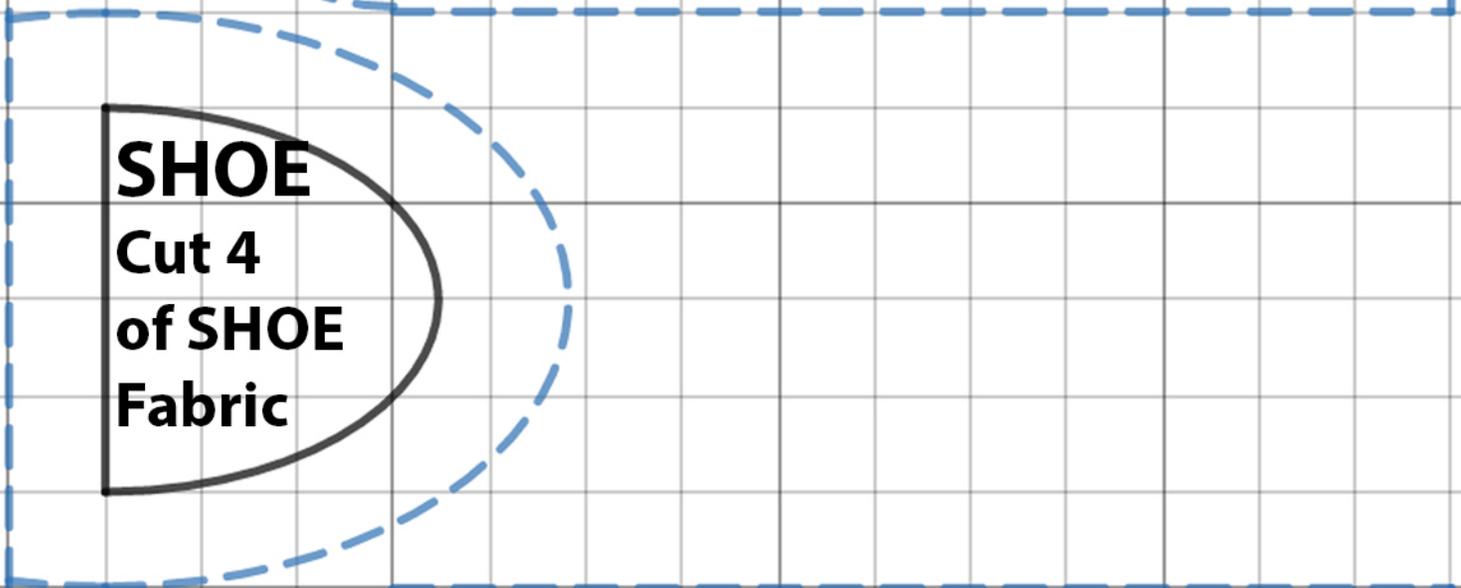
Cut 2 of BODY Fabric

Key
 Cut Line
 Sew Line

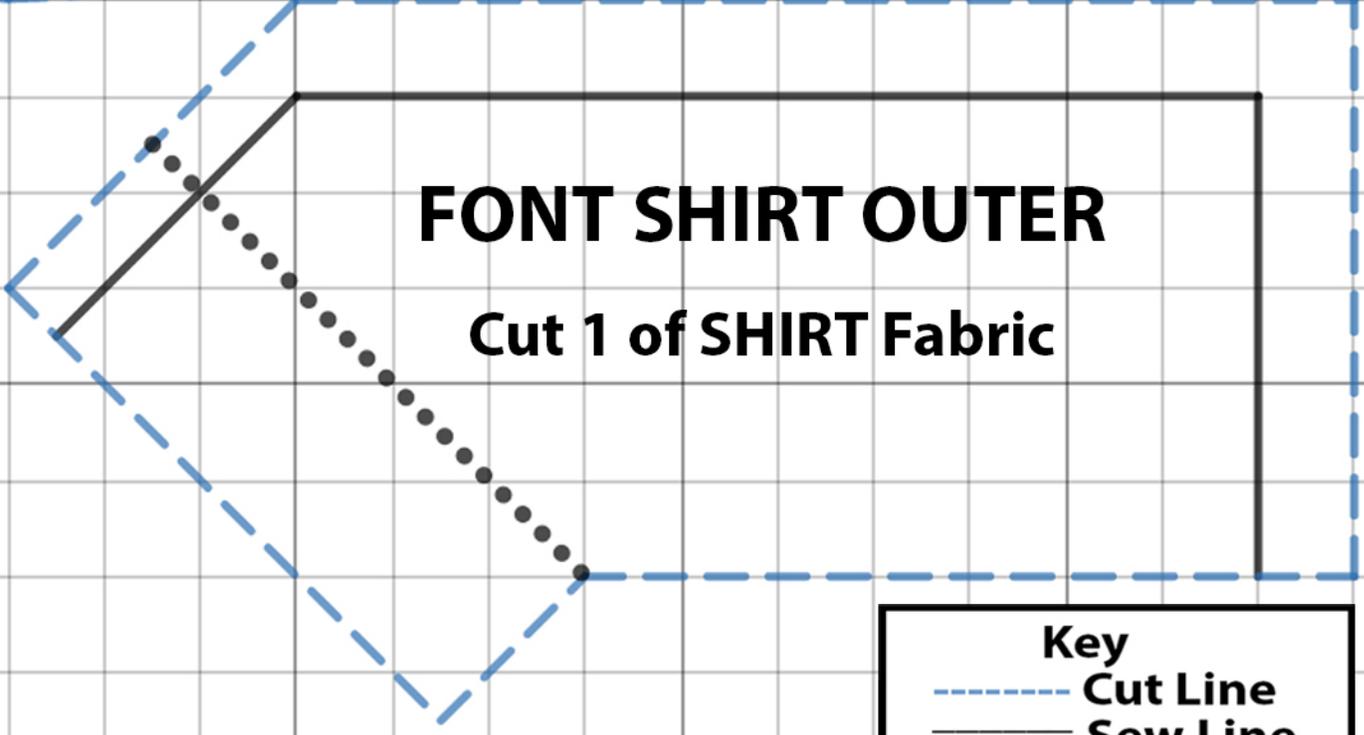




LEFT ARM
Cut 2 of BODY Fabric



SHOE
Cut 4
of SHOE
Fabric



FONT SHIRT OUTER
Cut 1 of SHIRT Fabric

Key

-  **Cut Line**
-  **Sew Line**
-  **Fold Line**

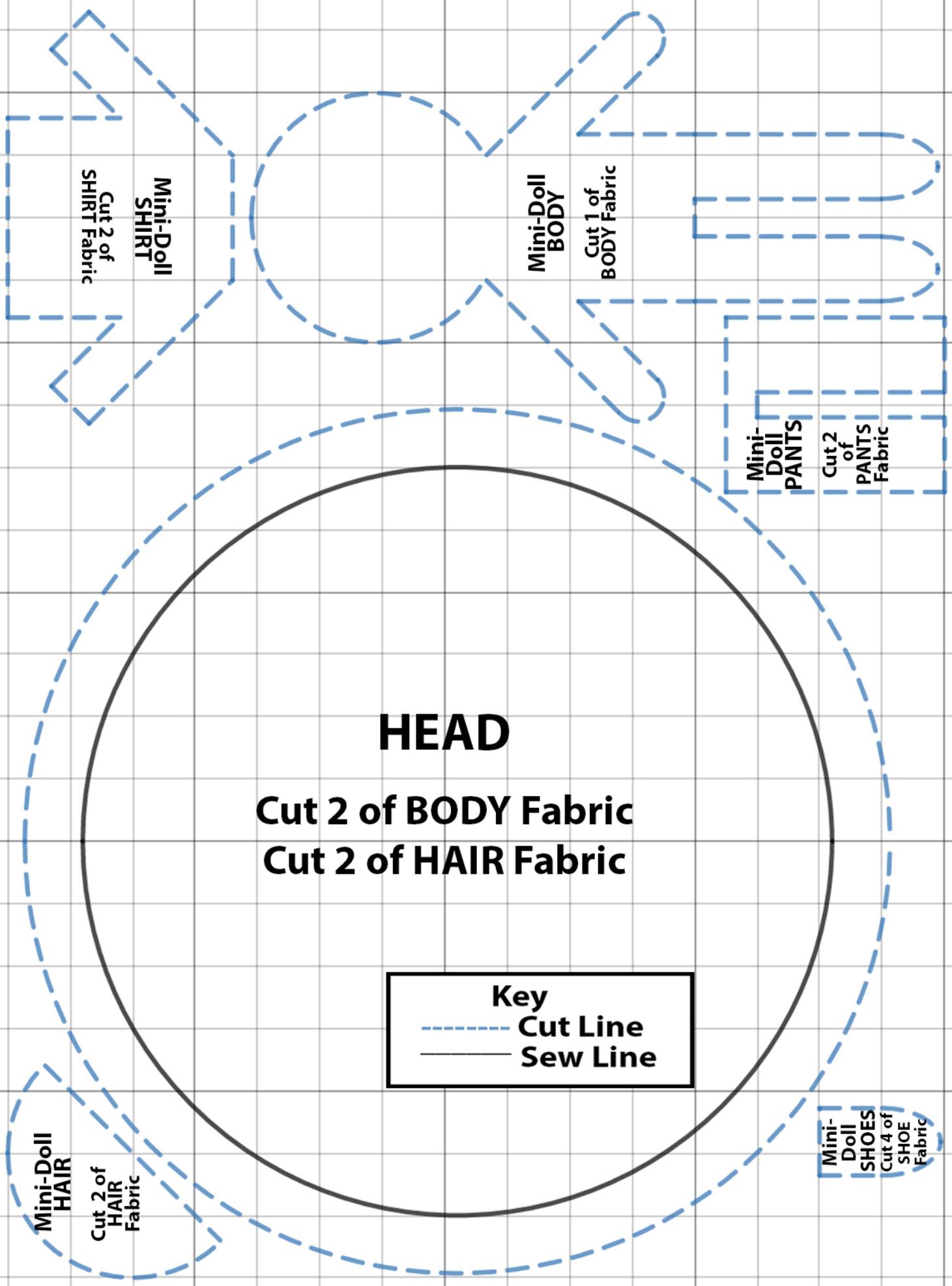
LEFT SLEEVE
Cut 2 of SHIRT Fabric

RIGHT SLEEVE
Cut 2 of SHIRT Fabric

PANTS
Cut 4 of PANTS Fabric

Key

----- **Cut Line**
———— **Sew Line**



Mini-Doll
SHIRT
