

Block Off Time for Learning

Social and emotional

What examples of children's teamwork are pictured here?

How does building with blocks develop children's feelings of competence?

What other social and emotional skills can children practice while building together?

What pretend play themes might emerge in the block area, and how can teachers support children's play?



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Language and literacy

How can teachers encourage reading and writing in the block area?

What conversations might be going on as part of the block play pictured here?

What could teachers ask or say to encourage and expand children's block play?





Physical

How does block building support development of motor skills?

How can blocks and assorted props promote hand-eye coordination?

Cognitive

What are the children in the photos learning about math?

What other math concepts can preschoolers explore through block building?

What math vocabulary can teachers and families introduce?

What architecture and engineering concepts do the children use when building?

What could teachers offer to encourage children to make their block building more complex?



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Possible answers

Social and emotional

Teamwork: Building an office, a farm, or a highway system all require planning and collaboration. Most children enjoy working and playing with others to make plans, move and place blocks, solve building challenges, and share in the fun.

Feelings of competence: Whether working alone or as a group, children feel proud of their accomplishments, like building a bridge that spans the block area, a ramp that works, or a towering multilevel building.

Social and emotional skills: Block builders learn to follow classroom safety rules, to respect the rights of others, and

to stand up for their own rights. They also learn to respect and care for the classroom environment and to use their thinking skills to negotiate and resolve conflicts.

Pretend play themes: Many times children's block play includes dramatic-play themes. To promote this natural partnership, locate these two areas next to each other. You can also offer props such as animals, sets of families and community helpers, hats, keys, vehicles, and traffic signs. Play themes that could arise from the block play pictured in the photos include:

- Running a park for dinosaurs or a zoo
- Driving home on a superhighway
- Living on a farm
- Living and working in a skyscraper
- Calling the doctor to make an appointment

Language and literacy

Reading and writing

- Provide paper and writing tools in the block area so children can make signs to label their structures or to save them for the next day. In this classroom, the children have premade signs with their names and the message, "Please save my work."
- Offer to record children's stories about what they have built: "This is my family. They are in the skyscraper because it is fancy."
- Take photographs to accompany children's stories, then place the photos in a binder kept in the block area, publish them in the family newsletter,



or post them on the center's Web site or on a bulletin board. Children will enjoy being photographers too.

- Display books in the block area about buildings, roads, cars, trucks, current play interests, and new ideas to support reading and provide inspiration.

Conversations one might overhear

- A son tells his father, "I can fit my whole arm inside without knocking over the blocks."
- Children discuss how fast a ball or truck travels down the ramp or which animals should go in the corral.
- The child on the phone orders pizza: "Give us extra pepperoni and lots of tomatoes. Please."





Teachers' questions and comments to extend children's play

- How could you build the corral so the animals don't get out?
- Where are the cars on the highway going?
- Do these traffic signs [or people] fit in with what you are building?
- It looks like the families enjoy living in this skyscraper. What could you add to make the building a more fun place to live?

Physical

Motor development: Children develop large motor skills by lifting and carrying hollow blocks, stretching to put a block atop a tower, and returning blocks to the shelves when they finish using them. They refine small muscle skills when they turn an arch around to fit on the end of a rectangular block, set up animal and people props, and roll a ball or vehicle down a ramp.

Hand-eye coordination: Building with blocks requires careful hand-eye coordination. To balance a tower, a child must carefully place blocks on top of each other. Likewise, putting a final decoration atop a construction requires balance and coordination.

Cognitive

Learning about math: The children pictured are learning about patterning as they create bridge supports and block designs; about geometry as they organize blocks by size and shape on the shelves; and about area and space by making enclosures for the elephants and dinosaurs.

Other math concepts: Teachers can support children's understanding of number concepts by asking them to each put five blocks back on the shelves or to count the number of bridges in a construction. Children can learn about measurement by using a double or quadruple unit block to measure a tower; they observe volume by seeing how many children or animals fit within a block enclosure.

Math vocabulary: Teachers and parents can introduce words about spatial relationships: *under, over, through, on top of, and inside*. And, they can introduce shape-related words represented by the blocks: *arch, triangle, rectangle, square, and cylinder*.

Architecture and engineering: To build tall and complex structures that don't topple over, young builders apply principles of architecture and engineering, such as

- Bases of structures must be stable
- Structures must be balanced
- Ramps are strong when they are supported
- Columns can support arches and bridge spans
- Tunnels will collapse if they are not built into well-supported structures
- Long unit blocks and strong hollow blocks are best for framing foundations.



Props to extend play: To prompt both dramatic play and elaborate block building provide items such as

- People figures (families and community helpers)
- Farm, zoo, and other animals
- Trees and other landscaping items
- Traffic signs
- Cars, trucks, and other vehicles
- Phones and phone books
- Blueprints for buildings
- Child-size hard hats
- Paper, notebooks, clipboards, and writing tools