



Children's Places of Secrecy and Play: A Playworker's Guide to Dens and Forts

Morgan Leichter-Saxby



Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Theory

2. Why is Constructive Play so important?

3. The Play Types

4. Play and the Emerging Self

5. The Playwork Principles

6. Inclusive Geographies of Play

7. Affordances

8. Privacy and Publicity

Practice

9. Where can Dens be Found?

10. What do Forts and Dens Look Like?

11. What are Dens For?

12. Dens, Forts and Genders

13. When is a Fort Not a Fort?

14. What Does a Rich Den Culture Look Like?

15. How Can We Facilitate This Process?

16. What Does This Mean for Best Practice?

17. Things To Consider

18. Conclusions

19. Bibliography

1 - Introduction

In the summer of 2007 I conducted research at Evergreen Adventure Playground, an inclusive and open-access play site in East London. I was looking at how the movement patterns of children ebbed and flowed across the landscape, forming a geography of play. I found that there were some areas, those below or behind large-scale fixed play equipment, or in clearings half-hidden behind screens of trees, where I rarely saw children, but detritus of play accumulated.

Evidence of play in these places was abundant and changing; the floor was strewn with empty crisp packets, relocated chairs and tables, and pieces of cloth had been tied to branches. These were small objects, viewed by the adult play workers as rubbish and tidied away periodically, but they were more than that. They were proof that children spent time in these places, alone and in groups, out of sight of adults, immersed in their own distinct culture and capable of building the places necessary for it.

Since then I have studied and lectured on dens, forts and the importance of privacy in childhood, and led den-making days across London. I now work for the Islington Play Association as Access Developer, studying issues of access and inclusion at each of Islington's 12 Adventure Playgrounds.

This guide is intended for playworkers and anyone else interested in learning more about children's constructive play - how to recognize it, understand it and facilitate it.



Den-building requires very little in the way of materials. A blanket and a tree, or some cardboard boxes will make a wonderful start. Far more important are space, and time.

2 - Why is Constructive Play so important?

Dens and forts provide opportunities for a range of play and social functions. The names I have chosen here are a bit misleading, because children can construct teepees, homes, shops, police stations, outlaw hide-outs - the list is endless. Some people talk about 'play buildings' to get this diversity across, but I tend to use the terms 'dens' and 'forts' because I think they are a particularly important form of play building, both very common and highly endangered. If you can support children's construction of fort-like spaces on site then you'll see lots of other play buildings growing and collapsing all over the site, like mushrooms in the night.



Dens and forts speak to a deeply-held human need for privacy and security. We can see the roots of those words shared in 'fortress' and in 'hidden', and may well remember some of our own impromptu childhood spaces. A table and long tablecloth, a stack of leafy branches leaning against a tree, cardboard boxes with holes cut in, even small spaces that children can crawl into like those found under hedges and behind furniture. Some of these places are ready-made and taken advantage of, some are purpose-built by and through play activities.

These are places of secrecy in childhood, places to sit and observe the world or places to escape it entirely. Children use dens and forts to be alone, and to be alone with one another.

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.

3 - The Play Types - (With thanks to Bob Hughes)

Although the Play Types are often quoted, it is worth reviewing them now and considering what particular expressions of each might be more readily, or exclusively, available in children's private spaces.

Communication Play - Ex: name calling, mime, jokes, facial expressions (the play face), gestures, poetry, etc.

Creative Play - Ex: access to different creative mediums and where getting messy is not a problem

Deep Play - Ex: children playing in front of traffic, riding a bike on the parapet of a bridge or through a fire, high tree climbing, especially over near water.

Dramatic Play - Ex: a dramatization of parents taking children to school, of a TV show, of a conversation between two people, a festival or even a funeral.

Exploratory Play - Ex: engaging with an object or an area and either by manipulation or movement, assessing the possibilities and content.

Fantasy Play - Ex: when children play at being a pilot, the owner of an expensive car or catcher of giant fish.

Imaginative Play - Ex: patting a dog that doesn't exist, or singing into a non-existent microphone.

Locomotor Play - Ex: chase, tag, hide and seek and tree climbing. Movement for its own sake.

Mastery Play - Ex: fire play, digging holes, changing the course of streams, constructing shelters and growing things.

Object Play - Ex: examination and novel use of almost any object. For example, a ball, a market, a piece of cloth, or even live or dead animals.

Role Play - Ex: the child brushes with a broom, dials a telephone, drives a car.

