



I'm a teacher, get
me OUTSIDE here!



Creative STAR
Learning Ltd

Making Forts and Dens

Dens and forts meet a deeply held human need for privacy and security. Children use dens and forts to be alone, by themselves or with friends. They need to experience solitude, so that being alone for them is not being lonely. In a busy outdoor space, dens can provide a place to simply be away from the hubbub.

According to Morgan Leichter-Saxby¹ “People of all ages need privacy for a range of reasons, both immediate and developmental. Privacy provides children with opportunities to:

- Contemplate and imagine
- Discover their sense of autonomy
- Rest and rejuvenate
- Confide in one another
- Learn concealment and subterfuge
- Experience anonymity
- Learn intimacy
- Experiment with language, behaviours and objects that are 'disapproved' of elsewhere or forbidden”



No adult may enter this den unless invited by a child

David Sobel² takes a place-based perspective in his book, *Children and Nature: Design Principles for Educators*. He writes about dens being special places to hide away that become home from home in nature. They provide a bridge to the wider world and a place to bond with the natural world, allowing children to feel comfortable in the landscape, connected to it and eventually committed to acting as stewards to it. This seems to ring true in all cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds and climates world-wide. There is a human instinct to build a place of refuge or safety when needed. Children manifest this in their play.

Where are you now?

It is useful to reflect upon your current outdoor provision – both in your outdoor space and further afield, if your setting has a local area of greenspace that is repeatedly and frequently used. Have a look at Appendix 1 for a baseline audit.

¹ Morgan Leichter-Saxby, M. (2009) *Dens and Forts* Islington Play Association <https://bit.ly/2Cgap2p>

² Sobel, D. (2008) *Children and Nature Design Themes for Educators*, Stenhouse Publishers <https://amzn.to/2Crr0mk>
©Juliet Robertson, 2011-18, Creative STAR Learning Ltd. www.creativestarlarning.co.uk

Setting up dens

Den building requires very little in the way of materials. A blanket and umbrella, or some cardboard boxes on a dry day make a fine start. Far more important are space, and time. If you can support children's construction of den-like spaces, then you'll see lots of other constructions going up and falling down all over the outdoor space! Generally, forts tend to be built with defence in mind. Dens are usually more cosy affairs.

If a den building culture does not currently exist in your setting then consider ways of prompting this to happen:

- Have a den set up so that children can experience what it is like. This does not need to be a fancy setup. Practice getting one put up quickly and to work out good places to site it.
- Be mindful of weather conditions – windy days will put strain on materials used. Look for sheltered spots. Cheap tarp can be easily ripped. Shock cord or bungee cords can be useful as they have more give.
- Once children have seen a variety of dens and played in them, then leave part of the dens unfinished. Children new to den building may not be able to resist investigating these and making changes to the set up. This means that children can learn practical skills such as fastening Velcro, tying knots, pulling rope tight, etc.
- Set up some open-ended suggestions such as a piece of fabric tied between trees or a cardboard box with a sleeping bag in it. For little children, even a golf umbrella can end up as a den.
- Children need full control of their material creations. As much as possible adults should take a step back and let children get on with their work.

Eventually children will be able to set up a variety of dens in different places. Often fixed playground equipment can be used to create dens. Opportunities to den build in woods and other greenspaces are popular with children. With support and the right sort of encouragement to use tools, children may want to create their own more permanent structures.

Useful books and other resources

- *The Den Book* by Jo Schofield and Fiona Danks (2016) <https://amzn.to/2Aprmsk>
- *Den Building* by Jane Hewitt and Cathy Cross (2015) <https://amzn.to/2LHk3AW>
- Muddy Faces have an outdoor hub where a range of free online den building information can be found <https://bit.ly/2Qcd9Eo>

Den building resources

Abundance and diversity of materials matters. By providing a range of materials and other items:

- The children have to make decisions about what equipment they need to use in any given situation.
- The different colours, properties of the materials such as density, translucency, mass and texture all add variety which can spark a range of conversations.
- The variety of attributes enables sorting and comparisons to be made.
- Donations from families and items found in thrift shops and jumble sales make the resources personal to the community that grows around an early years setting.
- Ensuring that everyone is thanked for their contributions is also another element of learning about citizenship for children.

