

and abilities of each individual builder.

Blocks are an ideal choice as toy as well as an educational tool. They provide children with needed concrete experiences to help them understand the world and how it works. Children can manipulate them by arranging and rearranging according to their own vision. Blocks allow children to learn at their own pace through trial and error. In block building there is no *right* or *wrong* answer, but an infinite number of options as the creative process unfolds. Through constructing with blocks, children develop an appreciation for structure and beauty as it is expressed in form, design, and pattern.

Block play provides a rich avenue for sensory exploration. If you doubt it, reflect on the cherished childhood memory of a master builder who first experienced blocks in the later 1800's in a Froebelian kindergarten. "The smooth shapely maple blocks with which to build, the sense of which never afterward leaves the fingers: FORM become FEELING." A classroom equipped with children's building blocks provided the setting for Frank Lloyd Wright's first experimentations in architecture (*An Autobiography*, by Frank Lloyd Wright, Horizon Press, 1932). Those of us who marvel at Wright's buildings today have an early childhood teacher to thank.

Blocks, Beautiful Blocks! Bringing Block Building to Life

by Karen Stephens

You find them in almost every early childhood classroom.— blocks of all shapes and sizes. Wooden blocks, colored table blocks, plastic connecting blocks, alphabet blocks, jumbo blocks, hollow blocks, foam blocks, even blocks that stick together when wet for use in the water table! Why are there so many different types of blocks? And why have children had an ongoing love affair with blocks for thousands of years?

wooden blocks is pleasing to the eye. Their sanded finish is silken to the touch. Yes, blocks are a very aesthetic part of the child's world!

And blocks are fun! Children become absorbed in concentration as they create a block structure and then delight as they reduce their construction to a jumbled pile with the mere touch of a finger. Blocks are perfectly suited to the developmental needs of children of all ages (from infancy to

Blocks allow for integrated learning. As children cooperate with others to create a city, social development is entwined with sensorimotor and intellectual development. Block play stimulates and nurtures overall development (see "Block Play Promotes Learning" box).

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 : ticks, Easter grass, plastic flowers,
 pop bottle caps, aluminum tins from
 pies and TV dinners, plastic trays
 from microwave dinners, styrofoam
 packing pieces . . . and anything else
 that catches your recycling fancy!

the set is a basic block called a unit; all remaining blocks are exact multiples of that unit. Thus, concepts related to addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and ratio become a natural outgrowth of children's block play. Today's manufacturers have added auxiliary blocks to make the block building challenges more complex, i.e. pillars, wedges, arches, etc.

enticing. Include doll house furniture and wooden or plastic people (multi-cultural and non-sexist portrayals); plastic as well as stuffed animals; vehicles, and some structures (gas station, airport, barn, circus tent, school house, street signs, billboards).

At first glance, the cost of a set of wooden unit blocks can be a bit staggering. But the investment is well worth it: With proper care, a good set of unit blocks will become one of the most cost effective materials in the classroom.

A word of caution about accessories. Do not overwhelm the children with too many. If you provide all of the accessories and props for play, there will be little need for children to create on their own. By providing too many ready-made accessories, we rob children of chances to exercise their own creativity and imagination.

5. Provide accessories to extend play. There are a wide variety of accessories that help lend creativity and complexity to children's block play. Rotate collections of accessories to keep the play area fresh and

Allowing children to create their own block play accessories from junk items is a great way to stimulate inventiveness. Allow children access to collections of throw-aways and you'll marvel at their ingenuity. Include plastic berry baskets, plastic eggs, styrofoam meat trays, popsicle

6. Plan for adequate storage. Low shelving that is accessible to children facilitates the development of independence. When storing accessories in bins, be sure to identify contents by labeling in writing and with a picture of the contents. This practice helps children develop organizational skills.

When you store blocks on wooden shelving, draw an outline of each block shape in the appropriate section. This will allow children to replace blocks without the assistance of a teacher, and at the same time develops matching skills.

As you can see, blocks are versatile and rich with learning opportunities for young children. When integrated daily into the curriculum, blocks become an indispensable teaching tool in the early childhood classroom.

