

**Den &
Shelter
Building**

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Building**

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The End or is it!!!

What is a den?

The Dictionary definition

- wild mammal's hidden home; a lair: a female mink had set up her den there
- informal a room or hideout where a person can go to relax or be private: Harriet built a den in a tree
- a place where people meet in secret, typically to engage in an illicit activity: an opium den, a den of iniquity

Origin - Old English denn, of Germanic origin; related to German Tenne 'threshing floor', also to [dene1](#)

There are two main functions of a Childs play den

- A quiet place to spend time alone
- A meeting place to spend time with others

All dens are, or are perceived to be:

A secret place- having a special place that is hidden away

from the everyday world is very exciting. It is always a privilege as an adult to be invited into a child's special space. If we have the patience to sit and listen to the explanation of what is happening, a wealth of creativity can be uncovered.

Free from adult control - and constraints, a den is where a child can determine their own rules. It is a safe place, where the child is in charge and not adults. Having a sense of control and the ability to make decisions on their own helps a child gain in confidence and become more independent. Playing out of the direct sight of adults is also important to children.

Owned by the children - a lot of time, effort and imagination has been spent planning and building this space and it belongs to the creators - me or US. In a world where children have little control a den can have great significance and meaning.

Made or invade. A den is either made (created and built by the children sometimes with adult help) or **invade** (a space regarded as suitable as a den with little building required - under a bush, in a cupboard behind a shed. All dens are adapted by their inhabitants in some way.

Safety. Humans naturally choose to be positioned in protective space as it is instinctive and natural. Most humans, if given the choice, will sit with their backs to a wall/tree as opposed to the centre of an exposed place. Adults choose to live in houses to protect themselves and their families from the elements and from attack. For children, when building dens, the imagined dangers may be significant - a T Rex or dragon or the danger could be an emotional one they don't understand. All they know is they feel safe in a den.

A creative fountain - the imaginative ideas that come splashing out of children when they are creating and playing in dens is awe inspiring. A place that they can be who they want to be or imagine they are anywhere or anything.



Benefits of den building



‘Young children need outdoor play. When given the choice, the outdoors is where most children want to be and play outdoors is what they most want.’

Jan White - Playing and Learning Outdoors (Available to buy in muddyfaces publications section)

Being outdoors offers many stimulating play opportunities

The materials available outdoors such as soil and leaves, sticks and stones are ideal for children to manipulate and experiment with. There are interesting and unusual places to hide, climb and balance. A whole range of elements to encourage imaginative, challenging and creative play. Den building allows children to interact with natural elements. They learn to negotiate, problem solve, resolve, manage and work as a team. Learning to work together can be difficult at any age but den building can be a way of learning to cooperate. During this process they are often open to other children’s suggestions and learn from their own mistakes.

Assessing Risk and seeking opportunity- Outdoor environments cannot be controlled in the same way as indoor environments. Control over an environment will not necessarily result in an increase in safety. As practitioners we aim to expose our groups to risk but control that risk to prevent serious harm. Faced with low level danger, children learn very quickly how to take risks and understand the result of their actions. Learning to adjust to change and uncertainty is an essential part of growing up. Children who do not experience these things do not build up an understanding of how to calculate risk and are more likely to put themselves in danger. Den building naturally has an element of risk that children can explore and experiment with.

Problem solving and planning - Den building requires children to visualise, plan, and build and to manage, negotiate, cooperate and work as a team. Learning to work together and cooperate can be difficult at any age and den building can be a way of learning how to help this process.

Social Development - Many children today, have very hectic lives. With timetabled after school activities and homework, there is little time for relaxation. Those children whose lives are chaotic and perhaps even dysfunctional, a den is a haven away from the pressures of everyday life. It provides some sort of emotional security.

With less free time, children have less time to socialise with their peers, which is vital for their social development. Dens provide a social meeting place where friends can gather together and great plans are hatched. A den is a place where a child can reinforce his or her sense of self. Dens can be mini youth centres where meeting up is a regular occurrence and social development, language, problem solving, maths and physical development are always on the curriculum.

