

TREE DEN

Experience a bit of playful adrenaline among the trees



Goal: The children will test not only their planning abilities but also their design skills. They will build a tree den, house, nest or a hiding place with their own hands. They will develop their creativity by working with natural materials and a specific place. They will experience how it feels to create their own playground and toys either alone or in a group. They will find out what nature has to offer for their games.

How long: 30–60 minutes

Who: 4–99

Where: A place where there is enough materials for construction (forest, park, garden)

When: All year round (start in the warm part of the year)

You need: Building materials (ideally in a forest), ropes (tools optionally)

1. FOREST COMES TO LIFE

The space among the trees in the park, in the garden or, even better, in the forest is the perfect playground. It offers challenges to children for their body and soul. In addition, it contains a lot of materials for games and building. Go out among the trees in order to create games full of stories, adrenaline and playful wrestling. Build houses, shelters, nests, tree dens. They don't have to be spectacular; it's important that the children get excited about the construction and really enjoy it. Children can build any number of dens if they want. Even if the closest forest is some distance away, you should try to go there for a day and enjoy the opportunities it offers.

TIP: Look around your area for messy natural places if your forest is far away. New city wildernesses, overgrown places, dense corners of gardens and large mature shrubs could all be great settings for dens and houses. The important thing is to have enough materials to build with. It is good to have extras like branches, wood boards or planks or, at the very least, some cardboard boxes if there aren't enough natural materials around. Everything built can be temporary; their constructions should last at least long enough for the children to enjoy them. It is definitely worth it. Children can develop skills in planning, division of labour, overcoming problems, working through mistakes and much more during construction.

2. A GAME THAT DEVELOPS

When the building is finished it is time to play. Some children enjoy the construction while others prefer to play. Allow enough time for both activities. The buildings may not last until the next time you visit them but, never mind, you can always rebuild and improve them.

TIP: Don't be afraid to allow some playful battling. Children can enjoy games with conflict but there should be specific boundaries set up beforehand. Who wouldn't want to have a treasure hunt or stage a conquest or have a cone war between dens or stage a pirate defence of an island?

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3. SMALL WORLDS

Construct small natural dens for children's favourite characters, animals or fictional forest creatures with natural materials from your local area if you don't have the opportunity to go to a suitable woodland. This will ensure lots of playing and great fun. Most children have already built elf houses. How about trying something more challenging this time? Maybe a small forest den that has walls, towers or maybe bridges. These are all big challenges for small designs.

TIP: Take any opportunity to return to your dens repeatedly because it will not only be an opportunity for the children to play but also to observe and compare changes in nature. How do you build differently in the autumn, winter, spring and summer?

4. SHARE

Building and playing around houses and dens can engage and excite children. It is good to plan a short time for them to look back and describe how everything went. What was it like to play and build among trees? What else could they have needed? What would they build next time? What did they enjoy? What frustrated them?

TIP: Children can draw or write notes in a chronicle of their den or shack. You can also add photos, stamps or rubbings of natural materials, and pressed flowers.

EVALUATION OF THE ACTIVITY'S GOAL (EVIDENCE OF LEARNING)

The children (alone or in groups) planned and tested building dens, lairs, hiding places and the like with natural materials.

They used natural items creatively for such things as toys and building materials.

They built their own natural playground and experienced what it is like to play in nature.

The children discovered that playing in nature is enjoyable and that they can introduce their own games there.

