



Chelsea and Seb construct their den outdoors. Once inside, they discuss what they will play. Seb uses a plastic tube as a doctor's stethoscope.

He pretends to listen to her heartbeat. The children continue to converse with both imagination and logic in the privacy of their enclosed space.

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

Hide away

Building dens is a natural and important pastime in children's social and emotional development. *Anne O'Connor* explores how adults can support this form of play while respecting children's need for privacy

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SIREN FILMS

Seb (three years 11 months) and Chelsea (four years two months) have made a den outside. Seb is the 'dad', but Chelsea wants to be the 'little girl' and wonders who will be the 'mum'? Seb suggests that the mum has died and they go inside the den, talking about how they will manage.

Chelsea then becomes the dying mum and suggests that the dad should work as a doctor so he can look after her. Seb, however, would rather be a policeman. They talk for a while about dead people.

Chelsea suggests using Seb's plastic tube as a stethoscope. He pretends to listen to her heartbeat. He tells her he can't hear it and that he is going off to catch a ghost. He invites her to come too, but she reminds him that she can't because she is dead. He tells her she can't be because she is still talking. Then the two of them chat about how they built the den themselves and how lovely it would be to eat their dinner inside it.

GOOD PRACTICE

Building and playing inside dens is a common feature of play and, for children, there is something very powerful about creating an enclosed private space.

In such spaces, children can play pretend games and reflect on important experiences, worries and anxieties, all of which is extremely beneficial to a child's emotional well-being.

Extensive research in Scandinavia, the United States, Great Britain and the

Caribbean has highlighted the importance of the den-building experience in children's social and emotional development. Unfortunately, it also notes that children today are increasingly less likely to be allowed the freedom and opportunity to play unsupervised outdoors in 'wilderness' spaces, and if they have a den at all, it is more likely to be a manufactured one, bought for them by their parents.

By providing the space, resources and time to experiment, early years settings can do much to encourage and foster children's interests in making dens.

2 Research into children's den-building has shown that children are naturally driven to modify their landscape and to define a space that is private – although more often than not, shared with one or two friends – and hidden from view.

Outdoors, children seek out bushes, pits and natural structures as starting points for constructions and 'houses' in which they can sit or play.

Very often, the construction and building of the den is as important for the children as the play that takes place inside. Collecting things to go inside the den is also an important element of the experience.

Den-building happens indoors too – under tables, behind sofas and, perhaps best of all, with the traditional wooden clothes horse.

3 Young children may well appreciate adult involvement in constructing a den, particularly technical help in securing it, but avoid taking over and building your own grand design.

- Some children will be keen to involve adults in their den play, but you should respect the private nature of these special places too.
- Provide books, paper, crayons and pens for children to make the most of the quiet creative space.
- Dens are temporary by design, but think about ways of enabling children to maintain, extend and refine their dens wherever possible.
- Making 'keep out' notices and other signs is an essential part of den-making, so provide the resources and support for children to make lots of them.

4 When considering den-building opportunities in your setting, view your environment from a child's perspective:

- Are there spaces, corners, nooks and crannies that lend themselves to den-making?
- Can you remove the doors from a low-level cupboard to make an interesting space for children to climb into?
- What can you add to make the space more special? Try adding a few

cushions and some books, soft toys, mirrors, musical instruments.

5 As a team, reflect on the range of resources to make available to children, indoors and outdoors, for their den-building.

- For outdoor dens try to provide:
 - ✓ bushes, shrubs and trees
 - ✓ willow tunnels
 - ✓ dead wood
 - ✓ leaf litter
 - ✓ logs
 - ✓ branches and twigs
 - ✓ old carpet pieces, rugs or mats
 - ✓ wind breaks
 - ✓ bamboo poles
 - ✓ umbrellas (for roofs)
 - ✓ tarpaulins
 - ✓ ground sheets
 - ✓ tyres
 - ✓ large cardboard tubes (from carpet shops)
 - ✓ washing lines
 - ✓ broom handles/wooden poles/clothes props.
- Ideal for den-building both indoors and outdoors are:
 - ✓ milk and bread crates
 - ✓ tents
 - ✓ wooden clothes horse
 - ✓ boxes, large sheets of cardboard
 - ✓ blankets, fabric, saris, curtains
 - ✓ pegs and tape for securing
 - ✓ ropes and ribbons
 - ✓ cushions
 - ✓ pots and pans, mugs and plates
 - ✓ snacks – eating in a den can be a great way to encourage reluctant eaters.

6 The obvious way to record children's den-making experiences is to photograph them, but you can try sketching them too.

The children will be fascinated by your attempts and will no doubt offer advice and criticism to make sure you get the

FURTHER INFORMATION

- The stills are taken from Siren Films' 'In the house', part of 'Child Observation No 8 – Learning Through Play (The Three- to Four-Year-Old)', a DVD showing how play promotes development and learning. Visit www.sirenfilms.co.uk or call 0191 232 7900

drawings right – and it's a great way to encourage them to try doing the same.

Make copies of the sketches and gather them together in a book, along with photographs and children's comments, so that the children have a permanent reminder of the dens long after they have been dismantled. ■

LINKS TO EYFS GUIDANCE

- **UC 1.1** Child Development
- **PR 2.3** Supporting Learning
- **EE 3.3** The Learning Environment
- **L&D 4.1** Play and Exploration
- **L&D 4.2** Active Learning

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

- Learning Through Landscapes provides advice on outdoor learning environments – www.ltl.org.uk
- Muddy Faces provides Forest School equipment and den kits – www.muddyfaces.co.uk
- *Nature's Playground – Activities, crafts and games to encourage your children to enjoy the great outdoors* by Fiona Danks and Jo Schofield (Frances Lincoln)
- Kylin, Maria, 'Children's Dens', *Children, Youth and Environments* 13(1), Spring 2003, visit: www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/13_1/Vol13_1Articles/CYE_CurrentIssue_Article_Dens_Kylin.htm