

# The Ayr Adventure



The Eden Project is an environmental education charity and a regeneration project. They have developed a range of approaches for engaging the public with the issues and opportunities that a sustainable future presents.

## Location

Ayr Field Park, St Ives

## Aim

Design a play space with the local community



Creating a community of dens on Ayr Field Park

Ayr Field Park is situated in the upper side of St Ives bay, a highly popular tourist destination in the southwest. Cornwall Council had purchased it in 1914 for use as a school playing field, but by the 1980s it was largely underused and so became a seasonal car park before becoming a building compound. In March 2006, the builders vacated the field and the local community started a campaign to win back the space for community usage. The field is currently managed and maintained by Ayr Field Community Group.



The Eden Project's involvement began in 2008 with an email from a member of Ayr Field Community Group, who explained they wanted to design an innovative play space that would give local children access to adventurous play in a natural environment. Eden had a project at the time called 'Changing the State of Play with Mud Between Your Toes' that was funded by the Big Lottery. Part of the project's remit was to help local communities design nature-based play spaces as an alternative to KFCs (play spaces with a Kit, Fence and a Carpet).

For communities that want to design bespoke play facilities that do not come out of a manufacturer's catalogue, having access to a designer is paramount, but costly. Eden's role in the Ayr Field project was to provide a design brief based on consultations with children and local families.



## Engagement Events



Eden advised Ayr Field group to extend their existing community engagement work by offering a play event that would take the form of a community celebration. This kind of approach helps embed participatory activities into events that people already enjoy and avoids any of the negative associations with standard community consultation exercises, which are often regarded as dry and boring. For many children and young people consultation exercises are about sitting around tables in dreary buildings. Authentic engagement, on the other hand, is based on the realities of children and young people's everyday experiences and should be undertaken in the places where they spend their free time. We took the view that any engagement about play ought to have play as its integral feature rather than as an additional component.



The lookout tower



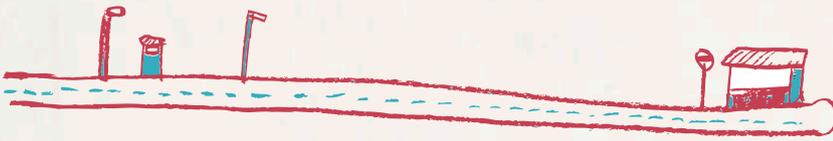
Eden's H2O Challenge at the celebration day

In September 2009, Eden rocked up in a transit van full of materials and with a handful of playworkers began to help and encourage children to build dens. The idea was to create a kind of mini-festival at which children and young people were given the opportunity to informally impart their ideas about designs. Creative engagement techniques were deployed around the edges of the main den building 'arena' where participants were given the chance to write their thoughts on postcards, or draw on clothing hanging from a washing line. The latter was particularly favoured by young people because we included permission-giving messages, like this one on a pair of jeans with a torn knee-cap:

*Bobby, aged 7, saved the world from an alien invasion in his back garden last night, just before tea.*

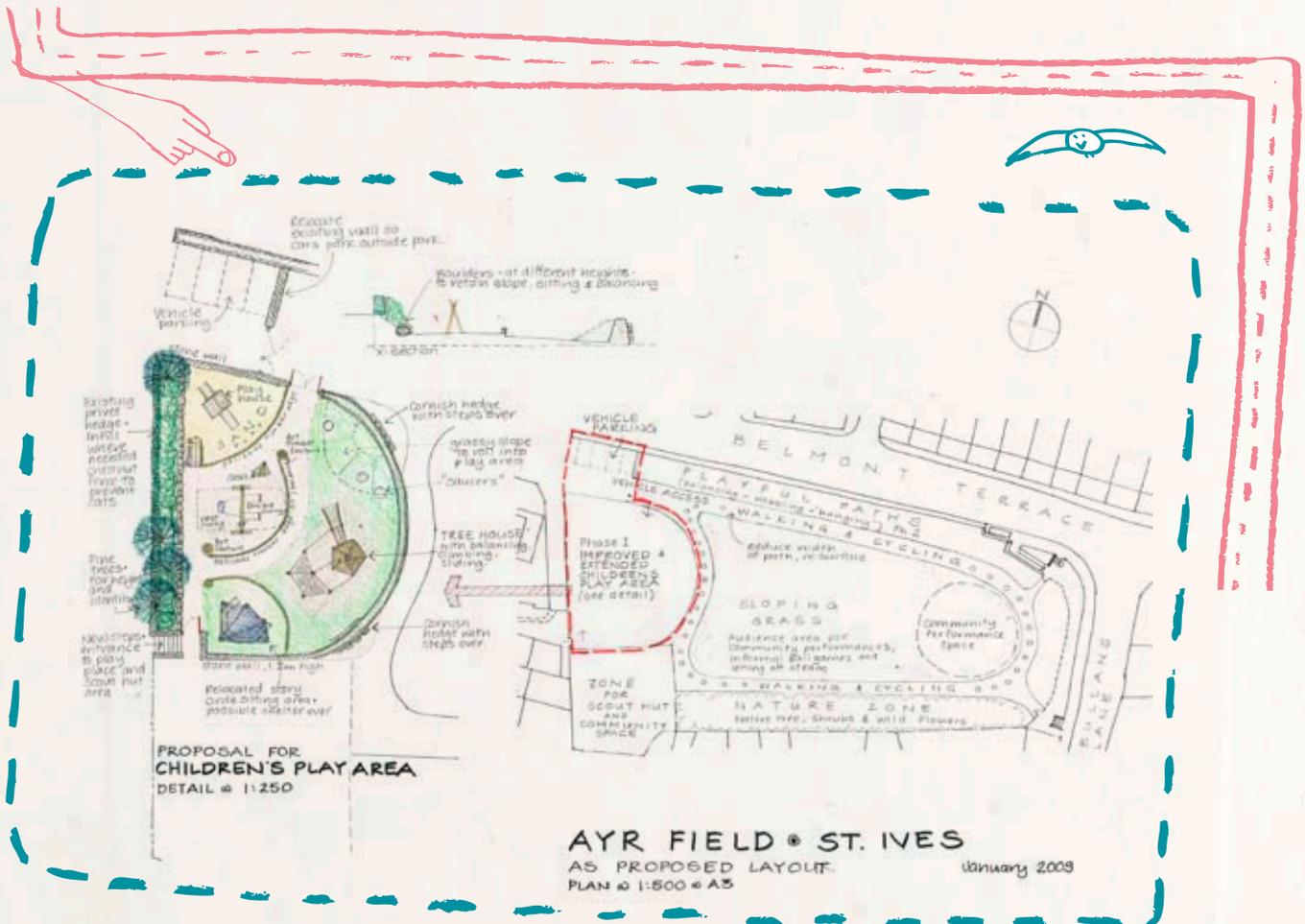
Or this one pinned to a skirt with grass stains on the bottom:

*Sarah, aged 13, yet again broke the world record for international grass bottom sliding while on her way home from school.*



Information like this was used as an invitation to contribute playful memories. A simple technique like this breaks down the barriers between youth and adult cultures, while also paving the way for conversations about play experiences rather than play equipment.

We have found that children are more likely to talk about play while they are playing so the main consultation was carried out via video interviews while the children were building or playing in their dens. In their dens, children would talk about their immediate play experiences before willingly recalling other play memories. In most cases open-ended prompting moves children away from the usual playground consultation questions, for example: what would you like to see in this park? Often resulting in what children already know or expect: swings, roundabouts, slides and climbing frames. Instead, we framed their thinking around the sorts of experiences they would have in different environments, like the beach, a field, a back yard, a garden, on the moors, etc. This way they would think about play in relation to space rather than playground furniture. The findings were then typed up and given to the landscape designer to translate into a design brief.

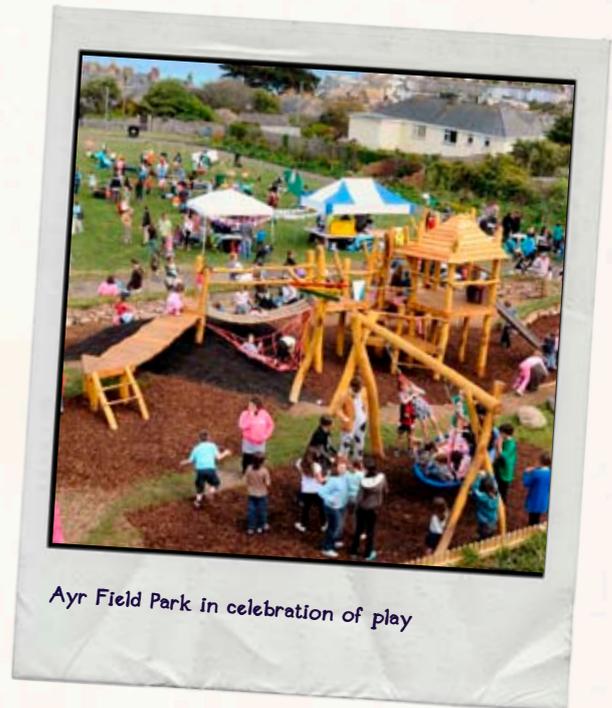


The ultimate aim for a design like this, is that it reflects children's experiences of play, while also giving scope for them to discover new experiences.

# After the consultation

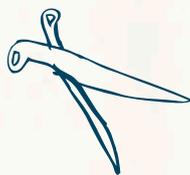


One of the things we enjoy most about community engagement is being able to celebrate the successes. We were invited to the grand opening of Ayr Field play area in 2010 where we offered additional activities to supplement the playground. It was a hugely successful day with a high turnout and acted as the closing chapter for the work we had done, while also laying the foundations for the beginning of a strong community spirit which will see the field continue to transform and evolve.



Ayr Field Park in celebration of play

## Techniques



Postcards  
Washing line and clothes (with inspirational messaging)  
Participatory video

## Key concepts



- △ Situate engagement activities in the realities of children and young people's daily experiences.
- If you want to design inspirational spaces you need to encourage children to move beyond structures and focus on behaviors and experiences. Let them use their imaginations.
- ▽ Be playful it only works if it's fun, don't stand there with a clipboard.
- △ Don't be afraid to use technological tools just ensure batteries are charged, buttons are pressed, and you have a tape in the camcorder.
- Use open-ended questions that don't lead, but could inspire.