Rough and Tumble - Ex: playful fighting, wrestling and chasing, where children involved are laughing and squealing and obviously enjoying themselves by their facial expressions.

Social Play - Ex: building or painting something together, co-operatively moving/carrying something, team games, parachute games, etc.

Socio-Dramatic Play - Ex: playing at house, going to the shops, being Mothers and Fathers, organizing a meal or having a row.

Symbolic Play - Ex: using an object like a piece of wood to symbolize a person or a flag to symbolize a group.

4 - Play and the Emerging Self

"Privacy contributes to the kind of inner growth that is associated with independence, personal power, and positive autonomy."

(Children's Secrets: Intimacy, Privacy and the Self Reconsidered. Max van Manen and Bas Levering. New York: Teachers College Press, 1996. 181 pp.)



Opportunities for solitude in childhood are vital for the development of self-esteem, the chance to pause and reflect on an often busy and stress-filled life, and to discover and maintain the boundaries of self that are key to current and future social interactions.

Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, considered the child's private space a 'fortress of the self' - essential to the child's learning to listen to the quiet internal voice, and development of a full interior world.

Places of privacy within nature, or with natural elements, are also important for children to counteract what some researchers (such as Richard Louv) are calling 'nature-deficit disorder'.

"There is no quiet place in the white man's cities. No place to hear the unfurling of leaves in spring, or the rustle of an insect's wings. But perhaps it is because I am a savage and do not understand. The clatter only seems to insult the ears." (Chief Seattle)

Children need to gather the skills of solitude, so that being alone for them is not being lonely. **They need the chance to learn self-reliance, and to develop a secure understanding of who they are, and who they might yet be.**

5 - The Playwork Principles

We often see the Principles, and many of us work with them posted on the wall. Even so, it is worth reading them again in the context of children's building and privacy. Consider what kinds of play we offer the children who visit. Are your children able to change their playspace to suit them?

These Principles establish the professional and ethical framework for playwork and as such must be regarded as a whole. They describe what is unique about play and playwork, and provide the playwork perspective for working with children and young people.

They are based on the recognition that children and young people's capacity for positive development will be enhanced if given access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities.

1. All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well being of individuals and communities.
2. Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.

3. The prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education.
4. For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas.
5. The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play.
6. The playworker's response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up to date knowledge of the play process, and reflective practice.
7. Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people's play on the playworker.
8. Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the developmental benefit and well being of children.

(As endorsed by SkillsActive)

6 - Inclusive Geographies of Play, or Providing for a Range of Skill Sets

Play providers supply time, space and raw materials for children to explore a range of play types and possibilities, to create their own play environments, to create and fulfill challenges appropriate to their increasing levels of skill, curiosity and inclination.

This is an ambition with issues of inclusive play right at its heart, because it ensures that **all children, regardless of their particular requirements or developmental speeds, are able to structure their play time according to their needs and inclination.**



Every child has special needs, and special abilities.

Many playgrounds create opportunities for gross motor skills, with large fixed climbing equipment, swings and room for a kick-about. Are other needs as well provided for? What chances do children have on site for places to be quiet, to watch the clouds and imagine? To observe small insects, build miniature worlds of fascination and create lengthy and evolving play narratives?



When we provide a play environment that holds the potential for a range of play we enable children to discover their particular abilities and interests, and to share them with others. **That's when we know that our play spaces offer all children what they need the most - opportunities for free, rich and varied play.**



The physical and social context of playgrounds frame the games and imaginings inside. Like other animals, humans grow up learning to navigate their biological niche, acquiring the physical and social skills necessary to their lives. The challenges the world sets children establishes the techniques they develop, whether its climbing stairs, singing in a group, sliding down poles or eating ice lollies.

7 - Affordances

When children play in a space they experience it in a unique way. They view it in terms of its 'affordances', rather than its common use.

The 'affordances' of a space or object are all the things it has the potential to do or be. A table offers the child a jumping platform, if turned upside down a ship, and if on its side a protective wall. These, and all the other 'affordances' of the world adults take for granted, are discovered and elaborated upon through play.



What this means is that play gives children the opportunity to change their world to suit them. When children construct their own play environments, they naturally create ones that are most responsive to their needs, both at the moment and in terms of their long-term development. They know what those needs are better than we do, so when we support children in play construction we are helping them to determine their own play requirements, and to meet them.



