

## It's Time for Play! Building Forts

[Music]

Children: It's time for play!

[Music]

Beth Zack: Oh. Hi there. My name's Beth, and today, we're going to be talking about the magical secret worlds that children and adults alike can create by building forts. Think back to your own childhood. Did you ever build a fort? What did it feel like to be hunkered down inside? What did you use to make it? I remember the thrill of having my own secret spaces as a little girl. I used sheets and couch cushions and pretty much attached it to anything I could find. Then, I'd add some pillows and books inside and had that private space all to myself. Now, I get to help my toddler build her own forts, which she loves to call "bear dens." We usually just prop up a few couch cushions and put a sheet overhead. It's simple but wonderful. Sometimes, she invites me in to snuggle and maybe even read a book or two. But often, she wants that cozy space all her own, and that's OK.

One of the great things about building forts is that you already have everything you need at home. You can use clothespins or binder clips or bag clips from your kitchen to attach the roof to some cushions or to some furniture. You might try popping open an umbrella, putting a sheet over top, some pillows and blankets inside for a cozy space that's a little less work. Same goes for just throwing a big blanket over a table. Or, give your kids a great big cardboard box and some crayons and markers, and let them design it however they'd like. Outside, you might use some logs and some branches or even snow. Building forts is an integral and natural part of children's play. Children build STEAM skills as they choose materials to test their ideas and build and create. These sheets and couch cushions and those binder clips and clothespins – all of those are technology or tools. Constructing the fort is a lesson in engineering. Now, building forts can be messy, but I urge you to let go of the mess a little bit. It's nothing that can't easily be cleaned up.

And remember to follow your child's lead. Younger children are likely going to need a little more support than older children, who might just want to build all by themselves. Ask questions. You might ask, "Should we use this light sheet or this heavy blanket for the roof?" Let them experiment and decide. If they choose that heavy blanket and the roof collapses, talk to them about why. Remember: children are learning just as much from their successes as they are from their mistakes. Research shows that building forts nurtures children's imagination and their creativity. Building forts can be anything children imagine them to be. That might be a castle, a cabin, or even a bear den. Children get to decide who comes into the space, what they want to do inside, and what they should bring in. That might be a favorite stuffy or a snack or maybe even both. Forts can transport children to a whole nother world that's sized just for them. In a world where children have very little control, forts give them just that. Forts are also safe places that are wonderful for children who have identified disabilities or suspected delays.

It's a way for them, a quiet place for them to retreat away while still being safe and close to an adult. Now, babies are a little too young to build forts or even be inside one by themselves, but that doesn't mean that you can't create a cozy, quiet space to share with a baby together that has some of the same benefits.

Forts aren't just for kids. Other people, like us grown-ups, we crave our own space too. And it turns out fort building is pretty awesome for adults. In a world where it's hard to find alone time, forts can give us just that, that quiet space that we crave. You might crawl into your kid's fort at the end of the day or consider building your own. I can tell you firsthand, it's a lot of fun building forts with my toddler. I love it. If you don't want to build, maybe pop a tent that you use for camping inside with some pillows and blankets in it. Or, you could just prop up some couch cushions with a blanket or sheet just overhead, just a quiet place to retreat. Consider adjusting the lighting to create a softer mood for yourself. You might add some twinkle lights or a battery-operated candle, or even a flashlight will do. Try a meditation, listening to a podcast, watching a show or a movie on your laptop, or escaping into a book. You might even take a nap. Shh. It's your fort. You can do whatever you decide. Fort building is universal. Children all over the world build forts. And best of all, fort building is fun and free. I hope you too will be able to enjoy building forts as you make time for play.

Now, excuse me. This tired mommy is ready for some rest. Bye!