

## Builder Boards, a playhouse kids can build themselves

### Builder Boards

#### A Playhouse Kids build themselves

As a builder and newly minted preschool teacher I found children loved activities I was able to create from the world of tools, building and fixing. We took apart VCR's, patched bike tires, put faucets, flashlights and locks together and made things from wood. One day during this "shop" class I was watching kids play with Lincoln Logs and, for no apparent reason, thought, "wouldn't it be cool if kids could build their own playhouse, like big Lincoln Logs?"

It seemed like such a good idea (even if I do say so myself) I went home to my workshop and began experimenting. Logs were too heavy. Cardboard tubes and plastic plumbing were too awkward and ugly. What about notched plywood boards? I worked out the details of board length and notch spacing and made a some test pieces. Encouraged, I went ahead. Ninety-nine boards later, viola! A playhouse!

I took the playhouse to class and, made a mistake a more experienced teacher wouldn't have, by asking, "who wants to help build a playhouse?" Naturally enough, everyone did. Chaos ensued. Kids bumped into each other, walked on boards and no one could see which board to put on next. I discovered eight preschoolers were too many for one playhouse. But once we got down to three or so they were able to work together and plan their creation.

Eventually the kids got the walls up and were ready for the roof. In my excitement to test the playhouse I hadn't built the roof yet, so I got out a blanket. Big disappointment. The kids looked as if to say, "after we went to all this work to make this wonderful house you get out a blanket? We want a real roof." I had to promise to bring the "real" roof next week.

Although I was pleased with my creation, during the next two years, children taught me that it could be more than a playhouse. Using their imaginations, children hardly ever built the standard playhouse, instead building a house with two doors, and windows everywhere and a house with no doors or windows at all. Once they built a house with a tunnel entrance and a flat roof. After that came caves, castles, forts, towers, a reptile museum and a hot dog stand. The idea of building a playhouse gave way to the idea of building from a child's imagination.

Since then (1994) Builder Boards have undergone rigorous use in classrooms, at a summer camp for disabled children, and at Children's Museums. They always attract a crowd of eager young builders. Teachers and parents seem to like them as much as the kids. My current fantasy is to build a truck load of pieces, enough so a whole classroom of kids could build at the same time.

### About the Author

Jack McKee has worked as a mechanic, remodeled houses, built small boats and designed equipment used by children's museums, schools and preschools. He has worked at a Montessori school teaching "shop" to 3-6 year olds and for the parks department teaching summer woodworking classes for kids. His articles have appeared in Home Education, Tech Directions, Early childhood Today and Wooden Boat. He has written two books, Woodshop for Kids and Builder Boards. You can see more of Jack's creations in the do-it-yourself section of his web page at: [home.earthlink.net/~mckee](http://home.earthlink.net/~mckee)

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