8 - Privacy and Publicity

Play spaces can be highly secret or very public. They can be one person's space or a 'clubhouse'-style location where groups meet. They can be modest or notorious among the children on site. One thing is rare - for their location, nature and use to be well-understood by adults on site. **How these places are understood by the children who use them, as well as the children who know about them but do not go there, is difficult for adults to discover.**





When conducting research on dens I found that most children, even those who had happily led me around the whole site, explaining how everything worked, would not take me to certain den locations.

They would say "I don't go there" or "It's a place, but it's not my place" or simply "I don't know where you mean." But judging by the number of crisp packets I had found in these specific locations, and the daily changes I had noted there it was clear that many children did go to, and use, these sites. It seemed that one of the most important aspects of these dens and forts was their separateness from the rest of the site, and from adults.

9 - Where can Dens be Found?

Dens and forts look different every time, and are as unique as the children who built them. That said, they do tend to be found in places that offer certain possibilities. It has been argued that because of evolutionary considerations humans feel safe or at home when a particular set of requirements are satisfied. This idea can be found through much of the literature of environmental psychology, human geography, architectural anthropology, and elsewhere.



Essentially, these considerations are:

Refuge

Camouflage,
Defense,
Restricted
Entrance

Prospect

Surveillance of
Approach

Enticement

Self
exploration of
information-
rich settings

Peril

Pleasurable
fear, testing
competence

***Order and
Complexity***

Sorting complex information into new patterns

Greenery/Natural Elements

(G. Hildebrand, *The Origin of Architectural Pleasure*)



Places that offer all of these in a 'natural' environment, meaning either encompassing or with a view of trees, water, fields, etc., are expected to be even more deeply satisfying. In terms of children's dens, this means that places with a wall behind and a screen in front are ideal, because they offer security to one side and observation of the world (or barbarian intruders, pirates, police or parents) to the other. Forts, as the name implies, tend to be built with defense in mind. Dens may be much cosier in feel, offering a place for introspection rather than covert observation.



Of course, these terms are arbitrary and only useful in suggesting the diversity of children's built spaces. These places, like the play that goes on within them, tend to be fluid and variable, as much about mystery as the familiar.

10 - What do Forts and Dens Look Like?

When investigating a play space signs of a children's den culture is generally found in places that might be considered **behind** or **beneath**. By that I mean places such as underneath a large climbing frame, or tucked in-between trees around the corner of a slide. Den-building is in many ways a shadowy activity and, like shadows, are attached to the main elements of the site. Look for overhanging greenery that adds a sense of adventure to following a path, sheets of cardboard spread out on the ground, or detritus from lunch in a place you didn't think the children went.



At Evergreen Adventure Playground I found crisp packets laid out precisely every two (grown-up sized) steps along a well-covered path into the trees. I thought at first this was accidental, as bits of rubbish do tend to drift across playgrounds, but I noticed that even though playworkers tidied them away new ones appeared every day at the exact same intervals. Whether they were dropped as children walked down into the den, or whether they were left there as path markers, I do not know.



11 - What are Dens For?

A child might, with materials or imagination, build a representation of a familiar location such as a shop so that they can practice symbolic play. They might create a place that echoes another place but offers a different relationship, such as a house in which they are the adults. They might create a place unlike any they have ever visited, such as a jungle tree house, a pirate's tropical hideout, or a space station.

Researchers such as David Sobel have often discussed children's play buildings as either creating order out of chaos or, arguably, chaos out of order. A distinction is often made between a den that is like a 'little house', where the child enjoys games of cleaning, tidying and ordering of small treasures, and a 'wild' den, or bush house, where play will often reference the hunting or evasion of wild animals. Preparation and consumption of food (real or symbolic) is often found in both.

These distinctions are often tied to gender, with the suggestion that girls, when they are credited with den-building, play games of domesticity while boys, who are generally seen to dominate fort-activities, do so to play games of extreme survival. I do not think this is necessarily accurate as an observation, and I think as an analysis of children's play it is reductive and potentially dangerous.

12 - Dens, Forts and Genders

Children's preferences and behaviours may often fall along gender lines; gender is undoubtedly very important in each child's social experiences and development. My concern is that because we understand play to be an innate drive it is easy to think of play as 'natural', or existing somehow outside of culture. This misses the point that children grow up in the world, and that their play is tempered by their experiences outside of the playground.



Children may use play to understand something external, to question it, or to provide an escape from it.



They may use play for other needs entirely. As such, we don't know whether certain play behaviours are tied to gender, but we do know that it is important to ensure that all children, regardless of their individual attributes, have equal access to all spaces and opportunities the playspace offers.

13 - When is a Fort Not a Fort?