The Teacher's Role

1. Establish ground rules for appropriate behavior. If teachers clearly convey expectations for behavior, and give explanations for rules, children are usually cooperative.
2. Provide themes to stimulate play. Teachers can suggest themes indirectly by providing props of a specific nature, i.e. farm equipment and accessories. Having an *idea card* posted in the area can also help to stimulate imagination. Rotate cards regularly to limit monotony. Examples: "How many things can you build using five ramps, six pillars, and ten unit blocks?" "Build a large TV and then put on a weather report."
3. Extend play. Get down on the floor and play with the children! A teacher who participates is very reinforcing. As you play, nonchalantly suggest new challenges. Encourage children to dictate stories to you about their block buildings or allow them to record a story on a tape recorder. Take photos of block buildings and develop an album of classroom creations. Be sure to identify the architect of each design.
4. Integrate block building through the curriculum. Block building activities provide rich, hands-on experiences to develop math and science concepts. Field trips, dramatic play, and children's literature can serve as springboards for block building activities. Curriculum becomes more relevant, meaningful, and interesting for children when it is integrated rather than segmented.

Teacher Resources

- Church, Ellen Booth, and Karen Miller. *Blocks*. Scholastic Inc., 1990.
- Hirsch, Elisabeth. *The Block Book*. National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1984.
- Johnson, Harriet. *The Art of Block Building*. Bank Street College of Education Publications, 1966.
- Provenzo, Eugene. *The Complete Block Book*. Syracuse University Press, 1983.
- Stephens, Karen. *Block Adventures, Building Creativity and Concepts Through Block Play*. First Teacher Press, 1991.
- Zubrowski, Bernie. *Milk Carton Blocks*. Little, Brown & Co., 1979.

BLOCKS TO SING AND TELL ABOUT

by Jeannine Perez

Children like to talk, sing, and move about while they are learning anything new. I found a lovely picture book: *Block City* (Dutton) which is based on a poem by Robert Louis Stevenson. In it, a child creates a world with blocks.

Children love the book too, and we used it to cooperatively build our own city. Each child used a block or object for their homes, buildings they know like

grocery stores, churches, and schools, imaginary buildings like castles, and bridges and other structures. I told stories about the city we built, and the children that lived in the block houses, and then the children began telling their own stories, changing characters and activities. Children use other books that have illustrations about construction or house-building to give concrete ideas they can

incorporate into the block corner and their own "Block City."

SONGS AND FINGERPLAYS

Like jump-rope rhymes, songs and fingerplays can give a rhythm and cadence to building with blocks (and to putting them away again). Counting, colors, and children's names can be incorporated into the songs, and they can be sung or chanted.

♪ Build the Blocks

(Tune: Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star)

We build the blocks
up so high.
1 2 3 4 .
Touch the sky.

Then the blocks go
tumbling down,
4 3 2 1,
to the ground.

♪ Name Song (Tune: Old MacDonald)

Little _____ (Use child's name), builds with blocks,
E-I-E-I-O
Build blocks here, build blocks there
blocks, blocks blocks, blocks, everywhere.

Little _____ builds with blocks,
E-I-E-I-O

(We gave each child a chance to create a simple block structure using a bucket of blocks and the time it took us to sing the song).

♪ Build, Build, Build With Blocks

(Tune: Row, Row, Row Your Boat)

Build, build, build with blocks
Stack them altogether
I stack one,
You stack two,
Step by step, together.

High, high, to the sky,
build a tower together.
I help you,
You help me.
Having fun together.

(After singing this song, we talked about "cooperation", and how much fun it is to work together to build with blocks).

♪ Block Count (chant)

