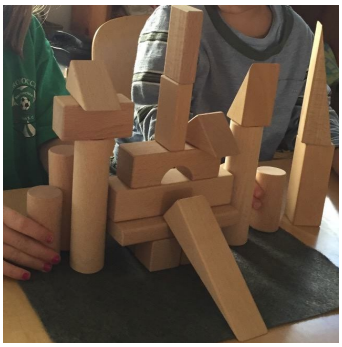
The Disappearance of Block Play

By Ann Hentschel, M.Ed.

This article and learning tool relates to the Blocks in the Environment Rating Scales.



Whatever happened to old fashioned block play? These days many spaces that should be dedicated as a block interest center are filled with lots of colorful plastic distractions—gigantic waffle blocks, a table filled with Duplos, tubs of interlocking manipulatives, and those huge plastic trucks that can only serve one purpose which is to crash and destroy another child's block structure. None of these materials provide the same learning opportunities as traditional blocks.

Using unit blocks and large hollow blocks is important because:

- Young children can explore math concepts in a concrete way like length, measurement, comparison, number, estimation, symmetry, and balance.
- Children learn to take turns, share, cooperate with others, problem solve, and develop new friendships which strengthen their social and emotional development.

There is valuable learning that transpires when a child takes an assortment of unit blocks and creates something of her own making and carefully stacks the blocks to make sure gravity does not take over and cause them to fall down. Not to mention all the cooperative social learning that takes place when children work together on a block structure. Block play is also important for later success with math and numbers. One research study, illustrated how children who play with blocks when they are three, four and five years of age actually do better in math, particularly algebra in middle school.

One of my favorite memories is of a teacher sitting on the floor in the block area with a group of preschool children. The teacher presence in the block interest center seemed to draw children over to the area. He would comment on what he saw the children doing and on occasion offer ideas on how they might extend their work. What started out as a couple of children building a fire station turned into a small group of children building an entire city with a hospital, police station, and grocery store.

This was a lesson I learned long ago as a teacher of young children. If you sit down in the interest center and pull a few blocks off the shelf children that are interested will come join you. It is not long before they are engaged in creating their own designs and building unique structures. Children that are interested will gladly have rich conversations with you about what they are building. It's also a natural place to point out math concepts to them such as the number of blocks being used or putting two triangles together makes a square.

What's been happening in your block interest center lately?

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Exercise

Take a few moments to reflect on the quality of learning experiences in your classrooms block interest area.

What materials are stored in the block interest area? Do these materials enhance block play or distract from it? How do you know?

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Describe something children or a child recently did in the block interest center.

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Reflect on a conversation you recently had with a child recently in the block interest center.

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How much time daily do children get to create and design with unit blocks or large hollow blocks with accessories?

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How might you further enhance the quality of block play in the classroom?

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References

Wolfgang, Charles H., Stannard, Laura L. and Jones, Ithel. "Block Play Performance Among Preschoolers As a Predictor of Later School Achievement in Mathematics." *Journal of Research in Childhood Education. Association for Childhood Education International.* Spring-Summer, 2001. Vol. 15, Issue 2.