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Blocks Center



The blocks center is a very important part of an early childhood classroom. In fact, if you had to choose one center in the classroom as the most important of all, the blocks center would be a prime candidate for the title. When children build with blocks, they learn about mathematical concepts such as size, shape, number, and quantity. They become aware of scientific principles such as the force of gravity and the functioning of simple machines such as levers and inclined planes. They learn to think, plan, and problem-solve as their structures take form. This center has special appeal for children whose intelligences are strong in the visual/spatial, logical/mathematical, and bodily/kinesthetic areas.

Blocks play provides children with opportunities to create, cooperate, and communicate. *Social learning* takes place in the blocks center as children work together to share materials, space, and ideas. *Literacy skills* develop through block play when children

write signs for their buildings and read teacher-made task cards for various blocks experiences. Children gain *eye-hand coordination* and *visual discrimination* skills when they group blocks that are the same size and shape at clean-up time. Virtually everything you might want to teach a young child can be taught through blocks play!

Creating a Blocks Center

Space and Location

The most important consideration in planning a blocks center is space. Since children need plenty of space to build creatively, a blocks center will take up a sizable area in your classroom. Ideally, the blocks center should be in a corner of the room that gets little traffic. This out-of-the-way placement will help prevent many of the disasters that occur when passers-by accidentally bump into structures that have been created with care.

Essential Materials

Rug

Placing a rug with low nap on the floor of the blocks center serves several purposes. It defines the space and outlines the boundaries for blocks play. It provides a comfortable surface for the children to work on since they will be sitting, kneeling, and crawling about on the floor while they construct. The rug is also a good sound absorber. It helps muffle the sound of falling blocks when structures topple over.

Shelves, Not Bins

The blocks center needs low, open shelves for storing blocks when they are not in use. The shelves need to be open and accessible to the children during learning center activity time. Blocks storage bins are available in some early childhood equipment catalogs and stores. While these bins are convenient to have if you need to store blocks over an extended vacation or when things are being moved around for cleaning and maintenance work, they are not generally recommended for regular classroom use.

One problem with keeping blocks in a bin or box is that children have to “dig” through all the blocks to find the shapes and sizes

they need for their buildings. This is frustrating to children, and it creates an incredible amount of noise and unnecessary clutter with all the discarded blocks scattered around the floor. Blocks building is encouraged when children can see, at a glance, which shapes and sizes are available for their buildings. Another problem with storage bins is that they fail to give the children the message that the blocks center is a place with a purpose and a sense of order. Whenever materials are dumped together in a random way, the unspoken (and unintended) message is, "This stuff isn't very important and it doesn't need to be handled with care." Help children understand that everything in the classroom is valuable and important enough to be treated with respect.

Unit Blocks

The main feature of the blocks center is a set of high-quality wooden unit blocks (preferably several hundred that include a variety of different shapes and sizes). Unit blocks are available commercially in classroom sets. These blocks are mathematically related to each other. For example, the basic unit is a rectangle. Two square blocks equal one unit. Two narrow rectangles equal one unit. Two right triangles equal one unit, and so on. While many classroom materials can be homemade, it is usually best to purchase commercially made wooden unit blocks. The perfect fit that is required tends to be very difficult for the home woodworker to achieve. While a classroom set of unit blocks is a large expense, the blocks are virtually indestructible and can be expected to last for many, many years.

Additional Props

Once these basic components of the blocks center are in place, consider adding additional props. For example, add wooden people figures, cars, trucks, and traffic signs. You can change the props to fit project themes or units of study. Just like the blocks, the props need a special place to "live" when block play is over for the day. To reserve a space on the shelves, mark the desired area with a simple sign that says "props."

Try This

Create Boundaries for Building

Use colored tape or masking tape to create a line on the rug about two feet away from the shelf and as long as the shelf. When you encourage children to build structures on the side of the tape line away from the shelf, this makes the space between the line and the shelf available for traffic. Children can get to the shelves to get more blocks without interfering with anyone else's buildings—and lots of conflicts are avoided!

Try This

Signs for Props

Within the prop area of the blocks center, make a sign with pictures and words for each type of prop. Not only do the signs help keep the area organized, they make the blocks center an important part of a print-rich environment.

To enhance their development of mathematical concepts through blocks play, provide such measuring tools as tape measures, rulers, lengths of yarn or ribbon, rolls of adding machine paper, and cutouts of hands and feet at the blocks center. It is usually wise to start out with only one or two of the measuring tools and change or add others as the year progresses. Just as with your other props, identifying a specific spot on a low shelf to store the measuring tools will help with the smooth operation of the center.

Writing Materials

Writing materials such as index cards and pencils are also a necessary part of the blocks center. When you designate a spot on a shelf to store the writing materials and label it clearly, you have tools to encourage children's emerging writing skills. They can make signs and write stories about their buildings. Make sure you have tape available so the children can attach their written work to their constructions.

Keep in Mind

Make It Viewable

Be sure to place the visual aids at the children's eye level so that they will be most useful and accessible to children as they work.

Visual Aids

Inspiration for creative buildings can come from displaying a few carefully selected photographs or realistic posters that depict children working with blocks or various types of buildings and structures.

Task Cards

The final step to creating your blocks center is to add task cards. These are simple drawings or photographs, accompanied with words, of the actual children in your classroom. Task cards show children how to use materials. A basic set of task cards should always be on display in the blocks center. For example, a set of task cards might show a 3-step sequence for blocks play: (1) choose the blocks, (2) build with the blocks, (3) put the blocks away. Include task cards that show children how to use the measuring tools and writing materials. Other task cards can be added throughout the year to go along with

Try This

Using Task Cards

When teaching about farm life, place a set of task cards in the blocks center that shows children how they might build an animal pen.

particular themes or projects. For additional information, see the section on “Task Cards” on page 168.

