

# Playwords

for people who are passionate about play

Play  
words™



# Animating spaces for play



Philip Waters, project coordinator at the Eden Project, takes a space, any space, and Eden will animate it for play!

Sounds bold, but at the beginning of Eden's Big Lottery funded project, Changing the State of Play with Mud Between Your Toes, we used this claim as a baseline for suggesting that all spaces have playfulness within them. Also that even the most barren space, with a little flair and imagination, could be dressed for play given the right materials and resources.

## So how have we been animating spaces?

Eden's Den Building (see *Playwords* Summer 2009 Issue 39) comes in many disguises, but generally involves building shelters out of a variety of materials, including bamboo, rubber ties, tarpaulins, blankets, sheets, netting, bungee cord and rope. Dens can then be lavished with furniture, ornaments or art, and pretty much anything else the den builder desires.



PHOTO: EDEN PROJECT



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Eden has witnessed thousands of children build dens over the past few years, including tepees, forts, double-decker houses, triangular huts, star-shaped, boat-shaped and spaceship-shaped structures. Many designs accommodate the whole family, and even one – which we claim to be the world's biggest – an entire community! Well, almost.

Not all dens are made from manufactured or recycled materials, occasionally we work with natural materials found in natural spaces. A recent example was in North Carolina, USA, where we used fallen branches, leaves and foliage, and even a bit of mud, and if this wasn't wild enough, we had to share the space with poisonous snakes, spiders and ivy. In this instance, den building really did take on a survival theme!

Of course, we don't stop there; many of our play days have extended the shelter-building theme to include foraging and cooking, and even more adventurous activities, some examples given below.

## Adventurous play

Our more wild and adventurous play takes many forms, including building full and mini-sized rafts on beaches and rivers, hanging nets and ropes from trees, playing with mud and sticks, and wading and jumping in streams and rivers, to name but a few.

Throughout the project's life our adventure kit has developed considerably, originally starting with a few basic ropes we now have rather a large selection of tree hanging swings, including the basic tyre version, to the more elaborate horse-shaped tyre swing. We also have bucket swings for babies, knotted rope swings and rope ladders for older children, and a variety of trapeze style offerings for the more nimble and athletic. Our kit also includes cargo straps and horizontal ladders, which we use as low level tightropes or crossings to go over rivers and even the odd swamp!



PHOTO: EDEN PROJECT

### Landscape furniture

More recently we have been setting up 'quest' days where we have taken historical or mythological narratives and weaved them through landscapes as play trails. Some of these have included our adventure kit above, while others have been minimalistic; only relying on the land itself. These particular events have been played across moorlands, beaches, woodlands and marshlands, and could easily be adapted for urban spaces too.

In many cases we start by looking at what's available in the landscape, see what gear we have and imagine what'll happen if we combine the two. We often find these combinations end up being the most memorable because of their bespoke nature. We often support children in creating their own spaces so they build the structures and create the play experiences they want to have.

### H2O Challenge

The H2O Challenge is our latest playful experiment. In essence, it's a kit of junk materials that children use to construct water transportation structures (canals or aqua ducts). The kit consists of hundreds of lengths of pipe and guttering, water butts, hoses, funnels, buckets, pumps, barrels, milk crates, trugs, cups, tubes, bamboo tripods, a bath on wheels, treadle pumps, and all sorts of floatable bits. We challenge children and their families to build structures without losing a single drop of water. Of course that's usually impossible, but the challenge's a giggle.



PHOTO: EDEN PROJECT

### Zips and nets

Our giant net, one of the most popular bits of our kit, is provided by local fishermen and reinforced with rope, this is usually tied between four substantial trees and can take the weight of about 10-15 primary-aged children. It's even more exciting when suspended over streams or muddy areas, and with the addition of a scramble net it makes getting on and off rather interesting.

We also use a small zip wire - sometimes converted into a seated zip wire for smaller children - and when throwing oneself down a wire doesn't fulfil the need for thrill-seeking, we occasionally enhance the landscape by hanging cargo nets and ropes over banks, hills, mounds, or even branches. More recently we've added a couple of fire pits, some cooking pots, half a dozen storm kettles and a couple of tents. And if all that's not enough, we provide creative tactile opportunities too, like making things from clay; rush lamps or small creatures we call Guard-its - they guard your den from ITs, you know, those ugly wild creatures that live out there in the wild. What do you mean you've never seen an IT! I don't know. What's the world coming too? Where was I? Ah, yes. We also support children making stick and rock characters which, as every playworker knows, must be formally adopted into the child's family, meaning a seat at the dinner table, its own bed, a PSP, PJs and a school uniform. You think I'm joking. I have three stick people at my house!

If you have any suggestions for items to add to our kit. Or if you would like further details about Eden's MUD programme, which includes the play project, then please contact the project coordinator, Philip Waters  
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