Cut 2 of
SHIRT
Fabric

Mini-Doll
BODY
Cut 1 of
BODY Fabric

Mini-Doll
PANTS
Cut 2
of
PANTS
Fabric

HEAD

Cut 2 of BODY Fabric
Cut 2 of HAIR Fabric

Key
----- Cut Line
———— Sew Line

Mini-Doll
HAIR
Cut 2 of
HAIR
Fabric

Mini-Doll
SHOES
Cut 4 of
SHOE
Fabric

Instructions:

1) Cut out the fabric per the instructions on the pattern.



2) Sew SHIRT ARM to BODY ARM at bottom, right sides facing up. (See photo.)

• Make sure you have two of the "front" and two of the "back" ARMS when you are done.



3) Sew ARMS (right and left) with right side together.

• Make sure all layers of fabric are being sewn.

4) Turn ARMS right-side out.

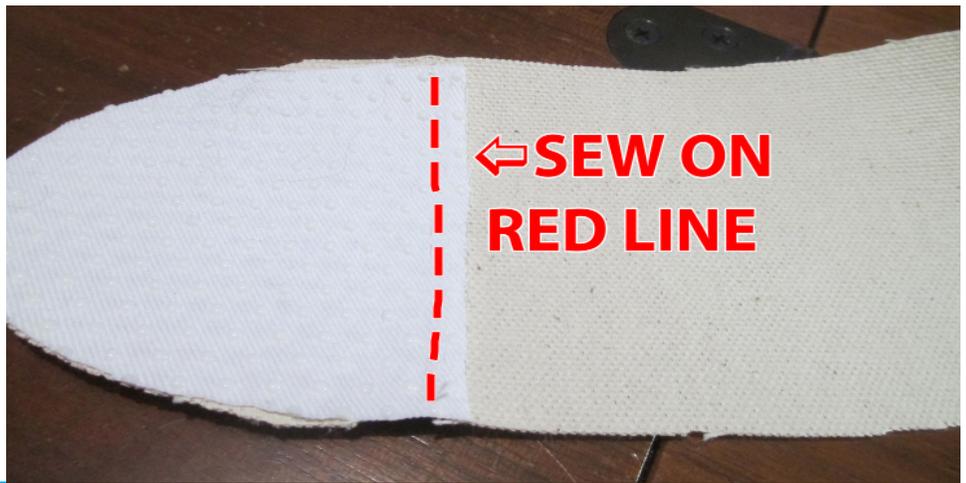
• Because of the thickness of the duck cloth, this may be a bit difficult, but it can be done with a bit of work. (You can use the handle of a screwdriver or carefully use pliers to help.)

5) Stuff ARMS.



6) Sew SHOES onto LEGS.

- Place SHOE on leg with both right side up. Sew top. (See photo.)



7) Sew PANTS onto LEGS.

- Place PANTS fabric wrong side up, with bottom edge aligned with top edge of SHOE. Stitch all three pieces together. Then flip the PANTS fabric up. (When you do this, the seam is hidden and it makes it look like the PANTS are over the SHOES.)



8) Sew LEGS right side together.

- Make sure all layers of fabric are being sewn.

9) Turn LEGS right-side out.

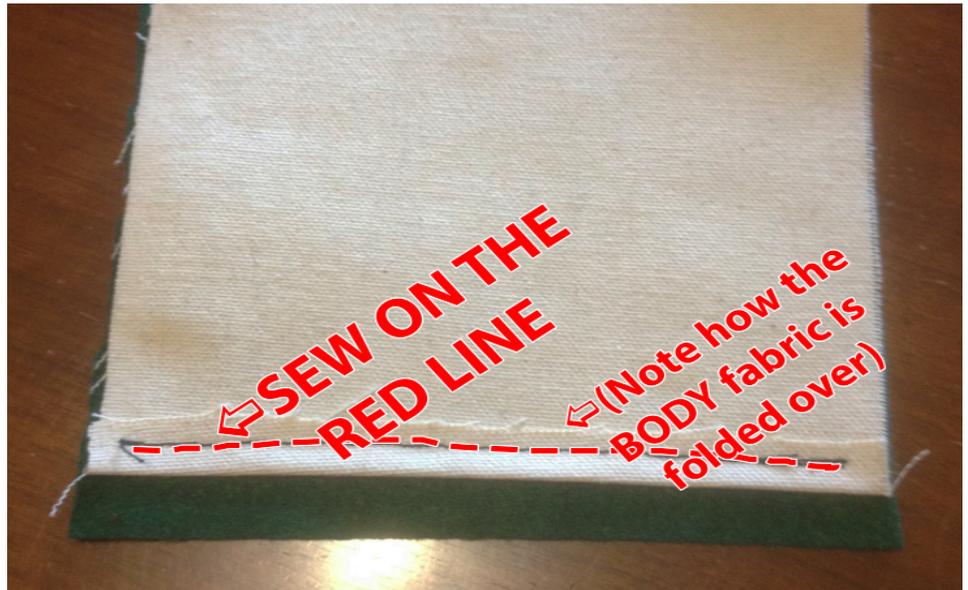
- Again, because of the thickness of the duck cloth, this may be a bit difficult, but it can be done.

10) Stuff LEGS.



11) Sew **BACK OF SHIRT** to **BACK OF BODY FABRIC** at the bottom. Fold the **BODY FABRIC** (but not the shirt fabric) up when you do this (see picture.)

- This will help later, when you sew the body closed.



12) Sew **LEGS** to **BACK OF BODY** and **SHIRT**, on the **BODY FABRIC** side.



13) Sew **BACK OF HAIR** to **BACK OF HEAD** all the way around the circle, with right sides up.

- Sew close to the edge so when you sew the **HEAD** pieces together, this stitch doesn't show.



14) Sew **BACK OF HEAD** to **BACK OF BODY** and **SHIRT BACK**, right sides together.

15) Flip **BODY** down (see right photo.)



16) Sew **INNER SHIRT** to **BODY** piece at collar.

• Fold the collar down and sew at top, so some fabric is "free."

17) Sew **hook (rough) side of Velcro fastener** to **INNER SHIRT** piece, right sides up.

• The doll has been designed so that the shirt can be opened and closed (giving the child the sensation of using the Velcro) but the child can not undress the doll (yes, I know how kids can be.)



18) Sew **loop (soft) side of Velcro fastener** on **back side of FRONT SHIRT OUTER**.

19) Sew **collar down on SHIRT FLAP**. (See photo.)

• Again, sew near the top, so some fabric is "free."

20) Place **SHIRT FLAP** on **INNER SHIRT** and **Velcro** together.



21) Fold FRONT HAIR in half.
Sew to head.

Sew around the circle. You can sew along the straight edge, too, if you want, or leave it "open," forming a kind of pocket.



22) Place FRONT HEAD on FRONT BODY, right sides together. Sew.

• Make sure the "hairline" is straight.

23) Flip HEAD up (see photo on the right)



24) Sew ARMS to BACK OF BODY and SHIRT, right sides up.



24) Place doll front and back with right sides together and sew shoulders and HEAD.

- Try to sew inside the other stitches.

25) Fold ARMS inside BODY (see photo) and then carefully sew each side of the BODY.

