

Building dens with fences and gates: ritualised inclusion and exclusion in children's peer cultures

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines one of the social fundamentals of children's play. As William Corsaro has observed, two social themes run through children's peer cultures. One is that children try to control their interactional spaces; the other is that children share this control amongst each other. Concurrent with these themes are practices of inclusion and exclusion: while some children can play along, others cannot since they would threaten the control children have acquired over their interactional space.

Considering play as the most important context of shaping children's peer cultures, this paper analyses children's constructing of and playing in dens (huts, forts, bush houses) as a ritualized mode of inclusion and exclusion in children's playing and peer cultures. Drawing on semi-participant observation in summer playgrounds, this paper shows how den playing is virtually tantamount to shared scripts and shared practices of inclusion and particularly exclusion. It provides an ethnography of children's elaborated repertoire in their den play and shows how children use these narrative and material means to include some children and to exclude others.

Through these practices, and in constructing a social and material world of its own, den building is a prime example of children's agency: inspired by shared scripts learnt in the past, thriving on children's imagination, and constantly adjusting to events evolving during play itself.



Control and sharing, inclusion and exclusion

For children, playing is many things, but most of them would agree with Huizinga (1951: 3) that 'fun' is a core quality of playing. This quality of 'fun', I would argue, has three main and interrelated sources (see Meire, 2007: 44-46). The feeling of agency or *control* that play can offer is perhaps its most fundamental appeal: experiencing your skills, winning a game over others or playing tricks on them, building a den or making up an entire imaginary world. Second, the *sharing* of this play space – being engaged together in the same activity – is a hugely important element of the fun of playing. Enjoying doing things together is then often facilitated by routines, rules and scripts for common excitement or emotional security. And third, much play brings about *bodily sensations* – a theme, however, which will be left aside here.

This article is concerned with the social aspects of playing and thus with 'control' and 'sharing'. These are two core themes in children's peer cultures, according to sociologist William Corsaro in his work on children's everyday (peer) cultures. A peer culture is "a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers" (Corsaro, 2005: 110). It develops especially when children move outside the family into the surrounding community and interact intensively with each other – like in child care, schools, or organised leisure activities – such as the playgrounds focused upon in this article. As Corsaro observed, children will make persistent attempts to gain *control* over their lives; and they will attempt to *share* this control with each other (2005: 134).

Concurrent with these themes are practices of inclusion and exclusion: while some children can play along, others cannot since they would threaten the control children have acquired over their interactional space. This is protected against outsiders: "no you can't join in! Go somewhere else!" As the flipside of 'sharing', exclusion is inherent to creating interactive play spaces.

We all know this: for instance, children exclude other children when they define some spaces as 'only for girls', or as a 'not for girls' zone. Even so, exclusion tends to be overlooked in many studies on play, which usually focus on the effects of play or which start from the individual child. However, I consider inclusion and exclusion to be *social* fundamentals of play. The inclusion of co-players implies the exclusion of other children, who are refused to join in or are excluded during the game itself. Ethnographical studies of play which focus on children's interactions have shown how identity markers such as ethnic origin and especially gender are used in inclusion and exclusion, but also that even within same-sex play groups, inclusion and exclusion are persistently present in children's play interactions (Aydt & Corsaro, 2003; Evaldsson & Corsaro, 1998; Goodwin, 2006). Children's rituals for choosing soccer playmates on the school playground, for instance, are practices of inclusion and exclusion, based on notions of 'being a boy' and, in the school context, ultimately of 'being a pupil' (Kofoed, 2008). This is true for den building as well: places of children's cultures, dens reflect wider values on gender and age in the local community (Kjorholt 2003).

Children's dens – in organised summer playgrounds

Considering play as the most important context of shaping children's peer cultures, this article aims to show how inclusion and exclusion are getting a ritualised form in children's playing in dens.

Children's dens, also called 'forts', 'huts', 'bush houses' or 'tree houses' (Sobel, 2002; Kylin, 2003), are prime examples of 'children's places' (Rasmussen, 2004). "Through making their own places, children start to carve out a place for themselves in the world" (Sobel, 2002: 47).