Without **imagination and creative development** the den building process would never get off the ground. A child needs to be able to visualise and realise their ideas, be open to suggestions and learn from their mistakes. The planning process is as important as the building process. Den building is where a child's play is dictated only by their imagination and their personal limitations. They can play at whatever level of complexity they feel comfortable with.

Language development is not something you associate directly with den building, however, the task provides opportunity for plenty of talking during the planning and building process. The children will need to be able to convey their ideas through talking and describing. During building, instructions will have to be given and language used to problem solve. On completion the den will become a magical place where children's imaginations will come to the fore and interaction through imaginary play presents many rich language opportunities.

Mathematical development - Who would have thought that building a den would involve so much maths? Design skills are key to a successful den and being able to visualise the finished product is paramount to its success. Children therefore need to be able to think logically and look carefully at the shape and size of the materials they are using. If something is too big, it may unbalance and fall over, too small and it may take too long to build. Materials are constantly being put together and taken apart, to try and find the best solution to the problem.

Physical development - Den building is not something that can be done sat down and it can be quite vigorous physical exercise, which children will not even be aware that they are moving around. They will be fetching and carrying objects as they search for materials, some of which will be quite large. These materials will have to be lifted and attached into place which will involve stretching and balancing on odd shaped objects.

Determination - Many children are scared to try something in case they can't achieve it. Often children are so absorbed in the den building process they do not recognise that they are learning from repeated miscalculations. When a roof collapses they pick the items up and try again repeatedly adapting all the time. This then is a significant life skill that is required in most elements of their formal learning.

This free resource and many others are available at www.muddyfaces.co.uk

Moving the Indoor Outside

Easy Den Building

Photos in this section are kindly provided by Jane Wratten & Slinn St STARters Community Pre- School, Sheffield.

Children love to build dens and they are so imaginative in their creations that they do not need special “den equipment”.

If you look around your setting you will be able to locate many different items that are perfect for building dens.

Why not take this equipment outside and let the children show you how it can be used? Tables and chairs, a clothes airer, perhaps a plastic indoor climbing frame or even a pop-up tent or tunnel can make wonderful den frames.

Old sheets and blankets or a table cloth, some lengths of fabric or even some old curtains make ideal den covers.

Large cardboard boxes lend themselves perfectly to building a den – maybe the children can even decorate the inside of the box with paint or crayons. Smaller cardboard boxes or empty plastic storage boxes are good for stacking when building walls.

Design skills are key to a successful den and by having different sized and shaped materials children will have to consider logically and look carefully at the individual materials they are using.

Over time you can build your resources up, providing a range of materials that can be used in many different ways.



Moving the Indoor Outside - cont

Photos in this section are kindly provided by Jane Wratten & Slinn St STARters Community Pre- School, Sheffield.

A large container like this basket, placed on its side immediately becomes a readymade den waiting to be customised by its occupants.

A large sheet or blanket draped over the top gives a sense of enclosure and when inside the occupants can pretend the world outside is a very different one.

Why not find a wooden pallet or an old fence panel? Check for nails and any other hazards, supply resources to ensure it can be secured safely, and let the group or child do the rest?

Tipi's made from old broom handles, clothes poles or long sticks can provide an excellent frame. Provide some rope, string or wool for securing the top and materials for round the outside. Why not paint an old sheet?



Facilitating Den building

It is useful to consider that den building should be completely child led but sometimes it is necessary to support children to help develop certain skills_ how to safely build a wall or how to make a connection. Also in some cases it may help to offer children support if they lack confidence about participating.

Some adults working with groups may not have a vast experience of den building or if they do, it was a long time ago. It is for this reason we have put together the following sections giving ideas on how to build a den and the resources you could use.

What sorts of dens can be built

The environment you are in and the resources available for use in construction, will dictate to some extent the type of den that your children will be able to make.

Building outside promotes more freedom of movement, the opportunity to engage in group construction and the interaction with nature and the elements.

