



By Karen Stephens

There's More to Children's Block Play Than Meets the Eye

Here's the scene. Five of the child care children and I are on the floor in the block area. It's a carpeted area with lots of wooden blocks that are different sizes and shapes. And there are play accessory items, like plastic cars and animals. Jessica is the first to put an idea into action. She says she's building a farm. The others join in, no formal invitation needed. As Jessica builds a house for the farm, the other children casually share suggestions: "We'll need a fence for the animals." And so Derek starts on the fence.

I ask, "Where can we keep the animals when it's really cold weather?" Dickie grabs onto that idea and starts on a barn, complete with a ramp, "So it will be easier for the animals to walk into." My cold weather question sparks an idea for Joanie, too. She suggests we have sheep on the farm so the farmers can make their own clothes from sheep's wool. Joanie sorts the plastic farm animals and puts the sheep in the fenced area Derek is building.

I comment that I've always wanted to have a pond near my house, so I begin to build a pond for ducks. As I build the pond Staley asks me how I'm going to make it look like real water. Then with an enthusiastic sparkle in her eye Staley solves the challenge herself, "Let's use a pie tin from the art area!" And the play goes on and on.

To a bystander, the children and I were *just playing* with blocks. But looking deeper reveals a secret early childhood teachers have known a long time. Blocks are much more than just fun; they're great teaching and learning tools, too. During the block play experience I described above, the children learned:

- to be creative and put abstract ideas into action (a farm can be represented with blocks);
- to make logical connections (farm animals need fences and barns);
- to apply previously learned knowledge (a character in a story made yarn from sheep's wool);
- to problem solve and be inventive (farm animals need a ramp to get into a barn more easily);
- to appreciate and respect others' ideas;
- to work cooperatively (division of labor helps get a job done);
- to capitalize and build upon each other's work (my pond was better because Staley thought of symbolizing water with a pie tin);
- to be proud of industrious accomplishment; and
- to enjoy the process of learning — (of course, THEY thought they were just having fun).

These are just a few of the ways children benefit from block play. There are many others. That's why a good collection of blocks is standard equipment in every early childhood classroom or child care center.

I wish children were allowed to learn with blocks at least through third grade. But since blocks are so often seen as a *toy*, our elementary teachers (or school administrators) are hesitant to offer them beyond kindergarten.

In fact, providing opportunities for block play is a great way to build skills that we ordinarily think of as *academic* or school-related. Blocks are especially beneficial when

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children are allowed to freely explore and manipulate the blocks in a variety of engaging ways. Famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright agrees. In his autobiography he credited block play as the beginning of his interest in architecture. Yes, the roots of the “prairie style” design sprang from Wright’s nursery school experiences.

Whether children are building a farm — or even trying to replicate one of Frank Lloyd Wright’s building designs — is how learning can advance through block play.

- Math concepts are explored and put to practical use, including: shape, size, length, weight, and spatial relationships such as symmetry. At different stages, children create stacks, lines, towers and then bridges and enclosures. Designs and patterns gradually emerge. The older the child, the more complex the building becomes.
- Science concepts are investigated, including: gravity, balance, stability, and cause and effect.
- Language, vocabulary, and symbolic thought are increased.
- Children’s confidence in making decisions and choices and self expression are enhanced.
- Coordination develops so eyes and hands and small and large muscles work together, which in turn prepares kids for success in reading and writing.

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The wooden unit blocks that are used in today’s early childhood classrooms were invented in the 1800s. We have Carolyn Pratt, a nursery school teacher, to thank for the beautiful “toy” that’s so appealing to children’s playful spirit and intellect.

When you’re looking for something that does *double duty* in terms of children’s play and education, the gift of blocks is the way to go. Stores that specialize in quality children’s toys carry an interesting selection of blocks for various ages. If store-bought blocks are too pricey, you can make great blocks at home. A stash of empty shoeboxes or even clean, empty cereal boxes can keep an ingenious child busy for weeks.

Children’s creativity will expand further if you encourage them to make their own block accessories from throw away *junk* items. For instance, preschoolers can use packing peanuts to represent cars or people. When it comes to block play, it’s all in the imagination.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.