



#PlayToday

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promoting the value of play

CUBBIES

Cubbies are small enclosures either made by adults or created by children themselves. Most often they are used for role-play, dramatic and fantasy play. Cubbies offer a large range of developmental benefits to children including in their social, cognitive and language development.

The feeling of being enclosed and hidden is an important aspect of cubby play. Several studies have documented that environment modification to create closed spaces is high on the list of preferred activities for children. It would seem then that refuge, a prominent symbol in both natural habitats and built environment, plays an important role in children's developmental needs.

The play value of cubbies is maximised when:

- a wide choice of props and loose materials is available;
- they can be changed at will by children themselves; and
- the immediate surrounds of the cubby can also be used for play.

Different ways to provide for cubby-type play

Permanent, built cubbies

Permanent cubbies or forts with a platform, a ladder and a space underneath often confuse two types of play which are not always compatible:

- if children want to use their toys on the platform, they have to struggle up a ladder or net with them.
- climbing and busy physical activity may intrude and conflict with the role-play activity.

The design of any cubby structure should have the feeling of being hidden but have some permanent openings to provide for supervision.

Cubbies at ground level can relate well to sandpit play.

For children using the same play space for long periods of time it is very important that there are also opportunities for them to create their own cubbies.

Lean-to cubbies

These are constructions built by the children, perhaps with the assistance of staff, out of various loose materials in the playground. The processes of construction and change are important.

A fence, wall, tree trunk or other backdrop is useful to both provide physical support as well as enclosure and privacy. A supply of pegs, ties and small sandbags to secure materials is essential.

Built framework for additions by children or staff

A timber support, such as a tee-pee of lashed poles, or a lightweight steel framework, such as a climbing trestle, can be useful for draping cloth, tarpaulins, and parachutes over.

Cubbies amongst planting

Hedges, thickets and weeping shrubs provide wonderful enclosures for children's cubbies. Some plants which drop needles (such as pines and casuarinas), are useful as a supply of cubby-making materials.

Quiet areas, small spaces and secret places

Small and 'secret' spaces play an important role in the play of young children. They are particularly important for providing:

- privacy in centres where children spend long days with a large group of children and where there are often few opportunities for solitude;
- an opportunity for children to create their 'own' space;
- somewhere for two or three children to play quietly together; and
- a quiet space for a small-group activity such as reading.

Many ideas suggested for dividing up a play area can be applied to creating such small spaces. The spaces can be quite tiny and can give very small children a sense of being completely hidden even though an adult can easily supervise them.

It is important that children with disabilities also have access to such spaces, to the activities and to privacy.

Large cardboard or wooden boxes, built cubbies, small planted areas, groupings of logs or sleeper seats, and spaces under decks all create small spaces. Sometimes a small focal point such as a low 'table' or 'seat' made of a round cut from a telegraph pole or a low smooth rock placed in a small space will enhance the play possibilities.

Playground standards (AS4685) and construction

In the experience of Play Australia, many commercial cubby units marketed to Supervised Early Childhood Services do *not* comply with Australian playground standard AS4685.

Sometimes manufacturers will claim that their product "complies with standards" without nominating the particular standard to which this claim refers. In practice, Play Australia suspects that some of these manufacturers are likely relying on toy safety standards (eg no loose parts that might present a choking hazard) rather than AS4685.

If a manufacturer represents their product as compliant with AS4685, as a minimum, they are obliged to comply with the following (AS4685.1 clause 7.1):

The equipment shall be marked legibly, permanently and in a position visible from ground level with at least the following:

(a) Name, address and ABN of the manufacturer, importer or supplier.

(b) Equipment reference and year of manufacture.

(c) The designation (number and date) of this Australian Standard, i.e. AS 4685.1:2020, and any other applicable part of the AS 4685 series.

The use of the term “permanently” above shall take into account the life of the equipment and the environment in which it is likely to be installed.

NOTE: Manufacturers making a statement of conformity with this document on the equipment, packaging, within contractual documentation, internet, or promotional material related to that product are advised to ensure that conformity is capable of being verified.

Note also that many of these units are cheap for a reason, typically because they are built for only occasional backyard use rather than continuous and intensive use in a commercial setting.

Notwithstanding the above, a simple house or shed-style unit set at or near ground level with simple window and door openings is unlikely to cause issues. Review, however, whether exposed internal structural elements might be used by children as foot and hand holds to climb to higher windows or shop counters. Best practice construction would set the lower sill on open-air style windows and the upper surfaces of, for example, counter tops no higher than 599mm above the adjacent standing surfaces to avoid having to manage complications associated with AS4685 impact areas.

Significantly more care should be taken before purchasing elaborate, multi-level combination units, both in terms of their construction (including potential entrapments) and also with respect to clearances around the unit required by AS4685.

Play Australia recommends that screws be used in the construction of all playground equipment, including cubbies, as nails can easily work their way out of the timber over time due to vibration in the equipment and normal wear and tear, with the consequent potential for serious tear and puncture injuries.

AS4685 requires that all timber used in playground construction comply with the following

Timber treated in accordance with the AS 1604 series for Hazard Class H4 [Hazard Class H3 where entirely above ground], (excluding CCA and creosote).

Durability Class 1 or Class 2 in accordance with AS 5604 provided the untreated sapwood does not exceed 15 % of the cross-sectional area. Where the untreated sapwood exceeds 15 %, Item (a) applies (clauses 4.1.3.102 and 4.1.3.103)

Timber treated with Copper chrome arsenic (CCA) should not be used in new construction, however the recommendation of most Australian health authorities remains that existing CCA-treated timber used in play equipment does not normally need to be replaced before the end of its natural lifespan.

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