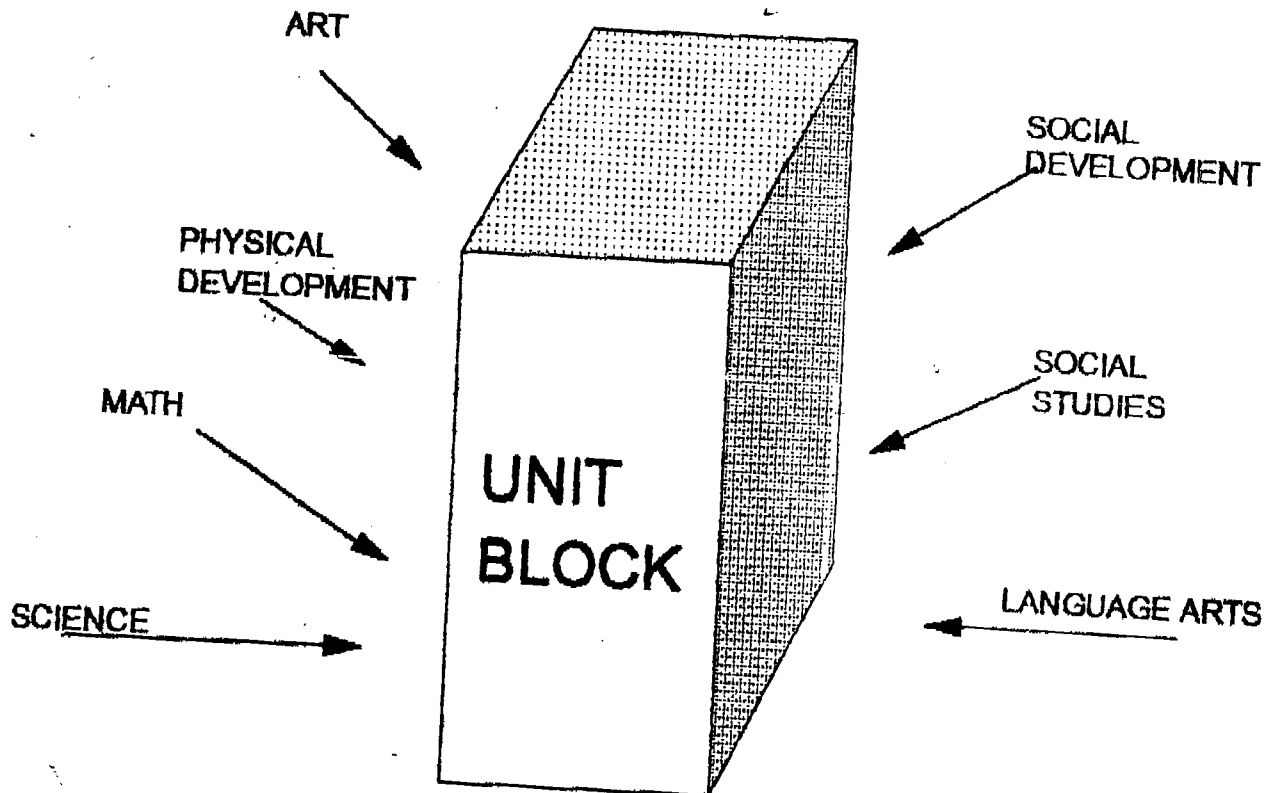
One, two blocks on my shoe.

Three, four blocks on the floor.

Five, six, seven, and eight,
I'll stack them higher,
If you'll only wait.

Nine, ten, tumble them down.
Begin again, building our town.

RELATIONSHIP OF UNIT BLOCKS TO THE CURRICULUM



BLOCK PLAY HELPS CHILDREN TO:

- SEE ACCURATELY
- JUDGE SPATIAL RELATIONS
- GET ALONG WITH OTHER PEOPLE
- DEVELOP MUSCLE CONTROL
- RECREATE THEIR OWN COMMUNITY
- UNDERSTAND GEOGRAPHY
- UNDERSTAND SCIENCE CONCEPTS
- MAKE ATTRACTIVE DESIGNS
- BUILD VOCABULARY
- PROBLEM SOLVING
- COUNT OBJECTS

A 3D diagram of a rectangular unit block, similar to the one above, with contact information printed on its front face. The block is shaded with a stippled pattern.

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Shape

Name



Half Unit



Unit



Double Unit



Quadruple Unit



Half Pillar



Pillar



Double Pillar



Small Triangle



Large Triangle



Small Column



Large Column



Ramp



Elliptical Curve



Circular Curve



1/4 Circle

Shape

Name



Large Switch &

Gothic Door



Small Switch

Large Buttress



1/2 Arch &

Small Buttress



Arch &

1/2 Circle



Roofboard



Double Triangle'



Large Arch &

1/2 Circle



Double Roof Board



Double Floor Board