The Power of Blocks: Meeting Standards Through Block Play

Iowa AEYC Fall Institute 2017
Revisiting the Joys of Childhood Play

- Describe the play activities that fully engaged you in childhood, the ones you could do for long periods with no sense of time passing? What was it about these activities that kept your attention?
- What materials did you most enjoy playing with? Do you remember the scents, sounds, colors, or textures of those materials?
“I sat at the little Kindergarten tabletop...and played with the cube, the sphere, and the triangle....I soon became susceptible to constructive patterns evolving in everything I saw. I learned to ‘see’ and when I did I did not care to draw casual incidentals of nature. I wanted to design.” ~ Frank Lloyd Wright, architect, 1957.
Due to demand for accountability and for “outcomes,” or an increased emphasis on cognition and skill learning, Block Play may have disappeared in preschool and kindergarten classrooms. However, block play has a legitimate place in early childhood classrooms.
The History of Blocks

In the early 1900’s Caroline Pratt designed the wooden unit blocks that became a basic material in schools across the United States
Creative Curriculum

- Full set of Unit Blocks 390 (25 shapes)
- Hollow blocks - 48-54 (6 shapes) recommended
- One other kind of blocks: foam, Legos, duplo, bristle, cardboard etc
Think about...

How do you find time for blocks?

How do you extend children’s learning in various subjects through block play?

How do you record children’s progress and/or evaluate their learning?
Stages of Block Play

Stage 1 (2-3 years): Non-Construction

- Carrying & dumping blocks
- Learning about block properties
- Developing muscle tone and coordination
- Children explore the properties of blocks by moving, touching, holding and feeling as opposed to building.
Stages of Block Play

Stage 2 (age 3): Repetitive

- First structures appear
- Puts blocks side by side
- Experimentation and problem-solving
- Encourages cooperative play
- Stacking blocks vertically in repetitive patterns
Stages of Block Play

Stage 3 (ages 3-4): Bridging

- Creating bridges
Stages of Block Play

Stage 4 (age 4): Enclosures

- Create a space to enclose an object or area.
- First with blocks lying flat, then vertical enclosures.
Stages of Block Play

Stage 5 (ages 5-6) - Structural

- Creating Structures
- Physics, dramatic play, coordination, motor skills
Stages of Block Play

Stage 6 (ages 5-6) - Functional

- Elaborate constructions
- Creativity/Artistic Skills
- Dramatic Play
- Variety of blocks & props
- Building begins to resemble intentions
Stage 7: Symbolization

- Children reproduce or symbolize actual structures they know.
Benefits of Block Play

Discuss: “What is the value of building with blocks?”
Learning Through Play

How to Meet Standards through Block Play

- Develop Social-Emotional Skills
- Reinforce Language and Literacy
- Address Physical Needs of Children
- Social Studies
- Technology
- Build Twenty-First-Century Skills
- Math
- Encourage Creativity
- Strengthen Spatial Ability
- Representation
Reinforcing Language & Literacy

- Provide writing materials
- Books about building & construction
- Reading accessories (signs, etc.)
- Label materials
- Conversations about constructions
- Drawing/representation
What are some examples of vocabulary that could be introduced during block play?
Creativity in the Block Center
Sign-Making in the Block Center
Reinforcing Language & Literacy in the Block Center
Books in the Block Center

Fiction
Books in the Block Center
Non-Fiction
Writing in the Block Center

Idea of Things To Build In The Block Area:

Please don’t vacuum this area or touch this area (on the rug).

Thank you.

Emma, Jake, Michael
Building Twenty-First Century Skills

Approaches to Learning

- Initiative
- Persistence
- Creativity & Innovation
- Critical Thinking
- Problem Solving
- Communication & Collaboration
Planning for Building
Planning for Building
Planning for Building
Encouraging Creativity & Aesthetic Awareness

- Creativity is strongly linked to cognitive and emotional development.
- Children naturally organize materials.
Math in the Block Center
Number & Operations
Algebra
Geometry
Measurement
Accessories & Materials

- Road signs & carpet maps
- Wooden, fabric, or plastic animals and human figures
- Vehicles and ramps
- Measuring instruments, such as tape measures, rules, and nonstandard measuring instruments
- Dramatic play items, such as construction hats
Loose Parts

- Natural Materials: leaves, shells, corks, seedpods, pinecones, stones, twigs, flower petals, wood scraps, tree cookies, etc.
- Recycled Materials: scarves, artificial flowers & leaves, bottle caps, buttons, fabric & carpet pieces, yard, cardboard tube, popsicle sticks, keys, etc.
Blocks and the Outdoor Learning Environment

Set up a block area outside:

- Use table top blocks on a picnic table or on a blanket on the playground.
- Take large blocks outside and add dramatic play props so the children can create...fast food restaurants, gas stations, etc.
Cleanup: A Special Challenge

- Give children a 5-minute warning
- Allow extra time
- Help children get started
- Let children continue working if they are truly engrossed in block play
Supporting Children During Block Play

The Role of the Adult

- Provide time for open exploration with blocks
- Observe and document children’s building
- Understand the stages of block play
- Listen to Learn, Inform, & Assess
- Solve Problems
- Respond with Thoughtful Feedback
- Ask Open-Ended Questions
Supporting Children During Block Play

The Role of the Adult

- Describe, Interpret, & Expand on What Children Do and Say
- Support Language and Vocabulary
- Point Out Building Elements, Concepts, and New Terms
- Make Connections with Other Areas of Learning and Life
- Have Children Draw What They Build
- Encourage Multiple Ways for Children to Express Their Ideas and Thinking
Supporting Children During Block Play

The Role of the Adult

- Provide Regular Times for Discussions
- Model and Coach Respectful Listening and Sharing
- Revisit Displays of Children’s Work
Supporting Children During Block Play

Assessment
“Play... is a state of mind that promotes imagination... What a crime it is that we deprive children of play in school, and then we expect them to think hypothetically and be creative!” ~ Peter Gray (Free to Learn)
Additional Resources

- All About the ECERS-R
- Blocks and Beyond: Strengthening Early Math and Science Skills Through Spatial Learning by Mary Jo Pollman
- Building Structures with Young Children
- Ramps & Pathways: A Constructivist Approach to Physics with Young Children
- The Block Book (3rd ed.) by Elizabeth S. Hirsch
- The Creative Curriculum for Preschool
- Creative Block Play: A Comprehensive Guide to Learning through Building by Rosanne Regan Hansel
Contact Information
Dawn Johnson, SWVPP Teacher & AEA Early Childhood Consultant, dawn.johnson@gpaea.org
Anne Michel, AEA Early Childhood Consultant, anne.michel@gpaea.org
Vickie Parker, AEA Early Childhood Consultant, vickie.parker@gpaea.org