Transcript: Grounds for Learning - Den building and hiding

Narrator: Adult-free secluded spaces are important for children. They allow children to step out of the adult world and enter more fully into the child’s world, they contain opportunities for intimacy, solitude, calm and reflection and they stimulate imagination and socialisation as children become absorbed in fantasy worlds in their secluded spaces.

Shelter is one of the most basic human needs and den building seems to be an innate behaviour in children. On cold windy days these spaces can provide welcome shelter while on hot days they create valuable shade.

Pupil 1: My favourite thing to do is to build dens because it’s fun and you have to do tons of problem solving and work with your friends and figure out where to make your den and how to place sticks and everything.

Pupil 2: We’re making this house, we’ve got a living room and a bedroom and we’ll just, me and my friends, we’re just making it for fun.

Narrator: Den building is a very inexpensive activity to facilitate.Simple materials such as poles, rope, sheets, tarps, pegs and crates can be endlessly flexible in the hands of children. You can also use existing structures like walls, trees, fences or willow tunnels as additional resources for den building. It’s an activity that’s great, not just in natural surroundings but works well for tarmac spaces too.

Den building is a great example of co-operative play in action, with children working together to design, engineer and build a variety of creative fantasy worlds like army dens, wigwams and houses.

Helen Downey, Playground Supervisor: Sometimes with the den building you think it’s just dens, but it’s not, it’s like problem solving, it builds up friendships, they all work together as a team and do things.

Susan Somerville, Playground Supervisor: It opened up a lot of different avenues rather than just playing football they’ve now investigated what they can use, how they can use it and even sitting in the tents afterwards like today, they’re talking about staying overnight and what further things they can do, even to the wood and playing with sticks and they’re using the sticks rather than using them as fighting tools.

Narrator: As well as providing materials for den building, we can create natural opportunities in our playground for seclusion using trees, shrubs, grass, willow structures and landform. These natural spaces are particularly important for creating moments of calm in a noisy busy school day. They also give children experiences of being up close with nature in a safe and secure way, helping to form a strong affinity between children and the natural world.

Christine Sutherland, Playground Supervisor: They’ve got just a certain amount of time to play and they know that and they’re just so busy that they don’t have time for any niggles and if they have to put things away, well that has to be done as well so they have to concentrate on what they’re doing.

Narrator: Providing seclusion is quite counter-cultural to how we normally manage our playgrounds, so how can we provide these kinds of experiences in a way that ensures children’s safety?

Helen Downey, Playground Supervisor: We do a risk assessment, check that it’s not too windy or whatever, then I’ll sit the kids down and I’ll tell them the do’s and the don’ts. Some of the things they say we shouldn’t do are put heavy things above your head, don’t run about with sticks, if a branch is too long get two of you to carry it instead of one.

Narrator: Simple tips like timetabling different classes and using children themselves to help monitor play can unlock the benefits of den building and hiding allowing co-operation, creativity and a sense of responsibility to flourish whilst minimising risk.

Keith Belleville, Headteacher, St Ronan’s Primary School: Just standing back and watching the teamwork, the co-operation and just getting down to that level of a bunch of Primary Six girls inviting you across to show the den that they’ve built and offering you a cup of tea, it’s quite liberating, I think, for them, they are out the classroom, they are out the traditional playground situation and they can be children again and it’s just great to see that.