Children's dens are an ubiquitous part of children's shared play repertoire, especially in middle childhood (Hart, 1979; Sobel, 2002). Usually dens are built in children's own neighbourhoods, in their informal play space and time, in between spaces with clearly defined functions (Hart, 1979). This article, however, draws on semi-participant ethnographic

observations in two organised playground settings during summer school holidays in Flanders (Belgium).¹

The playgrounds referred to here are organised only during school holidays and are very flexible in that there is no membership and children can come from day to day as they (or their parents) please. Like in other 'youth work' in Flanders, playgrounds are supervised and the activities are organised not by professional play workers, but by young volunteers (aged 16 to early 20's). The holiday playgrounds present themselves univocally as places for fun and play and consider play as valuable in itself. For instance, playgrounds have recently campaigned that the scratches and bruises or the dirty clothes that children are coming home with, are signs that they "have been playing well".

The social and temporal organisation of these playgrounds varies widely. On many playgrounds, children are expected to follow the organised play activities (often in distinct age groups), while others offer several activities for children to choose from. In that case, children can also decide to freely organise their play themselves. However, even in rather strictly organised playgrounds, children do have some 'free' time in which they can do whatever they want.

Den playing is an activity that is typically observed when children can decide themselves what they will do. In some playgrounds, building and playing in dens is the most important and perhaps even the only consistent manner in which children organise their own play. While most play activities are rather short-lived, playing in dens continues for the whole day or goes on during several consecutive days. This is possible because children are granted the time and space necessary for their own play.

In children's free play in their neighbourhoods, "the separateness from the world of parents and family" (Sobel, 2002: 47) is essential to den play. Even though adults sometimes help in building a den, children never say they 'have' a den with an adult: they only have it with other children (Kylin, 2003: 10). In the observed playgrounds, this was reflected in the play workers' reserved attitudes towards participating in den play. Play workers usually do not organise playing in dens (though sometimes they initially help in building) and they

¹ The observations in summer playgrounds (ten full days) were part of a research project on children's experience of time and temporal organisation, funded by the Flemish government.

refrain from intervening in the play and from playing along. Whereas play workers often play along and monitor most play on the playground, adjusting matters of power and hierarchy, conflicts and exclusion, this 'adult' guidance is virtually absent in the dens on the playground. Dens are the realm of children.

Material, social and symbolic realities of den playing

To many children, the organised playgrounds are ideal places for building dens since they provide both other children to play with and attractive constructing materials – both of which are frequently absent from children's daily informal play spaces in their own streets. Indeed, as Kylin (2003) observes, den playing is both engaging with the physical environment, and a mental and social reality, as experienced by children themselves.

In building dens, children literally create a shared place of their own. Apart from using fixed spatial elements such as trees, shrubs, fences and poles, loose elements are crucial to build a den: car tyres, barrels, drapes, sun umbrellas, cardboard, cushions, pins, ropes, tubes, beer crates, wooden boards, hammocks, camouflage nets. Looking for suitable things and building and furnishing the den itself are activities that can last all day long. Building, creating a den, making and changing a place are rewarding in itself as a very 'agentic' way of playing (see Hart, 1979).

As Kylin (2003) points out, the physical aspect of dens is intricately linked to how children experience den playing. However, in the scarce studies of children's den playing the social meaning of den play and the exclusion of children or the rivalry between dens remain somewhat out of sight. In the densely populated area of the organised playground, rivalry is at the core of den playing. This is both evident in how children conceive of the den as a physical entity, and in how they socially organise the playing in dens.

Places of adventure, the observed playground dens are – if only in a secondary degree – also domestic places, secluded 'nests' or places of security. Seats or cushions give

dens a cosy character on the inside. However, on a playground, this secluded character of dens is impeded by the lack of secrecy of the den's existence itself. The limited space available on the playground offers no realistic opportunity to construct the den as a 'secret place' – as opposed to the secret places and dens observed in children's neighbourhoods (Kylin, 2003).

Indeed, on the playground, most efforts go to the exteriors of the den, which is all about protecting and guarding the place against outsiders. Building barriers goes along with other verbal, symbolic and economic means of limiting access. This protection is done in multiple and elaborated ways; no den is a real den without these obstacles. For instance, dens are surrounded by physical barriers: walls made of car tyres or barrels, ropes, existing fences and shrubs. Reflecting the secret character a den 'should' (but in fact cannot) have, the den is hidden through its location between the shrubs or by way of camouflage nets. Stretched ropes function as an alarm system, their sound or movement signalling that they have been touched by an intruder. Children can be required to produce a stick (a weapon) or a password to be allowed to go in, or they have to pay with crown caps. And of course, weapons are displayed to threaten those who want to come in, and children are physically hindered or expelled and verbally reprimanded when they try to get access to the den: "get out of our den!", "go away!"

