

Put These Ideas Into Practice!

Block Play: Practical Suggestions for Common Dilemmas

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Key Concepts About Blocks for Young Children

- Wood unit blocks are a source of pleasure and learning
- Wood blocks engage children's imaginations and build cognitive, social, language, and motor skills
- When planning for materials, provide a higher quantity of basic unit shapes and add more unique shapes as children become more experienced with building
- Incorporate accessories to enhance block play
- Organize the block play area to minimize problems and facilitate clean-up

Tips to Enrich Block Play

Infants

- Provide brightly colored and textured blocks for infants to explore through observation, touch, and mouthing. (Disinfect blocks regularly.)
- Offer blocks that make sounds such as those with a bell inside. Shake these blocks to get and hold an infant's attention.
- Move a brightly colored block slowly in an arc for the infant to track with the eyes.
- Build small towers for infants to knock over.
- Place a block under a blanket. If the child reaches for it, this indicates an understanding of object permanence

Toddlers

- Encourage toddlers to explore and play with blocks on their own.
- Build a simple structure and then invite the toddler to join in pretend play with an animal figure.
- Offer containers. Toddlers enjoy carrying blocks from one place to another either in their hands, in a container such as a cardboard box, or pulling them in a wagon.
- Show toddlers a block shape. Ask them to find the same shape from a selection of three or four blocks.
- Add simple accessories such as trucks and cars. Observe how toddlers integrate them into their play.

Preschoolers

- Model the geometric standard of unit blocks by showing how two half units equal a unit, two units equal a double unit, and so on.
- Introduce unique accessories (recycled plastic containers, paper towel tubes, craft sticks) into the block center. Rotate their availability so that accessories supplement, but do not take precedence over, blocks.
- Include materials for writing such as adhesive-backed notepads and crayons or markers for children to make their own signs to attach to structures.
- Read aloud books and stories that relate to building such as *The Three Pigs*.
- Trace around each block shape on poster board and label with the name of the block. Encourage children to use the correct names (unit, pillar, cylinder) as they build to reinforce new vocabulary and names of shapes.

School-Agers (Kindergarten through Grade 3)

- Introduce other block-like manipulatives such as Legos®, Bristle Blocks®, and Waffle Blocks®.
- Encourage children to use the correct names for block shapes and introduce vocabulary such as *symmetry*, *dimensions*, and *seriation*.
- Encourage children to read and follow directions to put together themed building sets such as Legos and K'NEX®.
- If boys begin to dominate the block-building area, find ways to keep girls interested such as setting up their own center or designating times when they can use the block center exclusively.
- Introduce more detailed children's literature with building themes and include the books in the block center as motivation and resource for new ideas.

Adult Learning Experiences

- Review the rich history and prominence of block play in early childhood education.
- Identify other dilemmas teachers may experience and use the DAP Perspective and Recommended Plan of Action format to address each and find a resolution to benefit children.
- Become familiar with the term *scaffolding* and how this approach builds on what children know and takes them to a higher level of understanding. Use open-ended questions to scaffold children's block building as they play.