We have split this section into two areas

- **Building dens in a wild or woodland area**
- **Building dens at your setting with limited natural resources**

Building dens in a wild or woodland area

Using only natural resources

Taking a group of children out into a woodland is a magical experience. Many children will not have been given the opportunity to play and build dens in this environment. It offers a totally different play experience from that found at a setting as there are lots of old trees, bushes and shrubs

Site selection

- Try not to make too much disturbance to flora and fauna – look for a cleared area which is free from plants
- Dead wood and leaf litter is great for building dens – want plenty nearby
- Natural feature as a starting point – maybe large fallen tree or a leaning branch
- Avoid hollows as they can be wet – collect water
- Beneath leafy structure can continue to drip after stop raining

Mini dens and animal homes - A good starting point. Building houses for mini people such as elves, woodland fairies and animals with natural resources is brilliant fun. You need a lively imagination and everyone can get involved. Resources are easily found – twigs, leaves, acorns, moss, soil and sand all are useful resources. It also has opportunities for continuous play where you can keep going back and increase the size of your village. In order to expand introduce other resources within the setting – animals or people



Woodland Dens and Shelters.

There are so many woodland dens it would be impossible to show them all. Here are some examples of centrally supported shelters which we hope may give you some inspiration to get your den building off the ground and hopefully keep it off.

A leaning central beam from the support point to the floor. This picture shows a support point, constructed from two strong sticks tied or balanced together, and the central beam creating an elongated tripod. The sticks have been laid from the ground onto the central beam. This creates a shelter that is higher at one end, going down to the ground at the other.

This den has been created from a **horizontal beam tied between two trees** with the vertical support coming from two diagonal poles tied to the beam. Sticks are laid diagonally from the floor to the horizontal beam, creating a triangular shelter. Natural materials have been woven between the poles. A woven fence blocks off one side making a smaller entrance and a more enclosed and protected space inside



Central support and logs have been leant up against it creating a circular foot print. Many other shaped shelters can be made. using just the resources you can find in the woods.

Wild dens

Using only the resources you find in the wood. Collect branches and twigs – bind together **with rope or blackberry runners**



This free resource and many others are available

Den Building Resources



Den building resources

Only simple resources are required for den building, string and rope is really useful also covers such as tarpaulins or camouflage netting work very well. If you have lots of natural materials available then quite probably you will not require any extra resources Try contacting your local park or woodland ranger to see if they have any branches they could drop off at your setting. If you need to buy any resources check out our den building section online.

Resources

Building dens in a wild or woodland area

Tarpaulins
Poly rope
Sisal string and rope

Connecting and securing

String
Wool
Ribbon
Lengths of material
Thin rope or washing line
Velcro straps
Clothes pegs
Bungees

Other resources

Tent pegs
Mallet

Transporting and storing materials.

Carts
Buckets
Wheelbarrows
Bags
Plastic boxes
Plastic or metal storage cupboards
Sheds

Resources

Building dens at your setting

Building blocks

Tyres
Large plastic flower pots
Bricks
Soft play blocks
Plastic drums
Bread and milk crates
Laundry baskets
Plastic storage boxes
Wooden pallets
For fine weather-
Large cardboard boxes
Washing powder boxes cleaned and taped shut

Supports

Clothes airers
Guttering
Cardboard tubes
Bamboo canes
Broom handles
Branches
Lengths of dowling
Wood cut offs
Lengths of plank
Trellis or fencing

Other resources

Tent pegs
Mallet
Hooks on the wall or fence
Pop up tents

Resources

Building dens at your setting

Den covers

Rolls of mesh
Large pieces of fabric
Blankets
Sheets
Net and other curtains
Lengths of muslin
Tarpaulins
Camo-net
Large plastic sheets

Connecting and securing

String
Wool
Ribbon
Lengths of material
Thin rope or washing line
Sticky tape
Duct or carpet tape
Velcro straps
Treasury tags
Clothes pegs
Bungees
Elastic bands

Transporting and storing materials.

Buckets
Wheelbarrows
Bags
Plastic boxes
Plastic or metal storage cupboards
Sheds

Building dens at your setting with limited natural resources

In most cases this will require the provision of a variety of resources.