Sometimes a fort is not a fort. Sometimes it is a tree stump, or a spot painted onto a pole, or simply a rise in the turf. Sometimes a fort is invisible, known by its **social**, rather than **material** construction.



In the course of research I noticed that one area which the children called simply ‘the Woods’ was comparatively empty of evidence. There were no wrappers from lunches, and only a few stray balls that were half-covered by leaves. A tall wooden aerial runway cut across the woods and down, offering a high-speed path through and out of the trees. Children chased one another, and younger ones often ran it alone, screaming with that particular mix of thrill and terror. It was explained to me that the Woods were ‘dangerous’, they were ‘bad’, there were foxes and bigger kids. It was dark, but they went anyway.

**One girl explained it to me like this:
“It’s scary in the Woods. But then, sometimes I’m scary, too.”**

This place could have been filled with other kinds of play, with cardboard sheets and paints, its use and character could have been deliberately changed by the children, but instead they chose to not just leave it ‘scary’, but to actively keep it that way.

By telling each other stories about the fear they maintained the Woods as a place to experience - and play with - feelings of fear in a safe and moderated way. **The Woods then became a physical and cultural place among the children onsite, with its own set of behaviours, dangers and possibilities.**

14 - What Does a Rich Den Culture Look Like?

Some play areas already have a thriving culture of den-building, which children are initiated into as they first arrive at the site or as they “age” into it (by which I mean a complex set of age-related, developmental and interest factors).

In his article “The Hidden Curriculum of Recess” Mark Powell convincingly describes the presence of a “children’s culture of den-building” into which new children were initiated. This culture was maintained by its own complex system of rules, rewards and punishments distinct from the school structures surrounding it.

A rich den culture will be evidenced by the diversity of built locations on site. Small places that may seem quite rudimentary or centrally located might be built by younger children whose idea of the “fringes” of the space doesn’t extend as far as that of older children.

Multiple sites might exist in direct competition to each other, and trophy items may be stolen and re-stolen. Objects and children will move freely and rapidly through the space, often too quickly and subtly for the playworkers to even notice.



When children are experienced builders materials may seem to take on a life of their own, and sites will change regularly even when no children are seen to be using them.

Play constructions will rise and collapse quite suddenly, or slowly develop over time. They may be demolished by the child who built it, or become a casualty of a larger play narrative that involves other children.



Whether built, found, abandoned or destroyed, children's full control of their material creations is a vital part of the den culture.

15 - How Can We Facilitate This Process?

Even though adults have a limited role in the construction and use of these places, they have a very important part to play in providing the ways and means for children to enjoy building. A thoughtful walk around the site, bearing in mind the size difference between you and the children, is an excellent place to start. When you've identified some half-hidden places, you can then start assembling some materials.



Ideally access to woodlands is enough, providing all the sticks for construction and branches for camouflage that children might require. When these are provided, children will often become dismissive of the 'man-made' elements such as tarpaulin, that other sites rely upon. For playgrounds with a limited number of trees, however, there are other options.

For most playgrounds, common den-building objects include:

Big pieces of fabric, such as bedsheets

Tall sticks and wooden poles

Sheets of cardboard

Leafy branches

Rolls of tape, lengths of string and safety scissors.

Ultimately I would love to see a return to an older and broader approach to play materials that would include wood, hammers and nails. If you can provide this for your children then please, do! Children only need a little supervised practice at first to become proficient builders with materials, so get them started and let them learn the rest on their own.

Generally speaking, it is enough to provide opportunities for den-building, but if there is currently no culture of building onsite you may want to consider “seeding” play construction by setting out some elements of dens - such as pieces of fabric tied between trees - and leaving other materials out nearby. Children new to den-building are likely to investigate these changes and adapt them.



When a den culture develops onsite, it quickly becomes self-perpetuating.

One common practice that can severely limit play construction is the habit of ‘tidying up’ play spaces at the end of the day. This means that children cannot enjoy play construction on a long-term basis, cannot slowly adapt or decorate their places, cannot establish complex narratives between their locations and others on site.

By dismantling play buildings at the end of the day, playworkers are invalidating children’s material changes to the site and effectively saying that they have no permanent place and no value.

Adults ‘tidying up’ the space indicates *their* preference for ‘neatness’ - not the children’s. This practice ‘re-sets’ the site every day so that play construction needs to begin anew every time, with the knowledge that its survival is not determined by the child.

