

Blocks: A center for all seasons

Wooden, naturally finished unit blocks are one of the most versatile and long-lasting learning materials for young children. As a result, they have been a staple in early childhood classrooms for decades.

While the simplicity of unit blocks' smooth surfaces and symmetrical designs are naturally appealing, teachers may wonder how to sustain the popularity of block play throughout the year.

One way is to occasionally include props to complement themes of study, or, as this article shows, to correspond to seasons of the year.

Benefits of block play

The benefits of block play for enhancing all areas of child development have been well-documented. They range from opportunities for cooperation and

improving social competence to refining motor skills and promoting eye-hand coordination.

The proportional sizes of blocks are ideal for acquiring mathematical knowledge related to quantity, shapes, and sizes as well as parts of a whole (or fractions).

Meaningful language learning occurs as children make decisions, dramatize, and communicate with others during block play. Children develop crucial concepts needed for success in early literacy, such as visual discrimination and use of abstract symbols.

Unit blocks are a virtually indestructible medium that invites children to think, plan, and problem-solve as they share space, materials, and ideas to create their various structures.

Accessories enhance learning

Children's building becomes even more interesting when accessories are used to expand experiences and maximize learning potential. As with any learning center, available materials must be refreshed on a regular basis to maintain interest. Variety serves to motivate and challenge children by inspiring continued use.

Positioning a non-breakable full-length mirror along the wall at floor level, for example, pro-

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



vides a new perspective when building. Assorted fabric remnants (at least 1 yard) and sheer curtain panels add an element of softness to unit blocks by becoming tents, picnic blankets, costumes, or curtains for hiding.

Literacy props—assorted paper, notepads, clipboards, writing utensils, environmental print, and children’s literature—rotated periodically, are a permanent fixture in any well-stocked block center.

Keeping a record of block center creations throughout the year allows evidence of learning to remain once the buildings are demolished and cleanup is complete. A block journal, where children either write or dictate stories related to their building, chronicles the various construction activities as well as documents children’s growing knowledge of

print and abilities as writers.

Photographing or sketching structures is another possibility. Pictures can be coupled with children’s descriptions to preserve memories or document accomplishments in a class book or wall display.

Add props for the season

Like other types of art, children’s block creations are often reminiscent of things they have seen. Providing accessories that correlate with current weather conditions and seasonal events is particularly motivating and provides opportunity to recreate scenes actually experienced.

Many of the suggested items in the activities below are free or inexpensive materials easily found or recycled, particularly

when you elicit the help of the children and their families.

Winter wonderland

Provide faux ice blocks for building. Make an ice block by cutting off the top (handle and spout) of two clean, plastic gallon milk jugs and inverting one into the other to form a solid cube. These lightweight blocks are perfect for building an igloo or snow fort. Provide scarves, gloves, and mittens to allow children to dress the part while building.

Another idea is to add polyester fiberfill or small polystyrene packing peanuts to your block area so the children can drive hand-pelled vehicles through snow-covered roads. You can also use the material as ground cover or decoration for finished buildings.

Spring flower power

Durable plastic flower pots in various colors and sizes make interesting cylindrical building materials perfect for both nesting and stacking. Inexpensive gardening utensils—rake, shovel, hoe, trowel—in both hand-held and child-size varieties coupled with gloves, straw hats, and watering cans set the stage for spring planting. Add silk or plastic flowers to encourage building gardens and flower boxes.

Add photos or brochures (cut from mailers or printed from the Internet) of structures used in gardening. These may include a cistern, water well, compost bin, windmill, birdfeeder, and beehive.

Summer travel

Suggest the endless possibilities of summer travel by adding postcards, road maps, atlases, street

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



signs, itineraries, journals, travel posters, and brochures along with wide ribbons to serve as roadways. Add small matchbox vehicles to enhance the pretend play.

Attach a picture of each child to a small cardboard tube or craft stick to allow children to place themselves in Grandma's house, at the Grand Canyon, or riding a roller coaster as they construct their ideal vacation destinations.

Add photos of structures used in summer outings, such as picnic tables, boats and canoes, fishing piers, swimming pools, and camping tents.

Autumn adventure

As the weather turns cooler and the leaves begin to change, the fall atmosphere can be simulated indoors by incorporating some natural items into children's block

play. Items can include logs small enough to be easily moved and handled by the children, boughs of fir and other deciduous trees, acorns, pecans, colorful leaves, and pine cones of various sizes.

Consider adding tree blocks (round, flat slices of real trees that still have the bark around the edge and show the tree rings) and a few flat rocks that stack neatly. The rocks, leaves, and pine cones may become the actual building materials or be used to decorate the block creations. If you'd like to emphasize the woodland aura further, include forest animals, binoculars, field guides, small notepads, and pencils for recording autumn observations.

Match props to children's interests

To select appropriate props, be

mindful of children's interests. Observing children's block play may reveal the need for roof material or a suitable steering wheel, for example. You can also invite children to select desired items from available options.

Being alert to possible safety hazards and diligently guiding behavior will ensure that children's interactions with blocks and accessories result in experiences that are both enjoyable and beneficial throughout the entire year.

About the author

Rebecca M. Giles, Ph. D., is professor of elementary and early childhood education at the University of South Alabama in Mobile. She has spoken and published widely on a variety of early childhood topics and is co-author of *Write Now! Publishing with Young Authors, Pre-K-Grade 2*. ■

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ

