

Play Scilly



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

Porthcressa, St Marys, Isles of Scilly

Aim

Design a play space with the local community



Porthcressa beach is situated on the south side of Hugh Town, St Marys. It's a popular beach used regularly by locals and tourists with immediate access to amenities. The nearest playground is a play-ship on the Garrison, a steep, short walk from Hugh Town that has provision for children between the ages of 3-7 years.



The Play Ship



Proposed playground site at Porthcressa

Eden's involvement began in 2010 following some work in collaboration with the children's centre and youth service, offering adventurous activities in the woodlands and beaches on the east side of the island. Children's Services had received Playbuilder funding (a £235m Labour government initiative to support local authority play), to develop a number of play-spaces across the islands.

Eden's brief was to carry out engagement with children so that their wishes could contribute to a design brief which would then be put out to tender to playground manufacturers and designers. The playground would cater for older primary-aged children but with the potential to attract young teenagers as well.

Engagement Events



Children Services had already undertaken some quality engagement with teenagers, so Eden's role was to bring something dynamic and fun to the consultations with primary-aged children. A number of focus-group activities were set up over two days. On day one, two small groups of children were taken to Porthcressa and asked to create pebble characters who would then be led on a quest by a roaming pebble reporter using a video camera. As children often feel more comfortable projecting their thoughts through inanimate objects, as in doll play, pebbles made good objects that not only belonged to the beach environment where the play area was to be situated, but also enabled children to create an identity for their pebble characters by drawing faces on them and naming them. The roaming pebble reporter was then used as a proxy to ask children what they liked to do in different spaces around the proposed site - this involved a journey into long grass, a climb through bushes up a steep-sided bank, sitting on a nearby bench and exploring the beach. All their suggestions were extracted from the video and typed up for the landscape designer to translate into design concepts.



Pebble Characters preparing for a quest at Porthcressa



Informal consultations were also taken with adults who, as they passed alongside the proposed site, became curious about the engagement activities taking place with children. Interestingly, the proposed site resonated with many of the locals. The sponge-like bushes that sweep across the cliffs in that area are collectively known as 'the Icing', as it resembles the icing on a cake. Local knowledge like this can provide inspiration for designers whether they're developing new play structures or enhancing existing provision.



The second part of the consultation process involved children designing 'ideal' play spaces in sand trays using natural and manufactured materials. During the making process, facilitators asked them about their play experiences and how these were incorporated into their designs. In addition, children were filmed as they gave 'tours' of their created spaces. The information was, as before, extracted from the video and given to the landscape designer.



Ideal playgrounds created in sand trays

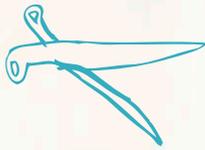


As not all of the children had been able to make pebble characters during the first engagement activity on the beach they were invited to make small clay creatures that would be interviewed by the roaming pebble reporter. Like the pebbles, the clay creatures consisted of natural materials found locally, thus helping children to relate to the spaces in which they play and live. Again, the interviews were filmed and information extracted to inform the design brief.



Clay creatures getting ready for TV interviews

Techniques



Pebble and Clay characters

Miniature play spaces

Participatory video

TV reporter narrative

Key concepts



- ◁ Situate engagement activities in the spaces children already use to play in, especially in areas that are proposed sites of change or design.
- ◻ Use informal and playful methods that ensure children feel safe and secure such as projecting one's ideas, thoughts and feelings through inanimate objects.
- ▽ Give children the opportunity to take the lead; you'll be surprised where they'll go and what additional information you'll gain.
- △ Encourage children to view their environment from a range of perspectives. For example, use techniques that focus on the world up close (e.g. pebbles on a quest in the long grass), and on the world from afar (play spaces in the sand pit).
- ◻ Have fun with the participatory process and your enjoyment will be infectious.