Storage

Always pack away materials and other resources dry. Otherwise they will rot, rust, get smelly and disintegrate. Suitcases work well as the outer pockets can store the string, pegs and other accessories. The empty suitcase also has high play value <https://bit.ly/2ThGtLx>. Other storage includes:

- Salt grit bins (Anna Ephgrave's recommendation)
- Shopping bags on wheels
- A big bag
- A rucksack (good for off-site den building)

Fabrics

Use quick-dry materials, as much as possible. Easy-care fabrics which can be rain washed and that dry in minutes are ideal. If they get really dirty, then make washing them an activity to do with children, followed by hanging the material up to dry. This includes:

- **Tarps:** different sizes, lengths, shapes, colours, weights including transparent tarp. Make old tarps into maths tarps with cut out shapes: <https://bit.ly/2CiMNN4>
- **Shower curtains:** ask for donations from families
- **Organza:** beautiful and some are surprisingly robust. Have a range of colours
- **Mesh:** commonly used on sports clothing
- **Ripstop nylon:** kites are made with this material which often comes in a range of colours including fluorescent and bright
- **Netting:** the sort used for curtains. It is not particularly robust, so used only second hand.
- **Netting with larger holes,** e.g. fish nets or garden netting is good for weaving natural material through to create a den. You can buy plastic netting from garden centres.
- **Various outdoor clothing material.** Pennine Outdoor³ sells many varieties: however there may be cheaper alternatives out there.
- **Fleece:** many supermarkets sell fleece blankets. Good for cosy warmth inside the den.
- **Insulated mats.** Essential for cold days. Use old camping insulated mats or yoga mats or aluminium bubble wrap
- **Groundsheets.** Good as a focal point and to ensure children have a drier, mud-free area to sit or lie on
- **Sleeping bags:** These provide warmth on cold days. They are also great for metamorphosing children into caterpillars.

Watch out...

- **Camouflage netting** easily rips. The types attached to a netting are more robust but less child-friendly.
- **Picnic blankets** often fall apart when washed if you buy the fleece sort with the waterproof underlay.
- **Large umbrellas** are not always as strong as they appear. Choose with care if you are keen to have one
- **Space blankets:** these can sometimes be found in supermarket sales. The material is prone to ripping and tearing, so don't put a heavy financial investment on this resource

³ <https://www.pennineoutdoor.co.uk/fabrics>

Sustainable resourcing of stuff

One responsibility of every practitioner is to consider how resources are acquired. You may well have lots of resources hidden away, so have a clear out. Look in lost cupboards and re-discover what you already have.

It is quicker to purchase, but through asking for donations and using charity shops, you are making the most of your community resources. Once everyone knows your nursery is on the lookout for “stuff” then after a few years, you will find people will think of your nursery before chucking things out. Don’t forget online options including social media, Gumtree and Freecycle – if it exists in your area.

Rather than instantly chucking out a broken resource, look at ways of fixing it safely. If this isn’t possible, then set up a tinkering table. This enables children to take apart objects and find out how they are put together.

Finally, if you are not using a resource, think about who else could make better use of it. Set up a system which ensure that the skip is the last resort and not the first. Possibilities include:

- Give the resource away: have a place where children and parents can visit and take stuff.
- Find out if you have a local toy library that may be able to make use of it. Find out if there is a homeless shelter, Women’s Aid or similar charity that could do with any quality toys. Donate to a charity shop.
- Swap with a neighbouring nursery. Organise an annual or termly open house so that other childcare organisations benefit.

For more information and thoughts, have a look at this blog post: <https://bit.ly/2EXSgLR>

Other useful resources for den building include:

- Cardboard boxes and sheets – dry days only
- Breadcrates – lots
- Milk crates – the more the merrier. The best ones are the H crates available only from Cosy
- Planks of wood
- Large hollow blocks
- Decking planks
- Brushings – ask for old Xmas trees to be donated
- Pop up tents
- Pulleys
- Various other loose parts
- Grow your own den: use simple wooden frames and lattice for growing climbing plants such as runner beans, peas, honeysuckle, etc.
- Willow dens



A maths tarp over the story telling chair is a perfect hideaway

Holdings and fixings

From the outset, it can be helpful to have a system in place so that children can freely access the materials they need but learn how to manage the little bits below. As with materials, it is really helpful to have plenty of each resource. The crown champion of den building has to be Muddy Faces. They have almost every type of fixing imaginable. Cosy also have lots of materials.

