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Understanding the Block Corner

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Block play offers it all. Through exploration with unit blocks children become competent learners in all areas of development: cognitive, physical, social and emotional. From the youngest age, children are drawn to wooden blocks. The smooth, sensual feel of the wood is satisfying to the touch; the sturdiness of the blocks allows a child to use them freely without fear of breakage; and the open-ended quality of block play provides an opportunity for creativity and cognitive development to soar. Blocks are a clean material, and, for children who are uneasy with getting their hands dirty, they offer a comfortable tactile experience. Lastly, children know that when they play with blocks, they are using real materials with weight, form and function.

Through repetition and experience, children learn that there are relationships in size among the blocks. Although they do not understand the formal mathematics involved, the “unit” blocks are based on a proportion. They are half as high and twice as long as they are wide. The other blocks in the set are fractions or multiples of this unit size. These physical mathematical relationships among unit blocks are understood intuitively by children. They become part of the sensory-motor, preverbal learning of young children and serve as a foundation for a more formal understanding of fractions later in their development.

All children pass through predictable stages of building as they become proficient at using blocks. The youngest or least experienced builders begin by merely picking up blocks and carrying them around in a seemingly aimless manner. In fact, these children are gaining knowledge about the properties of blocks: size, weight, form and the feel of the wood. They learn that blocks are predictable, unbreakable, and that their shape cannot be altered.

Young children delight in piling blocks on top of each other (creating towers) and lining blocks up end-to-end (making long stretches of roadways). Watch an inexperienced builder create a tower. As he or she piles block upon block until they inevitably fall, there is a look of surprise and excitement on his or her face each time the structure comes tumbling down. Prediction and cause-and-effect are not yet a part of this child’s realm of knowledge.

Similarly, watch a 3-year-old grapple with the challenge of carrying a quad (four times the length and weight of the unit block) from the shelf to his building area. The quad is long and heavy for little hands to carry, and for a young child this can only be accomplished by holding the block by placing one hand at either end of the block. A 4-year-old, with more muscle power and better dexterity, gracefully picks up the quad in its center freeing his other hand to carry another block from the shelf in the same trip. Now, he can work more efficiently to create his structure. Although this child does not know the concept of fulcrum and lever in a scientific sense, he has thoroughly incorporated its meaning into his body awareness.

It is exciting to observe a child who has learned to predict what will eventually take place as her tower grows in height. She becomes noticeably more purposeful in her placement of the blocks. Her whole body responds to what might happen as she now carefully places the top block on the tower. She delights in her accomplishment as the structure remains erect and no longer comes tumbling down with a crash. She has incorporated into her knowledge base the concepts of balance, mass and gravity. She has gained the small muscle dexterity to put her ideas into action. She is able to reason based on cause-and-effect and anticipate consequences.

Constructing spans or bridges creates a new series of challenges. It is with these structures that children begin to solve more complex technical problems. First by trial and error, and later by knowledge and the ability to predict distance, children learn to choose the appropriate block size to complete the span. As children challenge themselves to build ever taller spans and bridges they will stand the blocks on their ends, requiring a high degree of motor control and competency in balancing.

As children move on to building enclosures they are well on their way to learning about spatial concepts. Exteriors and interiors are explored, positions (above and below, in front of and behind, near and far) are understood and children begin to gain an appreciation of area as they select the appropriate number and shapes of blocks to fill in their enclosures.

More experienced builders turn their interests to the design and decorative elements in their structures. Children explore patterning, balance, and symmetry as they embellish their creations making use of small accessories such as colored wooden cubes and teddy bear counters. Too often adults only view children's structures from above. Try getting down to the child's vantage point while he or she is building. I assure you that you will observe a much more complex and interesting design.

Finally, children reach the representational stage of block building as they portray their world symbolically through block play. Children create structures and act out dramatic play scenarios related to meaningful experiences in their daily lives. A richness of experience blossoms when adults are actively engaged with the children in the block corner. Through conversation, teachers discover a wealth of information about a child's conceptual development and language capacities. An experienced teacher will bring children to the next level of cognition by asking questions designed to stimulate curiosity and foster the mastery of concepts. Children learn how to articulate their ideas, as well as the arts of verbal negotiation and problem solving, as they collaborate on a building plan.

Block corners are busy places. It is here that children grow in their motor skills, eye-hand coordination and planning abilities. Children learn about their own bodies in space—and gain immediate feedback from the environment—as they are required to carefully navigate between structures and peers in tightly crowded areas.

Experiences in the block corner foster emotional and social development as the children work together in a respectful and cooperative way. They share a sense of joy in their community accomplishments. As children concentrate while solving structural challenges, they learn to sustain interest and attention while gaining mastery in the arts of persistence, patience and overcoming frustration. Children have ample opportunities to be rewarded with the sense of pride and satisfaction that come as they develop confidence and competency. They come to understand that their friends may have different perspectives and ideas on “construction,” and they learn cooperation and tolerance along the way.

Successful block play does not just happen. Adults must set up a safe, welcoming and organized block area that allows all children to explore freely. Teachers must respect blocks as an important learning tool for young children and foster block exploration for girls as well as for boys. This requires that teachers be knowledgeable about the stages of block building and the inherent learning that children gain from frequent block play.

In order for all children to have successful block building experiences teachers must pay careful attention to the environment. Ample floor space must be available for children to build and to navigate around each other and the structures in a respectful manner. Blocks need to be arranged on the shelves so that children can make purposeful choices in their selection. Even the position of blocks on the shelves is important. When blocks are stored with the short end in view, the square, unit, double and quad all

look alike. It is important to arrange the blocks so that the shape is easily viewed. Also, storing the heaviest blocks on the lowest shelves creates a safer working environment. It reduces the chance that a heavy block will fall on a kneeling child. Cleanup, or “un-building,” needs to be orderly and safe. It is here that children gain experience with sorting and classifying skills as they match the appropriate blocks to their designated “home” on the shelf.

Unlike themed toys where children recreate stories and identify with characters dictated by the media, block play offers endless possibilities for a child to use his imagination in plot development and dramatic play. The value of block play grows with the child’s development over a period of many years. Make a point of visiting the block corner in your child’s classroom and see the potential. In addition, why not consider a set of wooden unit blocks as a wonderful birthday or holiday present for your child?

Resources

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