



Block Play is for ALL Children

by Kay Stritzel

The block center can be the most exciting place in the early childhood classroom. A center that is attractive and well stocked with unit blocks is an invitation to learning that will last a child a lifetime. Why is it, then, that in many classrooms it is only a select group of boys and the occasional girl who are taking advantage of these blocks? In room after room, it is primarily boys that are building with the blocks. In these same rooms, the girls are busy in the house-keeping center. Much learning is taking place in both of these centers. The learning that can take place in the block center is learning that should be available to all of the children — not just a small group that is usually boys.

When looking in your classroom, do you see the girls playing in the housekeeping center, the reading center, the art center, and the manipulative and/or math center? And do you also see the boys playing in the block center, at the computer, and the manipulatives? Probably your first response is “Well, a few of my girls play with the unit blocks sometimes.” A quick way to check this out is to keep a checklist of who is in the block area for a week or two.

After you have compiled this evidence, you are faced with the question of “What do I do now?” There are some strategies to change where the girls and boys are playing, and to encourage all children to use the unit blocks. In some classrooms, a group of children will claim an area as their “territory” and other children (boys and girls) are excluded.

The first item of business is to review your feelings about unit blocks and your knowledge about them.

Next, you need to look at where you spend your time during the period of the day when blocks are an open center. Are you available to the children in the blocks? Do you comment and talk to the children about their block play and building?

Blocks are not like painting and other art forms since you cannot display them on the walls of the room. They are mostly transient constructions. But there are ways to “save” them:

- Leave the constructions up for a day or so.
- Label the constructions.
- Take photographs to display in block books.
- Take dictation or have children write stories about their work.
- Make sketches of the buildings (by children or adults).

Start a collection of pictures of buildings that can be displayed near the block center. These can come from art prints that have buildings as a part of the scene or pictures cut from magazines and newspapers. By displaying these pictures, some children who are unsure of what they should build will have some specific ideas. Taking walking trips around the school also provides some ideas for structures.

Your presence in the center is also an important factor in letting the children know that you value what is going on. You can be there as an observer or as a player. Most of all, you can talk to the children



about their work. You convey your interest using convergent and divergent questions about what blocks they are using, the time spent, feelings and thoughts about the building, who they are building with, the number of different blocks being used, what they are building, balance, symmetry, and pattern. It is also an opportunity to encourage the child to take another step in learning (Vygotsky's zone of proximal development).

Now that you are in the block center more often, you have probably observed that there seems to be a difference in the way the boys and girls play with the blocks. The boys tend to build and build and build; usually they are building elaborate and tall structures. Boys seem to build skyscrapers no matter what part of the country they live in. Girls often build much less complicated and smaller structures that they then use to play out a scene such as house, farm, etc. The boys tend to love to tear down these structures and the girls are often more willing to help in the picking up.

Building with blocks utilizes skills from all the cognitive domains like math (number and pattern), science (balance and gravity), social studies (copying architectural monuments), art (form and design), and physical (large and small muscle utilization). Playing with blocks is mainly a social event with roles being played out with blocks as the medium. Both building and playing are important skills in the block center, and the teacher's job is to encourage each child to utilize both aspects.

The classroom can be arranged so that the housekeeping center is outside during the first few months of school and the block center encompasses that space indoors. This puts the housekeeping center near the very active play outside and it becomes a part of it. When the children are inside, the girls often join the action in the block center and play there.

If you have boys and girls playing together in the block center, they will be learning from each other. But even at this young age, boys and girls are beginning to segregate themselves based on their sex. They often have a view of what a boy / girl is based upon, where a child plays, who a child plays with, and what a child wears. They have observed during their previous years in group care that the boys play in blocks and therefore it must be a "boy place."

In some classrooms, a planning board is used to help the children decide where they are going to play that

day. With slightly older children, they can be heterogeneously grouped into committees so that during committee time or center time the group is working in the block center either with the teacher or independently. When the teacher does this, he is saying that the block center is an important learning place — like the computer, math, and reading center. The teacher can encourage the children to work together, talk with them about their building, guide their play, and observe their use of the blocks in play or building.

Girls often relish the opportunity to become skilled block builders. They are using numbers and math concepts in a very real way. They are eager to expand their storytelling abilities to include what they are building with blocks. Boys enjoy dramatic play with the blocks in a way that is different from their play in the housekeeping center. There can be a time for talking and sharing about what was built and comparisons to buildings that had been built previously in the block center.

Most of all, it gives boys and girls a chance to work together on a real project, to share in the planning, building, and evaluation of the structure and possibly plan future structures together.

Early childhood educators often lament that boys and girls don't play together often enough. Building and playing with unit blocks provides opportunities for them to play and learn together from this most valuable tool — the unit blocks.

Kay Stritzel is a kindergarten teacher at Borton Primary in Tucson Unified School District in Arizona and adjunct faculty at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, California, and is active in the Arizona AEYC.