- **Tent pegs:** go for a variety of cheap ones as you run the risk of losing them as children really do hammer them into the ground. This can become an entirely separate activity. You may want a few rubber, wooden or plastic mallets to support this activity.
- **Large stones or stumps:** useful for asphalt and other surfaces that tent pegs don't work on. Consider a size that is suitable for your age and stage of children.
- **Little stones or pebbles:** if you are wanting to use material that has no rivets, then use smallish pebbles and place them in the corners. Wrap the material around one and tie with a piece of paracord or nylon braid. This can then be used to attach to a fence or tree.
- **Put a strong post** into a strong, wide bucket and pour in ready mix concrete to create a moveable post for asphalt and other surfaces
- **Sandbags.** Fill with sand, soil or rubble and these can be used to weigh down material. Very useful in concrete jungles.
- **Tyre stands** (Cosy) ref 10355 Another alternative for asphalt surfaces
- **Clothes pegs:** ask each family to donate a few clothes pegs. Then you have a great variety that challenges children's fine motor skills and pincer grip. They can be sorted and encourage decision making.
- **Clamps:** these are large black pegs that clip material together. Much stronger than your average clothes peg
- **Wooden poles:** really long poles with a hole drilled in the ends. Go for a length around 120cm or longer. If you have access to coppicing, then this is a lovely challenge for children to find, measure and cut their own poles. Otherwise, it's a resource that needs purchasing.
- **Strong bendy plastic pipes.** These are usually used in the construction business and can be good for different shapes and attaching to other loose parts.
- **Velcro straps:** <https://bit.ly/2Aa6zsy> You can also buy strips of Velcro which are more like cable ties
- **Bungee balls:** these have a bobble at the end of the thin shock cord that slips through an eyelet on a tarp. It provides a bit more give than cord or rope. If you are also planning on creating a portable water wall, then you will need at least 30 bungee balls.
- **Elasticated shockcord ties:** these are more fiddly than bungee balls but enable an older child or adult to attach a tarp quickly round a branch or fence wire.
- **Scissors:** essential for cutting cord, Velcro and string as needed.

Long lines

It is sensible to know what line-making resources you have. Remember you may have to teach children how to use these items safely and include safety measures in a risk benefit assessment:

- **Paracord:** strong, cheap, nylon cord
- **Webbing:** can be a softer alternative to washing line. Watch as some are like unravelling knitting and become a mass of fibres in the hands of some children who discuss this unique property. Climbing webbing can be sealed at the ends and is very robust
- **High vis guy ropes:** good for dark places and dull days. Bright and reflective.
- **Cheap washing line:** the type that is bright green or yellow and easily cut as there is no steel inside
- **Marine ply rope:** this is very soft rope which is used on sailing boats. It comes in different thicknesses and is hardwearing

- **Masking tape** – for sticking up signs and notices
- **Ribbons:** another option for using with light fabrics.
- **Scraps of material.** Cut old bits of clothes and material into short lengths and use for tying things.

Watch out for:

Blue polypropylene rope: it's commonly available but goes hairy quickly and prone to wearing thin.

Hairy fake hemp rope: it looks wonderfully natural but also wears quickly.

If any practitioners or parents have joinery skills then den building can make good use of these in terms of making signs, simple frames and structures for children to add too. Children can be actively involved in this process.

Some things to remember...

- Try and keep dens up as long children want them there. If everything is tidied away at the end of a session, children do not experience the construction process on a long-term basis. This means they lose out on the opportunity to adapt and decorate their dens and develop complex narratives based on the longevity of the experience. Adults dismantling dens, arguably, invalidates their work and efforts with the hidden message that they have no permanent place or value. The children can take photos of their dens prior to dismantling if needed so they can remember the previous day's play.
- If necessary, allow some den building to take place indoors if this can't happen outside.
- Dens can exist in competition to each other. Props and resources can be stolen and re-stolen which can lead to conflict. Use this as an opportunity to develop negotiation skills rather than ban the building of multiple dens.
- Some practitioners feel the need to be able to see children. You can prune bushes and shrubs so that you can see through these spaces. Have translucent or transparent materials that enable you to see in, but still provide children with their own space. Maths tarps provide holes that also enable a better sight line.

Extend the purpose of dens



If children are not used to building dens and using dens, then help them by spending time making dens with children and then doing something inside them. If you have little or no shelter outside, then having a den or two provides places of refuge for sheltered activities.

You could:

- Provide snacks and drinks for consumption in dens. Remember to have mats to sit on or little seats and to wash hands before eating.
- Use for telling stories
- Play board games there
- Put out a set of small world items that interest a particular group of children
- Make puppets or have other creative sessions in a den
- Have mark making materials available.
- Fairy lights, torches and other lights for dark dens

- Have cardboard and box board and materials for making signs such as “No adults allowed”
- Have a range of books. It can easily become a book nook! This is especially relevant after visiting a library. It can also be fun to lie down to read a book or listen to a story. The different lighting provides a different atmosphere.
- Let the children play and decide what to do.

What are children learning?

