

Undercover. Learning

Dens can be more to young children than places in which to shelter from the elements – their construction, and the play they inspire, will support key areas of development too, says **Louise Nicholls...**



I have spent 20 years working with young children, and den play has always interested me, but my decision to carry out research into this area stemmed from an early years training day that brought its potential into focus. In the morning we were asked to work in groups and use a pile of resources to make a den in whichever way we wanted to. Over the course of those few hours, it was fascinating to see groups of adults working together socially, talking about what they were doing, solving problems together and, most importantly, having lots of fun. People soon became very protective of their dens and immensely proud when they showed the other groups what they had

constructed, talking about how and why they made it the way they did. Many people commented afterwards that it had been a day to remember!

I came away from the training day buzzing and keen to encourage early years practitioners to implement den play within their settings. In order to demonstrate its potential to others, and with little research having been carried out within this area, I was inspired to investigate its potential myself. I quickly set to work at a local preschool, where I made regular observations of eight children, two of whom I chose to be my 'focus' children, during their involvement in den play. My aim was to explore whether den play could have any

impact on children's social, fine motor and language development.

Positive impact

The research findings, conclusions drawn following observations conducted over a five-month period, were interesting. My data showed den play having a positive effect on social development, with both of the focus children increasing the number of children that they engaged with over the sessions I observed. As the sessions progressed I noticed a development in the way the children helped each other in the construction of the den, how they needed less and less support from an adult. There also seemed to be a link between the

number of children playing in the den and the type of role play that was taking place. The children seemed to realise that they needed more children to be involved in order to play the kind of games they wanted to play, commenting that they played in bigger groups because they "could play mums and dads", "needed a baby and a sister" and "could play baddies together".

I found that the role-play opportunities that the finished dens created had a positive effect on the amount of language being used by the children. The findings showed a particular increase in the amount of language being used once the dens were made and the children became involved in imaginative play, such as that described above. The area of physical development proved the most difficult area to research; however, I did notice that children became more competent at using fastenings during the den play sessions, requiring less help from adults as time went by. This could suggest possible fine motor control development, although I feel this is an area in need of further research.

Unrelated to the actual study, but fascinating nevertheless, was the fact that during all of the observations, the children constructed and played in their dens according to their gender. For example, on one occasion I observed the girls, whose

finished den became a home with different areas for a kitchen, bedroom and even a space for putting shoes; in contrast, the boys' den became a 'baddy trap'!

Although my study was small, I believe the positive links I was able to draw between den play and children's development and learning, particularly within the areas of social and language development, are very interesting and made this a valuable study to carry out. I do feel, however, that there is still more research that could be carried out within the broad area of den play.

It is important to note too that, in addition to the potential learning opportunities, my study also highlighted the children's enjoyment of their den play experiences. This is at the heart of my suggesting den play as a worthy addition to early years settings' outdoor provision – the quality of learning is known to be enhanced when it is enjoyable for young children, after all.

Introducing den play

In my experience, children will make a den out of anything they can. That means that den play resources do not have to be expensive. I have found that parents have been very generous in donating old sheets, curtains and even waterproof tarpaulins, which are great for den building in the rain. Other useful items include see-through

GET STARTED!

DEN PLAY NEEDN'T BE EXPENSIVE. HERE ARE SOME RESOURCES TO HELP KICK-START CHILDREN'S LEARNING...

- Sheets and blankets of different sizes
- Garden canes, bamboo poles and broom handles
- Tarpaulins or plastic dust sheets
- Netting and voiles
- Clips of different sizes (pegs are fine, but small children can find them hard to manage)
- Cardboard boxes and crates
- Picnic rugs
- Masking tape and scissors
- Rags
- String, wool and bungees

for tables, chairs, dolls, tea sets, shoes and soft toys, which the children used to enhance their imaginative play. Some even requested paper and pens and started using 'emergent writing' to make notices and signs for their den.

Whatever materials you choose to provide, however, I think the most important resource for great den play is enthusiastic adults who are happy to provide support and, most importantly, get cold and wet on occasion! Children never seem to mind the weather and one observation that sticks in my mind took place on a very cold and wet day when a group of children soon worked out a suitable waterproof material to use in order keep themselves and their den dry! You can imagine their delight when they were allowed to have hot toast and warm drinks inside their finished den in order to warm up.

I hope that the findings from my research and ideas about resources will be of interest to those of you considering implementing den play within your settings. If you do provide opportunities for den play, be sure to allow yourself time to stand back and watch what the children do, say and learn. I hope you will find it as interesting as I did.



about the author

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nets, which give the children the feeling they are hidden while allowing adults to see into the den and observe their actions.

Cardboard boxes are great and will often be used as the frame for a den, to which children will then attach sheets and blankets on the outside to make it more decorative! A group of children I observed made a den using sheets and broom handles in the more traditional way, and then used boxes inside for the television. A group of girls, on the other hand, found the boxes handy for their den, which they felt needed some shoe storage. The children often used frames that were already in the area where we were building too, such as playground equipment, the side of fences and even benches, on which they could attach clips and material to make their den.

I found that in addition to the basic resources (such as those listed below), it was often necessary to provide other resources, depending on what the den became once it was made. I had requests