These elaborate measures show that access is a core issue in children's dens: who is allowed to come in and who is not? More than anything else, discussions on access lead to quarrels in and around the dens.

In the playgrounds, this social inclusion and exclusion in children's dens often entail narratives of a 'military' character. For instance, the roles children play in the den are military ranks (dens have a more or less formal internal division of labour and a hierarchy topped by one or more 'bosses' – "he's a boss because he has fought a lot", children would say). Playing in and around the den includes sneaking snipers, training sessions, expeditions to 'shoot the enemy', rumours that 'the others' would carry out a bomb attack, and weaponry (often self-made, starting from twigs or branches from a tree).

In such a military atmosphere, it is harder for girls to find an appropriate role that matters. Sometimes girls are 'spies', but more often they have unnamed and vague positions,

or subordinate ones – in one den, a girl let another girl choose: “what would you like to be? A cleaning woman or a nurse?” (she chose to be a nurse. One ‘cleaning woman’ said she “resigned” after a quarrel because she wasn’t allowed to enter the den).

Inclusion and exclusion

Indeed, in its script, its practice and its meaning, play in dens *is* all about the inclusion of some children and the exclusion of others. A den has gates to let children in, and fences to ward off other children. Even the smallest children understand that the core feature of a den is that it should be guarded against outsiders: enemies that threaten to invade or destroy the den. Thus, den playing is social both in the ‘belonging’ to one den and in rivalling with other dens. A lack of children to play or to rival with, will usually bring the playing to an end.

Children are ‘of’ a den or not, they belong to one den or to another den. Having helped in building the den can be a condition to be a member, although access usually widens somewhat afterwards. Dens have a kind of informal membership (decided upon by the ‘boss’) and whoever is hanging around in the neighbourhood a of den, will be asked: “what are you doing here? To which den to you belong?” Access is often demanded or legitimised through bonds of family or friendship. “This is his brother, so he can enter”, “she is my friend [so I can enter too]”.

On the other hand, children are excluded from membership, often on the basis of gender or age. Dens are most often boys’ domain, although very often girls play along. Still, usually girls are a minority and have roles that are lower in hierarchy.

More often than gender, however, age is a marker for allowing children to play along (or not). When organised play activities on the playground occur in fixed age groups, these groups are easy markers for including some children and excluding others. Younger children are not admitted or are required to bring in weapons before they can enter. More often than

not, the youngest children are seen as a nuisance by older children. Sometimes they manage to get in in the chaos of the moment, but from time to time, they are bluntly expelled.

Despite a certain degree of internal organisation, the internal social dynamics of a den is characterised by a lot of rivalry. "I am the boss because I was here first!", one boy claims. "I am the king of the playground", a second retorts. "And I am the bosses' boss", replies a third.

Ritualising exclusion

Rivalry between dens

While rivalry within a den is a more or less inevitable side effect of playing in dens, rivalry *between* dens is a core part of the unwritten script of den playing. It is a ritualised form of the exclusion of other children: shared, scripted and restrained.

Once a space is occupied and a den is built – itself acts often in rivalry with other dens – it will be protected from outsiders. As mentioned above, access to a den is protected by membership and all kinds of physical or symbolic barriers. Guarding the den thus has a large moral weight. It is a constant care. It starts raining and everyone has to go inside, but the children of one den refuse to do so, "because the others will steal our car tyres if they are longer here than we are." Rivalry can also take more active forms: through sabotage of the protection of other dens (cutting ropes that function as alarm systems) or by stealing material, such as car tyres, weapons or helmets.

Rivalry over property rights and theft can turn into outright quarrels, and can lead to interventions of the play supervisors. Often, children negotiate on the property of loose objects, threaten to attack the others if they don't give back their belongings, or look for a play supervisor to help them.