If you have a diversity and abundance of different den-building resources, then a lot of learning will happen through den building. All of these are essential emergent reading, writing and maths skills:

- Children will have to make decisions about which equipment they use for any given purpose. This involves an element of problem solving as they have to work out what will work best. Strategies include: making a reasonable estimate then trying out their idea, working with others, and doing one thing at a time.
- Children will have to negotiate and learn to wait for an item they want or to find an alternative.
- The different colours, properties of the materials such as density, translucency, mass and texture all add variety which can spark a range of conversations. It facilitates the use of descriptive language, the language of comparison and the use of language associated with size, shape and measurement. It develops children’s understanding of attributes of materials, pegs and accessories and long items
- Children need to be able to visualise the den they are creating and to plan what happens each step of the way. Some may wish to draw their ideas first. Have pencils, paper and clipboards ready for this possibility.

Each type of fastening requires learning a new skill and develops a range of fine motor skills. This includes:

- The pincer grip or tripod grip to use pegs. Each type of peg has a different tensile strength that children need to learn how to get the knack of using.
- Palm grip to pick up and use stones
- Hand-eye coordination and depth perception to use a mallet and hammer in tent pegs
- Some types of line require scissors to cut. Signs may also need to be cut out and hung up.
- It requires high levels of dexterity to tie knots. Different string, rope and long things will further test children’s dexterity.
- Children develop proprioception skills to know where they are in relation to the den as they build it.
- They have to work out whether the den is big enough to fit all the children who need to be there. The child’s sense of space and how their own body ‘fits’ into the den is developed, as are real concepts of being ‘inside’, ‘under’ and ‘behind’.
- When the materials are being packed away, children are learning about the conservation of length and size of the materials. It can be hard to believe that such large pieces can be folded so small or squashed into a suitcase.
- As children choose different lengths of line and sizes of material, they are constantly estimating the size, the distance and the length of line needed to put up their den.
- When pegs are hammered into the ground, children have to negotiate stones and other hidden items that may prevent the peg from going into the ground. This involves problem solving strategies such as trial and error, having several goes and remembering from previous experience.

WHERE'S THE MATHS?

LENGTH →
rope

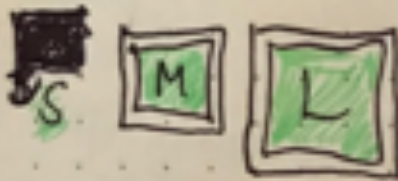
SIZE
of
MATERIAL

DEN
BUILDING

thickness
(width)

colours (high vis good)

type



Go for
pairs or
trios for

matching games & lines

pegs

materials

SHAPES



Of the material
& remember
HOLES in mat

PATTERN & TYPE MATERIAL

stretchy
static

solid

opaque

trans-
parent

PEGS

1, 2, 3 Count

∞ ∞ pairs

∞ ∞ diff colours

Spring / no spring

THINK!
Abundance
& Diversity

© Juliet Robertson www.creativestartlearning.co.uk

APPENDIX 1: Where are you now?

It is useful to reflect upon your current outdoor provision – both in your outdoor space and further afield, if your setting has a local area of greenspace that is repeatedly and frequently used.

REFLECTIVE QUESTION	YOUR RESPONSE
<p>Think about where children like to go in your setting to be alone outside? Is it behind a tree or shed, or, under a bush or bench? Den building may not happen in ways that adults perceive as dens. Very often small hideaway spaces are valued by children.</p>	
<p>Do your children role play situations where dens are used? For example, a particular spot may become a prison for 'baddies'. Think back and write down an example of where this has happened.</p>	
<p>How many nooks, crannies and spaces to den build currently exist in your outdoor space that your children use in their play?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this sufficient? • Are there any other spaces that children could use if resources and support were available? • Consider the range of sizes. Are some places small enough for just one or two children to use? • Do these spaces provide enough privacy away from noise or the hubbub of physical activities? 	

What provision for den **building and creating** nooks and crannies exist?

REFLECTIVE QUESTION	YOUR RESPONSE
<p>What den building resources can children access? Look at this handout and consider whether there are enough for the numbers of children in your setting.</p>	
<p>Do you enable all children of all ages and abilities to have the opportunity to build dens and use them? How inclusive is your provision and does it ensure children can develop and extend their den building skills?</p>	
<p>Can children leave their dens in place over several days or even longer so that their play can be deepened and extended?</p>	
<p>Do the adults respect children's need for privacy? Do they wait to be invited into a den rather than interrupting what children are doing? Do they only provide support when asked by a child?</p>	
<p>Is there an agreed approach between practitioners around the management of issues that may arise when children are den-building or using nooks and crannies?</p>	
<p>Have you backlinked den building to your curriculum?</p>	