Management Ideas

Make Block Outlines

Each different type of block should have its own special place on a shelf. One way to make the blocks center an attractive place for play, along with giving the children an opportunity to match and sort by shape and size, is to use blocks outlines. Using construction paper or posterboard, trace around each different block shape and size to make a pattern and cut the patterns out. Another approach is to put the blocks on a copier or scanner and make a copy of each shape and size. Be sure to laminate the outlines or copies for the sake of durability. Next, tape or glue the laminated outlines to the shelves or on the back of the bookcase just above the shelves to show where each type of block goes at clean-up time.

Begin Clean-Up Early

It is usually wise to begin clean-up work a few minutes earlier in the blocks center because putting away hundreds of blocks can be quite time consuming. If you get involved and help children put blocks on the shelves, it is a less daunting task for them, especially during the first weeks of school. Asking children to show you where to put the blocks helps them gain experience matching blocks with the outlined shapes and provides you with the opportunity to teach the names of various shapes.

Guidelines for Center Users

When children visit the blocks center, encourage them to:

- 1 Build only as high as their shoulders. (This protects children's heads from injury when block buildings fall, and they will!)
- 2 Build on the side of the tape line that is away from the shelf.
- 3 Take down only their own buildings.
- 4 Put their blocks away before they leave the center. (This rule may not be necessary in your classroom. In some situations, blocks buildings can remain standing overnight or for several days.)
- 5 Take blocks buildings down with their hands, not their feet.
- 6 Match the blocks to the shapes on the shelves and put them away.

Daily Maintenance Checklist

- Check the shelves to make sure all the blocks are in place.
- Periodically check the silhouettes, signs, and task cards to make sure they are firmly attached and are in good condition. Reattach or replace them as needed.
- Check cars, trucks, and other accessories for missing wheels and broken parts.
- Remove any broken equipment from the center until it can be repaired.
- Check the writing materials and replenish the supplies as needed.

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Teaching Tips

Respect Developmental Stages

Keep in Mind

Observe Quietly

Try to resist the urge to hurry children along by teaching them how to build better structures. When children are in the exploratory stage, stay in the background and observe their explorations.

Children pass through several predictable stages during blocks play. Being aware of these stages will help you discover ways to support their play. In the initial stages, children need to *explore* the nature of blocks. They need to experience the texture, weight, and shape of blocks. To do this, children will often cart blocks around the center, moving them from one messy pile to another. This may not look much like blocks building, but it is a necessary stage. After awhile, they will begin to actually build structures.

Children may first lay the blocks end to end flat on the rug. Later, they might begin to build upward, stacking blocks on top of each other. Eventually, children will build enclosures, bridges, and elaborate structures that have many interesting features. Be patient and remember that children go through each stage in their own time and in their own way.

Talk With Children About Their Ideas

While children are busy at play, talk with them about their ideas. The following comments speak specifically about structural features, and they are a great way to teach concepts related to shape, size, and number in an easy, informal way:

- “I see that you used a lot of triangles in your building.”
- “Your building is high in some places and low in some places.”
- “You used some long rectangles and some short rectangles.”
- “There’s a big square that you made with four rectangles.”

Ask Open-Ended Questions

Ask open-ended questions such as, “How did you make this building?” or “How many blocks do you think you’ll need for your building?” to stretch students’ thinking skills. See Bloom’s Taxonomy on page 23 for more ideas for questioning.

Encourage Literacy

Be sure the children know where the writing materials are and encourage them to make their own signs to go with their blocks creations. If children don’t seem interested in writing the signs themselves, you might inspire them by asking them to dictate their ideas to you. If you are doing the writing, be sure to print neatly and write the child’s own words exactly as they are spoken. One good way to stimulate sign-making is as a response to a child who says, “I want to leave my building up. Don’t let anyone knock it down.” Instead of promising to protect a building, suggest that the child make a sign to put on the building to communicate the thought. This idea is generally appealing to young children, and you will probably find many “Do not knock down” signs being attached to their buildings.

Provide Appropriate Materials

Be alert and responsive to children’s needs as they build with the blocks. If, for example, you see that children need a roof for a

structure and there are no blocks big enough to do the job, bring out some sheets of cardboard or swatches of fabric and take them to the blocks center. Or you might invite the builders to go with you on an “exploring” visit to the storage closet where they can work with you to find the materials they need.

Ensure Safety and Guide Behavior

Keep a watchful eye for safety hazards and guide behavior in the blocks center. The task cards are a great help in doing this job. Instead of telling children what not to do, invite them to read the directions for blocks building. For example, if a child is scraping all the blocks off the shelf and tossing them around the center, take the child to the task cards and help “read” the directions for using blocks. Point out the number of blocks that the task card shows being taken off the shelf at one time. Then go on to the next step in the task cards, which is using the blocks for building.



Tips for Success: Remember to . . .

- ★ Make sure all equipment and materials are in order before school.
- ★ Show a genuine interest in the children’s blocks work.
- ★ Ask open-ended questions to stimulate thinking and creativity.
- ★ Comment on specific things you notice about children’s structures.
- ★ Encourage children to make signs for their buildings.
- ★ Be available to write signs for children.
- ★ Print children’s words in manuscript print, exactly as they are spoken.
- ★ Help children put blocks away in their designated places on low, open, labeled shelves during clean-up time.
- ★ Allow extra time for blocks center clean-up.
- ★ Help children get materials they need to add to blocks buildings.
- ★ Accept the children’s developmental stages of blocks building.
- ★ Use task cards to help guide behavior.