So what sort of resources can you use?

Initially assess what resources you already have at your setting. Have a look around your outdoor area to see what you can find that you can adapt.

Shrubs, bushes, walls, fences, trees, Climbing frames, gazebos and any other permanent structures where dens could be leaned upto or against or covers can be attached to.

What moveable resources do you have outside? Garden canes and netting, planks, logs. Have a look indoors - is there anything that can be used? Crates, boxes, blankets and rugs. It may be that you could get parents engaged by providing information about the aim and reasons behind your den building and ask them to bring in any old sheets, towels or other useful resources to help put a good collection together for den building.

When collecting the resources consider how the children will attach and secure items in place. Rope and string are ideal for older children who can tie knots for younger children. Elasticated loops, bungees and Velcro are easier to add and remove and you can use them over and over again. Sticky tape and masking tape maybe ideal for certain materials, its disadvantages are that it may easily come apart and it is also not reusable!

If the den is being built on a rough or damp surface it may be a good idea to provide a plastic backed picnic blanket, tarpaulin or some old carpet tiles to protect the children as they sit and crawl inside

Resources to avoid - consider health and safety of different items that will break easily. Ridged tents and pre made dens with specific covers that limit how they may be used and adapted. Bamboo canes can split and create sharp long splinters. Ensure that the resources are well maintained and as soon as they show signs of splitting remove.

Tents etc can work well alongside other resources. On their own they are limited in their creative construction as there is only one application .

Transporting maintaining and storing materials

Once all the resources are collected where will they be stored and how will they be moved and accessed.

Construction Ideas

A few ideas to get the den building started

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Erecting a Tarpaulin Shelter in Woodland.

Sometimes this is easier said than done! Here are some tips and ideas to help you get a non-pooling shelter up quickly

Choose your site depending on the type of shelter you want to put up and clear any immediate trip hazards, such as brambles or large sticks.

Often when tarpaulin shelters are erected they are saggy and low with a tendency to pool when it rains. **The best way to remedy this is either to slant the whole tarpaulin creating a lean-to or to hoist up the middle so it is higher than the edges.** Hoisting up the middle can be achieved using a variety of techniques.

Use a long stick to prop up the middle. The disadvantages of this technique are that you have a pole in the centre of your shelter that might be tripped over or leaned against and where the pole is pushed up, a hole might form, damaging the tarpaulin.

Pull the centre up from above. This method is often used by leaders who have put shelters up regularly. It can be a bit tricky to start with but after it has been done a few times it is amazing how skilled the group become at tying and throwing.

Find a round non-spikey stone or lump of wood and place it under your tarpaulin in the central position. (You can use more than one place if you wish to create two hoist points.)

Tie a piece of rope around the base of the lump (a clove hitch is ideal but any secure knot will do).

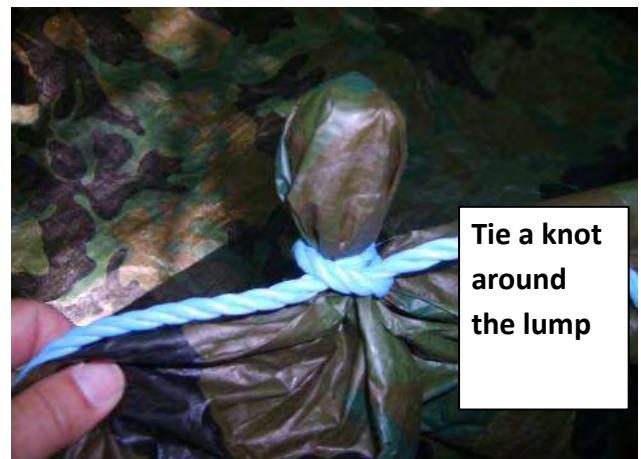
Check the rope that will hoist upwards is tight and won't slip off.

To hoist the centre up you will need to throw the rope over a branch above the shelter area.

Choose a branch that looks strong enough (not dead or too small)

Tie the end of the rope to a lump of wood or another heavy item making sure it is secure and won't slip off.

