

Shelter Building

Materials: Forested area for building, rope (optional)

Procedure: Divide the students into groups of two or three. Their challenge will be to construct a shelter that is weatherproof and warm and must be built using only materials that are dead. I like to use the phrase, “If it’s brown, and it’s down - go to town!” Remind the students that in a real survival situation, the use of any material is acceptable but because these shelters are being made for fun it is best to protect the plants and mosses growing in the forest.

- 1) The simplest shelter to build is the “A-frame” style (triangle shape). It requires no rope and can be made to be nearly bulletproof. At our bushcraft camps, we let our oldest campers construct their shelter to sleep in, and their only complaint is that they are too warm.
- 2) When building an “A-frame” the simplest way to start is by finding a ridge pole and placing it in a tree that has a natural fork. The fork should be as low to the ground as possible and the pole long enough to accommodate the students lying down beneath it.
- 3) Once that’s done, place branches and sticks along the supporting ridge pole to create the walls. It is best if the sticks don’t poke above the ridge pole as they will direct rainwater down into the shelter.
- 4) When the walls are complete use dead branches and other debris to thatch the walls
- 5) Finally, Insulate the walls with dead leaves. These can be gathered by armload or swept up with an improvised rake.
- 6) Once the teams are satisfied with their shelter, they can add homey touches, like a mock fire pit, stone path or wreath.

Hints, tips and tricks: Children love building forts and shelters. A fantastic book is David Sobel’s Children’s Special Places. It delves into the importance of these places for children and the role they play in their emotional well-being. Sadly, many of the children we have at camp have never built a fort or shelter and given the chance, they fall in love with their little home. Shelter building is just fun and your role as a leader should be to guide the process. Some groups may struggle with getting started and need some help finding a place to begin. Others will lose focus and need some encouragement. I usually cycle from group to group, offering whatever assistance is needed. At some point, magic usually sets in, and the groups are off and running. They will establish a division of labour, work process and vision that often exceeds my wildest expectations. Once the shelters are built, we stay to eat and play in them.

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