



By Hilary White, early years teacher, Somerset

Suitable for all ages

Come into our den

Save the Children's annual Den Day event provides a fantastic opportunity to explore the potential of dens for learning, and develop ideas and discussions around them, says Hilary White.

Resources

- This year, Save the Children's Den Day is scheduled to take place on the 17 June, although you can pick a day to suit you. To sign up your setting, go to denday.savethechildren.org.uk. You

will be sent a pack with full instructions, posters, stickers, flags and bunting. Once you are signed up, you can also access further ideas and activities online.

Playing and exploring

Although the activity of making dens is central to Den Day, the follow-up display is equally important to children's learning exploration and experience. Try these ideas and suggestions:

Den building samples: display samples of the materials and items the children used to build their dens (sticks, blankets, decorative flags and bunting, tent pegs and pieces of tarpaulin for outdoor dens, cardboard boxes, rope and so on). Encourage children to explore the items and reminisce about their Den Day activities.

Den photos: put out photos of the different dens you built on Den Day along with their architects. Include a series of photos showing the process of the den building; a photo of the materials laid out, a photo of the completed den

Save the Children's Den Day is an annual fund-raising event for nurseries, schools and youth groups. The event revolves around the activity of building a den and raising money to help the millions of children throughout the world who do not have a safe place to sleep. In order to raise the funds, each participating child is asked to give £2 to support the charity's work with displaced children.

and two or three photos showing the stages in between. Encourage children to explore ideas by talking about the dens they created, and put the pictures in the correct order.

Homes around the world: make up an album of pictures showing different types of homes and houses from around the world, such as mud huts, igloos, wooden chalets and houseboats. Include a large globe so you can show the three-and-a-half-plus age group the part of the world where each home can be found.

Active learning

Making dens, and organising and exploring a follow-up interactive display offers lots of opportunity to help the children build their understanding – and work towards – a number of development statements in the ‘Understanding’ section of Communication and Language.

Shows understanding of prepositions ... (30-50 months): As the children use the materials to construct their dens, introduce preposition words such as ‘under’, ‘behind’, ‘beside’ and ‘on top off’. This gives you a great opportunity to show what these words mean and look out for the extent to which a child understands their meaning.

Understands more complex sentences... (22-36 months)/ Responds to simple instructions... (30-50 months): Although the focus should be on the children making their own discoveries, your input will also be required. Giving instructions and suggestions during a hands-on activity enables you to demonstrate your meaning – and also allows you to observe the level of each child’s understanding.

Understands ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘where’... (22-36 months)/ Beginning to understand ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions (30-50 months): Asking questions needs to be handled carefully with the pre-school age group as too direct an approach can cause young children to clam up. The enjoyable activities of den building and exploring the follow-up the display, offer

the perfect opportunity to slip in spontaneous little ‘where/why/how’ questions as a part of your general conversation: ‘Where do you want to put your flag? How can you bang a nail into the wood? Why do you think the roof fell down?’

Creating and critical thinking

Help children to develop their understanding through planning ahead, predicting, speculating, drawing conclusions and explaining effects – as suggested in the Positive Relationships column of ‘Understanding’ (40-60+ months). Support them in exploring the resources and planning how to build their dens. Encourage them to speculate about possible outcomes (what do you think will happen if you use cardboard instead of a sheet?); make predictions (I think that piece of wood is too small to make a roof); and explain effects (the wall toppled over because we made it too tall).

Use your follow-on display as a starting point for reminiscing about Den Day and drawing conclusions about building the dens. Looking back at a completed experience, prompted by photos and samples of materials, will help the children to develop their understanding of the process. Talk about which parts of the activity they enjoyed the most. What kinds of obstacles did they face, what caused those obstacles (drawing conclusions) and how did they overcome them (explaining effects)?

Draw the children’s attention to the posters and stickers in the display and talk about how Den Day has resulted in money being raised to help children throughout the world.

Interactive display

Build up your interactive display slowly, introducing one element or activity every few days. This will prevent the children from becoming overwhelmed by lots of new activities and also enable them to thoroughly explore each activity or element, one at a time. Spark interest by showing the children each activity as a part of circle time and explaining that they can choose to use it during free-choice periods. Make sure that the display is as accessible to the children as possible. If you have the space, keeping the different activities and elements in one place helps them to recognise the common theme – but equally, you can put out activities at different stations around the setting. If at all possible, keep den building materials available both inside and out.

EYFS Early Learning Goals

Make a large poster or book with photos, drawings, captions, speech bubbles and labels showing how you used your completed Den Day dens (L). Use the den building resources as an inspiration for collage. Give the children different materials and papers, such as wood effect paper, string and fabric scraps. Encourage them to ‘construct’ a two-dimensional den on paper (EAD). Make bunting from different geometric shapes to decorate your dens (M). As you build them look out for opportunities to talk about similarities, differences, and how the children are transforming a collection of resources into beautiful dens (UW). Support the children in co-operating with each other and working as a group to build their dens (PSED).