Loop the rope in your hand so the rope can fly out freely without snagging.



Make sure everybody is out of the way so, if the thrower misses the target, or when the lump goes over the target, it doesn't hit anyone.

Throw the lump over your intended branch. Pull the lump end. Often the rope can get snagged on the branch. A good way to free the rope is to flick the rope and send the flick along the rope to the branch. If this does not work at first, try angling the flick slightly to the side to try to flick the rope to a different position on the branch.

Start to hoist up the centre tarpaulin. Once at the required height, tie the end of the rope securely to a tree/branch. When finished simply release this point.



Reasons for not getting the lump over the target

The thrower or someone else may be standing on the rope or it could be snagged on debris on the floor.

The path to the branch is being interfered with by leaves and branches.

The lump is not heavy enough or is too heavy.

If the rope you are using is quite heavy then try tying the end of the rope to a piece of string. Throw the string over first using the lump, and then pull the rope up.

The branch is too high.

The thrower needs more practice. (In general this last one applied to me for quite some time. In the end I would choose a lower branch which did not make such a good hoist but at least I got it over!)



Strong Stick used as a peg

Tying off the edges

Once the centre has been pulled up, tie out the edges ideally to trees or peg to the ground ensuring all angles create a down ward flow for rain.

It can be helpful to use bright rope for shelter guys so that they can be easily seen. Alternatively, tie pieces of cloth to any ropes that might cause a trip or head-height hazard. (This blue poly rope is easy to see and comparatively easy to untie. Remember to tie or heat seal the ends to stop it fraying.)

Bungees are useful to have in your kit to take the strain off the tarpaulin and it lessens the likelihood of tearing if the wind picks up. Avoid bungees with sharp metal points. If you need to peg out a rope find a sturdy stick and angle it into the ground. Over time the group could make some wooden pegs.

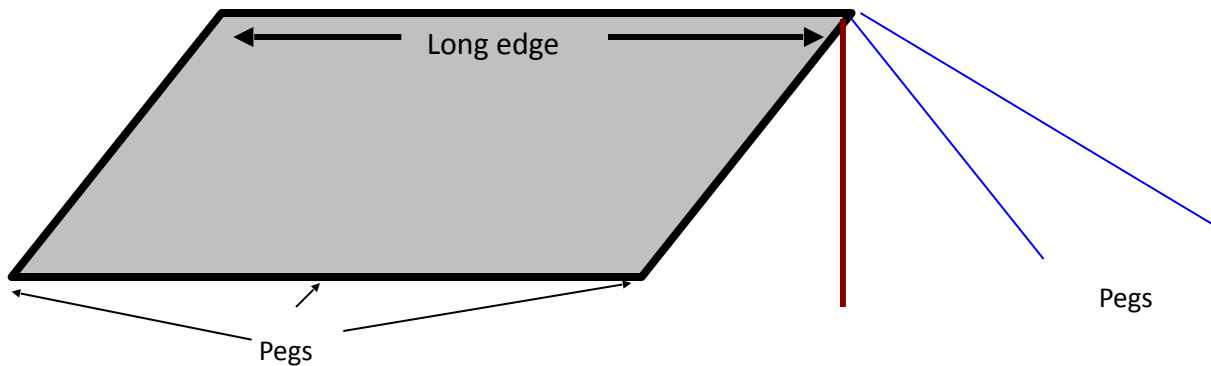


These tarpaulin shelter building ideas have been brought to you by Ben,

Ta DAAA - A tarpaulin shelter that creates a large protected area with plenty of head room that will not pool with water.

