

5 ways to explore...

an old playhouse

From a beach hut to an underwater tableau, **Julie Mountain** reveals how to transform a disused playhouse into something useful and rewarding

A playhouse coming to the end of its useful life can be a sad sight – but with a little effort, it can enjoy a few more years encouraging active outdoor play. All of these ideas involve removing the front panel and any other windows in your playhouse, creating a more open-ended (and open-fronted) resource.



BEACH HUT

Paint the playhouse in pastel colours, with a sandy yellow floor. A colourful rug, mini deckchairs and a play tea-set will be enough to spark new play scenarios, but you could place Tuff Spot builder's trays with sand and water nearby. Perhaps this beach hut doubles as an ice-cream parlour or a bucket and spade shop? Add mark-making materials and blank postcards so that children can design their own seaside scenes.



LIBRARY

Paint one of the interior walls with chalkboard paint (several coats will be needed) and attach vertical book display units to the remaining walls. Your outdoor library could be themed each week, or contain a general selection of picture books that will support physically active outdoor play, such as *Giraffes Can't Dance* by Giles Andreae and Guy Parker-Rees, *Josephine Wants to Dance* by Jackie French and Bruce Whatley, and *Sam and Dave Dig a Hole* by Jon Klassen and Mac Barnett. For longevity, chop up and laminate



CAVE

Screw lots of stainless steel eye hooks into various points of the playhouse's timber structure, then thread string through them, pulling the string taut as you go. Once you've tied off the string, you have a spider's web of string from which to hang or peg dark drapes – including across the open front – to create a cosy cave. Provide black sugar paper and chalk for cave paintings, red and yellow cellophane and



Above: the beach hut at Cybertots On The Green

Left: a playhouse used for storage

Below: Olney Infant Academy's bike garage (left) and an outdoor library

twigs for the 'fire', and lengths of fake fur for beds and outfits – scraps and roll ends of fabric can be bought very cheaply, in bundles, from eBay.



UNDER THE SEA

Using the cave's hooks and string, decorate the playhouse as an underwater tableau, with scraps of blue, green and orange silky and gauzy fabric to represent seaweed, corals and sparkling water. Your collection of small-world sea creatures and shells will spark plenty of imaginative play, and a water-filled Tuff Spot builder's tray placed inside the playhouse will add to the atmosphere.



STORAGE

An older playhouse makes excellent, accessible storage for children if you add shelves, hooks and baskets. It's always worth auditing outdoor play storage each year to establish which resources need replacing and which are underused. Repurposing the playhouse as accessible storage should free up space elsewhere and will offer opportunities for independence and taking responsibility as children choose their own play resources – and tidy them up afterwards.

And another thing...

Depending on the construction of your playhouse, removing the front panel should simply involve unscrewing it. Since the front panel also provides stability for the structure, screw a length of timber horizontally across the front, at eaves height, to provide that function; there should still be a horizontal bar at the base of the playhouse that the front panel was screwed to. ■