How Block Play Promotes Development

Blocks, especially hardwood unit blocks, are standard equipment in a Creative Curriculum classroom. Wooden blocks naturally appeal to young children because they feel good to the touch, are symmetrical, and invite open-ended explorations. When children construct, create, and represent their experiences with blocks, they grow in each area of development.

**Social/emotional development.** In the Block Area, children negotiate for materials they want to use, determine how many children can work in the area, care for materials, and follow the rules for building safely. They also exchange ideas. Since one child’s idea of how to build a zoo, for instance, may differ from another’s, children expand their knowledge and learn to respect viewpoints different from their own.

**Physical development.** Children’s small muscles develop when they carry and carefully place blocks together to form a bridge or make an intricate design. They gain strength in their large muscles using hollow blocks, and improve eye-hand coordination when they carefully balance blocks so they won’t tumble.

**Cognitive development.** As children experience the world around them, they form mental pictures of what they see. Playing with blocks gives them an opportunity to recreate these pictures in concrete form. The ability to create these representations of their experiences is the basis for abstract thinking. Moreover, block play promotes a concrete understanding of concepts essential to logical thinking. Children learn about sizes, shapes, numbers, order, area, length, patterns, and weight as they select, build with, and put away blocks.

**Language development.** Children are very willing to talk about their constructions when adults ask questions and show genuine interest. They increase their vocabularies when adults give them new words to describe what they are doing, and develop their writing skills by making signs for their buildings.
Blocks have the potential for stimulating a broad range of creative, imaginative, constructive play, from arranging simple designs to building actual representations of such complex structures as bridges, skyscrapers, and whole neighborhoods. As in all interest areas, your involvement in children’s play is what makes block play meaningful. Caroline Pratt, the educator who designed unit blocks in the early 1900s, cautioned that blocks will “simply remain pieces of wood unless they are infused with information gleaned from experience” (Windsor, 1996, p. 4). Children benefit the most from their play with blocks when teachers help them to organize and express their ideas.

The first step is to observe what children do so you can determine how best to respond to each child. You use a variety of teaching strategies as you interact with children to support their learning.

You are likely to see children playing with blocks in a variety of ways, some more advanced and productive than others. This is because children’s use of blocks goes through a series of predictable stages and children progress through these stages at different rates. A child first using blocks is likely to carry them around and manipulate them but not use them to construct anything. An experienced block builder may build an intricate tower or an elaborate design. Each child is exhibiting behaviors appropriate to his or her current stage of development.

Stages of Block Play
Understanding the stages of block play gives you realistic expectations of what children do as they carry, stack, manipulate, and build with blocks. Watch children as they play and build and soon you will be able to identify the four stages in children’s use of blocks. This knowledge will guide you in knowing how to help children advance to a higher stage of block building so they get the full benefit of playing with blocks.
Stage I: Carrying Blocks
Young children who haven’t played with blocks before are likely to carry them around or pile them in a truck and transport them. At this point, children are interested in learning about blocks—how heavy they are, what they feel like, and how many can be carried at once. By experimenting with blocks, children begin to learn their properties and gain an understanding of what they can and cannot do with blocks.

Stage II: Piling Blocks and Making Roads
Children in Stage II continue to explore the properties of blocks and how they can be used. They make towers by piling blocks on top of each other and discover what different arrangements look like as they place blocks on the floor.
At this stage children also begin to use their imagination and apply important cognitive skills. To young builders, flat rows of blocks on the floor typically suggest a road. They use props such as cars and trucks if they are available to elaborate on their constructions. Making roads during Stage II marks the transition from simple piling to using blocks to make actual constructions. Children who have been building roads find they can use roads to link towers. This discovery leads to an active stage of experimentation and problem solving.

**Stage III: Connecting Blocks to Create Structures**

In Stage III children use their experience with blocks to expand their construction techniques.