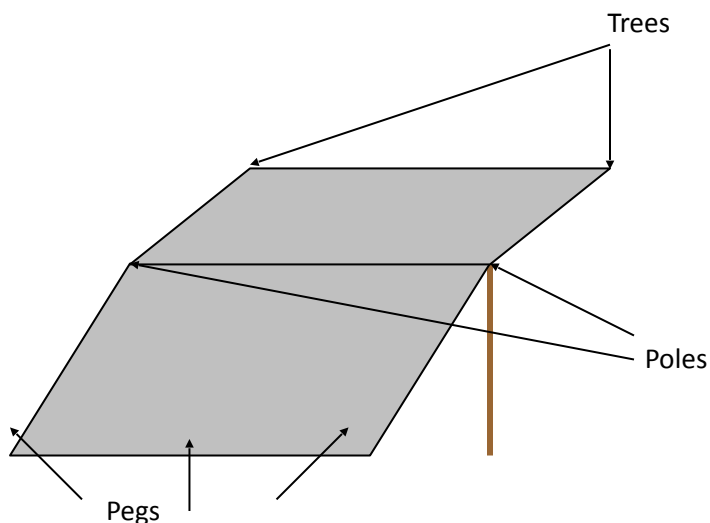
o,Lean to's are the simplest constructions to achieve. Utilising two trees, tie one edge up between two trees or to a fence and the other edge pegged down to the ground. If you do not have anything to tie the upper edge to, try the following method using poles instead.

If using on a hard surface where pegs cannot be used weight edge down with something heavy such as a sand bag.



Lean to with poles

1. Lay the tarp out and place two poles flat at the ends of a long edge.
2. Peg the other long edge to the ground through the eyelets.
3. Fold a rope in half and thread the fold through the hole in the top of the pole, then through the corner eyelet. Slip the loop over the top of the pole and pull tight. Alternatively tie off with a knot
4. Holding the pole up right peg out the two ends of rope. Repeat on the other side. You will need assistance to hold the pole whilst you peg out the ropes.



If you find your lean to a bit saggy, use two poles with a rope running between them, tied to eyelets to hold the middle up

Classic tent shape

This can be constructed using any methods you like.

Tie a rope between two trees or between a tree and a fence

If you do not have any trees or other points to tie your rope two you could use two poles with holes drilled in the top.

1. Lay the tarpaulin and poles out in the correct position the poles will be at the centre of the longest edges.
2. Tie little loops at the ends of a rope
3. About 1.5 –2 m along from the end of the rope fold the rope and thread through the hole in the top of the pole and loop back over the top of the pole.
4. About 5cm away from the top of the pole fold the rope again and thread through the central eyelet of the tarp and loop over the top of the pole.
5. Run the rope under the tarp then at the other side fold the rope and thread through the opposite central eyelet and hold.
6. About 5cm further on fold the rope thread through the hole on the second pole and loop over the top.
7. Loop the fold you are holding from the eyelet over the top of the pole.
8. Peg out each end of the rope (you will need assistance to hold the poles upright when you peg out)
9. Pull the tarp out firmly and peg each eyelet.
10. Check no part of the tarp is being strained too much.



Tipi

Loosely tie a number of poles together at the top
Splay out the bottoms (If the tops are tied too tightly then the bottoms wont pull out, tied to loosely then the tipi may wobble.)
Wrap the cover/tarp around the outside and tie around the top to secure.

Other ideas

Camouflage. Once you have built your den why not cover it with natural materials until you cannot see it any more.



Signs. Write on a piece of wood or card, the name of your den or put up instructions “Mind your head” “No adults allowed” “Wipe your feet”

Why not have a den building festival to conclude your theme maybe inviting friends and relatives? have a look at the Eden Project Cornwall.

<http://www.edenproject.com/>

A couple of den building links:

<http://creativestartlearning.co.uk/outdoor-play/den-building/>

http://www.naturedetectives.org.uk/download/den_building_tips.htm

<http://visitwoods.org.uk/en/visit-woods/things-to-do/Documents/den-instructions.pdf>

<http://www.edenproject.com/blog/index.php/2011/06/how-to-build-your-own-den/>

Final Word. Hectic lives, timetabled after-school activities and homework, mean there is little time for relaxation in a modern child’s life. A den is a haven away from the pressures of everyday life providing a level of emotional security.

Maybe we as adults could take note and create our own den to offer a protective space with time away from our hectic day-to-day lives. What a great place for contemplation and relaxation.

www.muddyfaces.co.uk

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The end
or
is it the beginning

