

# The Healing Power of Shelter Play

~ Paulene Hanna

Every human child's earthly journey has, at its beginning, the need for the shelter and warmth of a human embrace. Our earliest security is experienced in the arms of someone who willingly cares for us, not only with nutrition, but with a loving gesture. It is not surprising that further on in life whenever we are fearful, anxious or experiencing loneliness, we may long to return to this early form of shelter. We can find ourselves with a need for the arms of another.

For the child, only just on the road to independent self care, the need for shelter is very present. This need is expressed symbolically in drawing as well as in play: the building of a boundary is often an initial play gesture. When the child moves beyond their first home into the world of the unfamiliar, support for their gradual ability to feel at ease is needed. Free play requires trust, and is supported by adults who, with time and patience, respect their child's play as an important form of expression that can be most meaningful when the child feels "at home."

Often an initial feeling of insecurity is expressed through holding on to a known or newly friendly adult. Gradually the child may move towards setting up his or her own shelter or boundaries and then remain firmly within them. These physical structures tell us that a space has been made where the child feels secure. From this space the little one will look out and maybe, in time, invite another in. We can call this expression "foundational home building" or "enclosing play."

Over my career with freely playing children I have seen older, seemingly confident children return to an expression of "enclosure" when entering unknown territory. An example is a child who, in hiding behind or under a piece of furniture, is seeking security and shutting themselves off from the enormity of the situation. Similarly, a child who is seemingly destructive socially can be supported by being given a play enclosure to call their own—from this they can look out at, or meet others, with conditions that are under their own control.

Every healthy, meaningful journey will benefit from having a safe home at its beginning.



As adults living with the threat of the coronavirus, we too are feeling the need for a safe space to call our own. We feel the need for protection from all that is going on around us in the wider community. Many of us are rearranging and redefining our homes so that the feeling of “shelter” is, once again, experienced by the whole family. It is a time when we have an awakened empathy for the need to live in a safe space.

### **The Play Enclosure or Cubby House and the Growing Child**



The task of building a healthy physical body goes side by side with the child’s developing self confidence. This process can be meaningfully expressed through the child’s “home play.” Building up and breaking down is a common play theme of the very young child, whose instability in movement is reflected in the impermanence of their play structures. The older child, with growing control over movement skills and object placement, can plan and build more stable structures. He or she builds with more intention and confidence, and in doing so communicates: “This is my territory”; “This is my home”; “I can take care of myself.”

There is a feeling of satisfaction that comes with the building of a structurally sound “playhouse.” The play structure sits happily alongside all the expanding achievements of the child’s growing body.

Almost magically, home play is enhanced and enlivened by the child’s developing gift of imagination.



### **Home Makers**

Some children will be enthusiastic builders and some will move into shelters made by others. Those who arrange the space inside the shelter we can call “home makers.” Making beds, storing food, cooking, and defining entrances and exits falls to those who “live” in the home. Through the personalization of space inside the “cubby,” the child makes the home uniquely their own and expresses their idea of being “at home.”

From an archetypal perspective, each child is at the start of a long journey, travelled by many who have gone before. Every life is experienced uniquely, but at the same time the foundational journey towards socialization and independence has been shared throughout history and across cultures. There has always been the need for shelter, to find food, to meet others and to find common ground. Children, too, begin their playful journey by satisfying the need to have a defined and safe home base.

Children often show a preference for either indoor or outdoor play, and the shelter or house theme can be expressed in either setting. Children the world over build circles of security around themselves in many ways, simple and complex. They may merely cover themselves over or hide as a way of feeling “safer,” or their building may involve chairs, tables, sticks and cloths. I once had a neighbor who in his eighties could still describe in detail, and with a twinkle in his eye, his childhood “dugout.”

The playing children are joining in the human being’s universal journey towards self-understanding and independence, which has at its beginning



belonging in a safe territory. With a home space to leave from and return to, we can work on our communication and involvement skills as a member of a gradually widening social community.

All who are privileged to be with freely playing children can look at how experiences are digested and confidence enhanced by their entering daily into rich imaginative play. In all forms of play there are starting points, stepping stones, and sequences. All these stages can be revisited and enhanced by lots of self-propelled, playful practice.

### Supporting Cubby House Play at Home

1. Children need a space to build and rearrange some simple furniture.
2. They need time to get into the play and to become satisfied with what they achieve (1 hour or a bit more).
3. They need some simple furniture and props that are theirs to move around.
4. Decorating items can be collected by the child and adjusted to their growing needs and ability to care for them.

### 5. Suggested props:

- small or light chairs and stools
- a table that can be played under or added onto
- a big sturdy basket in which to sit—store
- wooden or strong cardboard boxes can also be inspiring
- plain colored flat sheets and smaller cloths
- some special long building sticks—perhaps found on a walk and sanded
- some lengthy ties to hold the shelter together

### Packing Away

It is important not to have too much, so that the materials can be kept in order. Children have taught me that they love to begin in a fresh space. If a space is cared for and ordered in a way that is accessible, it will attract players. Tidying and restoring order is important and children may need some adult enthusiasm to help with this. ♦



**Paulene Hanna** lives in Australia and entered Waldorf early childhood teaching in 1988. She has a passionate interest in children's play and uses photography as a nonintrusive way to observe children in this activity. She has recently retired from classroom teaching and is both a researcher and a writer, committed to awakening awareness of the importance of self-directed play in children's lives. She is also a former editor of the Australian early childhood journal, *Star Weavings*.