Typical techniques used by children in Stage III are the following:

**Bridging.** To make a bridge, children set up two blocks, leave a space between them, and connect the two blocks with another block. Like enclosures, bridges first begin as an experiment in construction and later are used for dramatic play. When children make bridges, they practice balance, explore spatial relationships, and improve their eye-hand coordination.
Chapter 6: Blocks

Making enclosures. Children put blocks together to enclose a space. At first, simply making the enclosure is a satisfying experience. Later, the enclosure may be used for dramatic play with zoo or farm animals. (Making enclosures also helps children think about mathematical concepts, particularly area and geometry.)

Designs. Children are fascinated with symmetry, balance, and patterns and use blocks to form decorative patterns and symmetrical layouts. Once they have combined a few blocks in a design, they may continue the same pattern until their supply of blocks runs out, or they may try variations. Blocks become an art medium for children to express their creative ideas.
Stage IV: Making Elaborate Constructions

Experienced builders are able to put blocks together with dexterity and skill. Children learn to adapt to changes in their building area by curving structures and by building them above, around, or over obstacles. Children in Stage IV often create artistic and complex structures.

During this stage of block play, children need a variety of block sizes and shapes so they can make their constructions more elaborate. Another hallmark of Stage IV is that children use them as a setting for dramatic play, often labeling them and even asking for signs so everyone will know what they built.

Responding to Each Child

In observing children’s individual growth, the stages we described provide a way for you to evaluate children’s experiences with blocks. You can use the information you gather to decide whether a child needs more time to practice a particular stage, or should be helped to move to the next stage. While observing a child, notice

- what stage of block building the child has achieved
- if the child is aware of different shapes and sizes and able to return blocks to their proper place
- whether the child talks about structures and responds to questions
- what props and materials the child uses in building

Your observations will help you plan experiences to facilitate further learning. You may find, for example, that a child needs more encouragement to use blocks or an idea to get her started.

To make the best use of your observations, keep The Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum in mind as you observe children and reflect on what you learned. When teachers take the time to consider what their observations tell them about a child, their responses are more likely to be effective in promoting learning. The chart on the next page gives examples of how this process works in the Block Area.
There is no right or wrong way to build with blocks—children can create whatever they want. Sometimes children start with an idea of what they want to make; at other times three-dimensional designs grow as children place blocks together randomly or in patterns. When children’s block structures begin to resemble things they have seen, they will start to name what they build—a road, a farm, or spaceship—and use them in dramatic play.

Your observations will help you determine when to intervene and what to say to support children’s learning.

Talking With Children About Their Structures

One of the most effective ways to reinforce children’s block play is to talk to them about their structures. This suggestion may sound easier than it actually is, especially when children are just beginning to explore blocks and their constructions are minimal. For example, talking to a child about the construction shown below might prove challenging for many teachers.

The easiest response to this builder would be to say, “That’s a nice building” or “Good job.” These statements say nothing at all about what the child did, nor do they give the child a chance to tell you something about the arrangement of the blocks. They also imply that the goal is to make something you think is “nice” or “good.”

The key to talking to children about their block play is to use statements that describe what a child has done, or to ask open-ended questions that encourage children to talk about their work. This technique is also helpful for children who have difficulty expressing themselves and may be unable, at least in the beginning, to describe what they have built.

What you say, of course, will depend on what the child has created. Here are the types of positive and constructive comments you might make about a child’s work.

**Choice of blocks:** You found out that two of these blocks make one long block.

**The arrangement:** You used four blocks to make a big square.

**The number used:** You used more than ten blocks to make the road.
The similarity: All the blocks in your road are exactly the same size.

Noteworthy designs: Your building is as tall as the shelf. Those long blocks are holding up the short ones. It took careful work to be sure the blocks wouldn’t fall.

Descriptions such as these validate the importance of children’s work, build concepts in math, and expand their vocabularies. Below are two sample buildings and some possible comments a teacher might make to reinforce the child’s work:

I see you used one block that is longer than the others.

Look, your blocks make a space in the middle.

All of your blocks except one are touching.

You used five blocks. You made the whole building with just five blocks.

All your blocks are rectangles, but they’re not all the same size.

Similarly, for the block structure pictured to the left, you might make the following comments:

You made the top block balance. I bet that wasn’t easy.

Some of your blocks lie down and some stand up.

If I get down on my knees, I can look through it.

You had to be very careful when you made this building.