At the same time, this exclusion and rivalry is not played out as hard as it could be. Like in most of their play, children have a practical sense of proportion in their (potentially

rivalling) interactions. In order not to make a conflict escalate, children sometimes give scarce or 'wanted' objects such as car tyres to another den.

This both underpins the 'ritual' character of den playing, and the fact that the playground remains a place of fun, rather than of negative social relations. After all, having 'enemies' from other dens excludes them from your den, and yet at the same includes them in your playing and – a concern typical of children's self-organised play – makes sure playing can continue. Having no enemies means den playing becomes futile.

Moreover, I have never witnessed a real 'attack' of one den against another. Most 'fighting' took place between children who were in a den and other children who wanted to join in but who were not allowed to do so. Whereas this internal exclusion was rather harsh, the rivalry *between* dens was restrained and ritual in character. It is all about the *possibility* that your enemies could attack you, and this idea gives playing in dens its spice.

External enemies

There is not only real rivalry between dens. Older children such as teenagers can also be defined as 'the enemy', even when they themselves do not have a den. Since teenagers (13 to 15 years old) are the oldest and thus the 'strongest' group on the playground, they are a worthy target, even more so because they are not popular among younger children.

At the same time, teenagers can be a safe target: often they have a terrain or a clubhouse of their own, more or less separate from the playground itself. Even so, the arrival of the teenagers is awaited patiently and weapons are prepared in case of... When it is rumoured that the teenagers are gone swimming, a boy sighs: "then I have been waiting for no reason!"

The 'virtual exclusion' of the teenagers is a script, a narrative around which activities in the dens are planned and carried out. It gives a surplus layer of meaning to the playing.

Weaponry

This is also true for weapons. 'Weaponry' is part of the defence of a den. Weapons are usually sticks made from branches of trees, and are called 'swords', 'daggers' or 'knives'. Or children make blowguns, or a weird mixture of paint, sun cream, squashed berries and flavoured drinking yoghurt that would be thrown over the teenagers and that was hid in a den (in a bottle carrying the inscription 'atomic bomb') for using it the next day.

That children make weapons at all, shows how much dens are *their* domain: on the playground it is forbidden to make (or use) 'weapons', for instance when there are tinkering activities. Weapons are not acceptable on the organised playground, but within children's peer culture in the dens, they are symbolically important objects. Indeed, children own their own 'swords' or knives, and in the den they discuss who owns the best or 'hardest' weapons. Dens are used to hide weapons: to protect the symbolically valued objects as such, and to make possible that den playing can continue the next day.

On the other hand, I have never seen weapons actually used against other children. Their value is symbolic: it is fun to look for them, to make them, to hide them – or to steal them from the others. Weapons give a tangible form to the narrative of den play. Children can spend whole afternoons making weapons and planning how they will heroically use them against the teenagers – which, of course, will never really occur.

Agency in play

Through these practices, and in constructing a social and material world of its own, den building is a prime example of children's agency in children's play. Children's imagination is crucial here. A hockey stick, that had been used in a hockey game elsewhere on the playground, can be redefined as a gun – since weapons are needed in the (learnt) script of den playing. And later on, when a boy is 'shot' during an expedition, nurses mend his wounded leg, after which the boy uses the hockey stick (first his gun) as a crutch to walk

around on one leg. Not knowing what will happen next or what the enemy is really up to, adds a lot to the attraction of den playing: an element of uncertainty which makes 'being in control' more challenging.

As Emirbayer and Mische (1998) have shown, agency is temporally embedded: it draws from knowledge and habits acquired in the past, is oriented at the future through imagining alternative possibilities, but is also influenced by the contingencies and practicalities of the present. Den play is inspired by shared scripts learnt in the past; even the youngest children on the playground know that 'a den' means: 'protecting your own place against attacks from outsiders'. It thrives on children's imagination of what 'could' happen in the future: "the enemy will bomb us!". And it is constantly adjusting to events evolving during play itself: "oops, the enemy is gone swimming. Let's do something else."

The 'as-if' quality of much play is so appealing because it interweaves these temporal aspects of agency, *and* the aspects of control and sharing. Its fun lies in the combination of (sometimes literally) making the 'as if' world, and thus taking control of it, and sharing the interaction in this world: the complicity of being a member of the same den and guarding it from 'the enemy', who is very dangerous – even though everyone knows this is not *really* the case. After all, it's just a game.

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