- This may be too thick for your sewing machine. You may have to sew this step and the last step by hand.



26) Turn BODY, with HEAD and ARMS, right-side out.

27) Stuff

- Start by filling the HEAD then the BODY.



28) Sew bottom

• Again, you may have to do this part by hand, since the layers of fabric are so thick here. Make sure to sew through the fleece, the duck canvas, and the legs with this stitch (but not the SHIRT FLAP—so it will still open.) This will insure that the doll stays together well.



29) Pat yourself on the back

• You have just created a doll that will help a special child learn to control their feelings.



Bonus: The Pocket-Size Mini-Amy G. Dolla/Mini-Andy G. Dolla

In addition to the pattern for the full-sized doll, I have also included a pattern for a pocket version of the doll. For some children, they may not want other kids to see them with a doll, but they still want to keep their Amy G. Dolla close, just in case. This mini-doll is 1/3 of the size of the original one and is not stuffed. It is designed for kids to be able to keep in their pocket, school binder, worn around their necks, or hidden on the inside of their clothes. It has the same great self-soothing effects, just in a smaller size!

Instructions:

- Cut out all the pieces
- Using white glue or Fray Check, go around all the cut pieces (except for the fleece) to prevent fraying.
- Glue clothes and hair to body piece on one side.
- Let dry.
- Once glue has dried, glue clothes and hair to other side.
- Let dry.
- Sew an outline around the doll, to keep it all held together.
- *Optional: Using permanent marker, add a happy face to one side of the doll and a sad face to the other side. The child can use this as a signal for how they are feeling, depending on which side is placed up.*



Tips for Using the Amy G. Dolla/Andy G. Dolla with Your Child

Note: these are only suggestions. You know your child best and know what will and won't work with them.

- Discuss the idea of the doll with your child before you even start to make it. Explain that it is designed to help them learn to have control of their own emotions.
 - You might even explain that the amygdala is a part of their brain that activates when they are scared or angry and that the Amy G. Dolla will help them when their amygdala takes over.
- If practical, take the child with you to buy the fabric and let them choose the fabric for the shirt and pants.
 - For some children, this experience would be overwhelming, so use your own discretion here.
- Let the child see you making the doll.
 - This could lead to positive memories later in life, and an association of the doll with you.
- Introduce the child to the doll when they are in a calm mood and again talk about its purpose.
 - I would say something like, "Amy (Andy) understands that you can sometimes get very angry or scared. She (he) can help you when you feel like that."
- When your child is in the "amygdala state," just give them the doll. DO NOT try to tell them how to use it at this point.
 - When the child is in this state, do not try to reason with them at all. Remember, they are in the most primitive part of their brain at the moment—they are not able to use their logical part.
 - Just keep the child safe and observe how the child uses the doll.
- After the child has calmed down, then you can talk to them about what happened.
 - Remember, this "amygdala state" is just as scary for the child as it may be for you. They need help sorting through all those powerful feelings. This is a great time to talk about "Amy's feelings" and why "Amy" acted the way she did. It is often easier for the child to talk about someone else than about themselves.
- Encourage the child to be aware of their own feelings and to ask for the doll before they get to the "amygdala state." By doing this, they are learning to take more responsibility for their own emotions and learning how to self-soothe. This is the real lesson here—and one that will stay with them all their lives.

Final Thoughts—and a Confession

You might be thinking, “This would be good for a young child, but how do I know when to stop using it? When is a child too old for this?” In my opinion, the answer is “never.” Okay, let me amend that. The answer is, “The time for a child to stop using the Amy G. Dolla is when the child wants to. And not before that.”

I do not think that a person is ever too old to use something that will help them to control their emotions. We all have ways to cope with difficult emotions—who’s to say which ones are “just for kids” and which ones are okay for adults?

Still, you might be worrying, “What if they never grow out of it? What if they end up taking the doll to college with them?” So what? I did. Well, not a doll, actually, but my own self-soothing item—my blanket. Yes, as a child I had a blanket that I used in much the same way as I see these dolls being used—as a way to sooth myself when my emotions got to be too much. I was a highly-sensitive child, and my blanket was my refuge. Then, after my mom died, it also became my connection to her, since she was the one who made it for me.

I learned when it was appropriate to have my blanket out—when I was home, without company over—and when to keep it put away. But I also learned that, whenever I was upset, my blanket would be there for me, to help me out of my own “amygdala state” and back into control of my emotions.

And I don’t see that as a bad thing. I don’t see that as weakness. I am able to be in control of my emotions—and I see that as a strength.



