

# The Learning Environments: Creating a Learning Environment Indoors and Outdoors

*Marion Dowling*

Rose worked in a nursery setting with a spacious indoor area but overcrowded with furniture and only a small outdoor area. Staff recognised the need for children to have good scope for large-scale play indoors. Despite this, Rose's observations of children's play revealed that little den-planning was taking place. She noted that pairs of children used construction blocks to make 'homes' for small-world characters but these were never elaborated. Sam, Amir and Joe often planned to make a cave or hidey hole but after starting out with great enthusiasm, draping a large cover over themselves the play rapidly fizzled out. Rose concluded that children were interested in making dens but needed some stimulus and access to further resources. Having audited the continuous provision Rose found it lacking in open-ended and found materials; moreover, the few resources that were available were located at a distance from the small-world play.

Rose took the following action:

- She read children stories about making secret dens and told them about the den she had built as a child in her own garden.
- When children responded and talked about making their dens she asked them what they needed for their constructions and in response to their suggestions she added a range of boxes, fabrics, blankets, wooden poles, ropes and ties to the making and sticking area and created more space by removing some chairs and tables.
- She located small baskets of found materials near to the small-world play.
- She joined groups as a co-player to listen to their ideas, encourage and suggest or provide practical help when needed.

As the den play grew Rose was amazed at the levels of co-operation demonstrated, the negotiations that took place and the interchange of ideas.

Amir and Sam, having painstakingly devised and built a 'den for spies', invited Rose to visit and supplied her with a password to enter – spyden. On her arrival Amir announced that Rose could be a super spy like them – 'then we can keep this den for ever and ever' he added.

## Reflective questions

- What are the possible benefits and limitations of offering children open-ended materials which allow them to create their own dens as opposed to commercial resources such as pop-up tents and ready made wigwams?
- How might you start to encourage babies and toddlers to take an early interest in den play, for example through playing repetitive games of peek-a-boo and observing how very young children like to hide behind furniture and be 'discovered'?