When materials are left out, children regain control of them. Children learn that their buildings can stand, that their locations are of importance and that their destruction or abandonment is also part of the play cycle.

16 - What Does This Mean for Best Practice? How Do We Ensure We Are Not Negligent?

As with risk, children may be clumsy at first when it comes to managing privacy. Additionally, many parents and workers may have concerns around issues of violence and sexuality that may come up when discussing provision for den-building. As a playworker, this is for you to address.

It is possible to offer 'spots' of privacy, or places of semi-privacy on site. Places that are hidden from view can still be monitored audibly, and playworkers who don't wish to invade private places of play can still walk the site, making lots of noise.

The point is not to 'catch children out' but to remind them that you are there as a refuge and a resource, should their games get out of hand.

Ultimately, children need to learn how to negotiate difficult situations. The vast majority of these situations will happen outside of adult view, but at least on a playground there are sympathetic and trained playworkers whose help can be sought, should the child wish.

17 - Things To Consider

Do you currently offer:

- Sub-spaces suitable for den-building
- Materials with which environments can be adapted and built
- Materials and spaces in combinations accessible for all children, including those who are particularly young, particularly adept or with issues of physical mobility?
- Support regarding material concerns, e.g. help in construction if approached
- A spontaneous and flexible site where materials can be left out to allow buildings to survive the whole of the play cycle
- A non- or low-intervention playwork style, waiting to be asked to join, rather than interrupting?
- A clear and collective agreement between all playworkers on den-building and possible issues that may arise

18 - Conclusions

Whatever the structure, layout and population of your site there is potential there for den-building. An inventive approach to collection of loose-parts and a recognition of the importance of play construction is all you need to start.

When children of all ages and abilities have access to play building opportunities you will see the development of new kinds of play on site, the enrichment of children's culture that can be passed from child-to-child. Individuals will benefit from the varied play opportunities provided by autonomous sub-spaces, the quiet and the solitude, while groups will form and reform as children create places and strategies for new and complex social negotiations.

The benefits to the children are clear - stronger senses of self and community, belief in one's own abilities to construct, adapt and demolish, the chance to identify and satisfy one's own social, material and spatial needs. Playworkers who support play construction among individual children, according to their abilities and inclination, help to create a rich and varied culture on site, a culture of play that is the children's to change, develop and perpetuate.

19 - Bibliography

Bachelard, G. 1969 (1960). (Russell, D., trans.) *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language and the Cosmos*. Grossman: Paris

Bachelard, G. 1994 (1958). (Jolas, M., trans.) *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press: Boston

Bengtsson, A. 1972. *Adventure Playgrounds*. Crosby Lockwood: London

Bertelson, J. 1943. *Adventure Playgrounds*. International Playground Association: London

Edensor, T. 2005. "Waste Matter - The Debris of Industrial Ruins and the Disordering of the Material World". In *Journal of Material Culture*, Vol. 10 (3), pp. 311 - 332.

Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and Punish*. Penguin: London

Gibson, J. 1986. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Cornell University Press: New Jersey

Hart, R. 1979. *Children's Experience of Place*. Irvington: New York City

Hildebrand, G. 1999. *Origins of Architectural Pleasure*. University of California Press.

Hughes, B. 2004. *A Taxonomy of Play Types*. Available online through <http://www.playwork.org.uk>.

Jung, C. G. and Jaffe A. 1962. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. London: Collins.

Kahn, P. and Kellert, S. 2002. *Children and Nature: Psychological, Sociological, and Evolutionary Investigations*. MIT Press.

Louv, R. 2005. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Algonquin Books.

Manen, M. and Levering, B. 1996. *Childhood's Secrets: Intimacy, privacy and the Self Reconsidered*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Powell, M. 2007. "The Hidden Curriculum of Recess." *Children, Youth and Environments* 17(4): 86-106

Rose, N. 1999. *Powers of Freedom*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge

Sobel, David. 1993. *Children's Special Places: Exploring the Role of Forts, Dens and Bush Houses in Middle Childhood*. Wayne State University Press: Detroit

Sutton-Smith, B. 1997. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass.

White, R. 2007. "Interaction with Nature During the Middle Years: Its Importance in Children's Development and Nature's Future". White Hutchinson Learning Group



Contact details:

Islington Play Association
West Library
Bridgeman Road
London N1 1BD

Tel: 0207 607 9637

Email: info@islingtonplay.org.uk

Website: www.islingtonplay.org.uk

January 2009

The Islington Play Association is a registered charity no. 1086165 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England & Wales no. 03989283