

Blocks: The Best Toy You Can Buy

Like most parents, you have spent money on a toy that your child didn't play with very much. Or you might have found your child playing more with the box than the toy that came in it. There is one toy that is a guaranteed winner for children, from toddlers to school-age children - Blocks. Buying a set of table blocks, cube blocks, or cardboard brick blocks is a very good investment in your child's play.

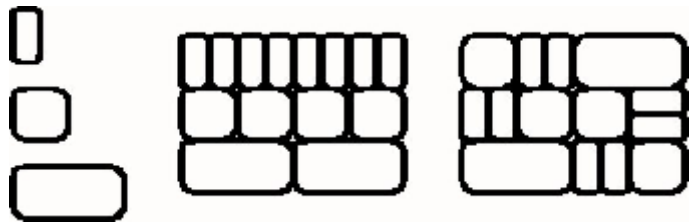
One- and two-year-old children enjoy carrying blocks around or piling them into a wagon and hauling them around. As they get older they enjoy piling blocks or organizing them on the floor. Three- and four-year-old children try making enclosures, bridges, and patterns with their blocks. They like to use their block buildings for dramatic play. Early school-age children enjoy using blocks in more and more complicated ways, creating little worlds of their own.

There is no other toy that children play with as much or for as long a time. So spend your money on blocks for your child. It is the best way to spend your toy dollar.

Here's what children learn when they are playing with blocks:

Block play teaches math and science skills. Blocks help children learn many subjects. Children learn shapes and a great deal about size. Young children develop math skills by counting, matching, sorting, grouping, adding, and subtracting blocks while they play. When children select blocks to fit in a space, they learn the meaning of half and whole and other spatial relationships such as area, length and weight. Children also learn to be comfortable with trial and error as they test out their block building ideas.

Block play improves reading and writing skills. By making pencils, markers, and paper available to children when they play with blocks, children can improve their writing skills by making signs for their buildings and drawing pictures of favorite block buildings.

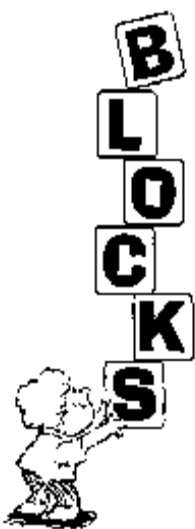


Block play teaches creativity and problem solving. Creative people have the ability to come up with new ideas. When children are building with blocks they practice coming up with new ideas. They must decide what they want to make. Block building gives children the chance to find solutions to problems and experiment with creating patterns.

Block play helps children learn social skills. Blocks invite children to work together. Children learn to get along with others and to feel good about working together. They learn that not all people have the same ideas.

Block play helps children develop emotionally. Children feel effective and powerful when they make large scale buildings. The pretend worlds that children create and play in gives children a chance to express strong feelings. Children can become frustrated and discouraged when block structures fall down. Through regular block play children can learn to cope with these feelings and continue their play. Because of the balance of satisfaction and frustration block building is a perfect way for children to build strong self-esteem.

Block play helps children develop physically. Children of all ages develop both large and small motor skills and eye-hand coordination when they play with blocks. As

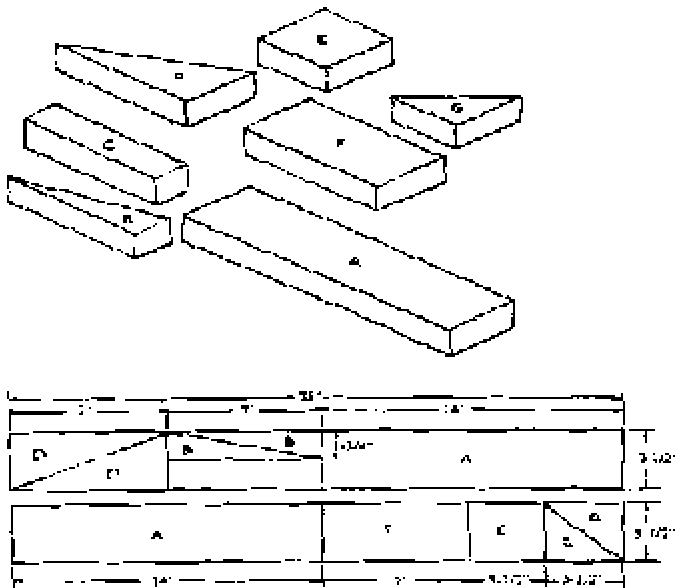


children learn to walk carefully around block structures, they improve their balance, control, and spatial awareness.

Make Your Own Wooden Blocks

You can make your own set of wooden unit blocks if you have basic woodworking skills. What you need is 2" x 4" lengths of wood. The picture below shows some ways you can cut out the wood to make small squares, rectangles, triangles and long blocks, all of the finished blocks will be 1½" deep and 3½" wide.

Sand the blocks very smooth. Children ages 4 and up may enjoy helping with this sanding. Soft woods (like pine) are less expensive and easier to cut and sand. But hard woods (like oak) are smoother when finished and will cause fewer splinters.



Talking with Children About Blocks

Talk with children about what they are making. Make sure you regularly use these words: square, rectangle, triangle, under, on top of, through, underneath, more than, and less than. We help children expand their vocabularies and learn about math by using these words with them as they play. One of the best and simplest ways to improve block play is to describe what the child has done. Here's how:

- Talk about the blocks the child has decided to use. "You used rectangle blocks." "You used three

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different types of blocks for your building - small, big columns and triangles."

- # Talk about how a child has arranged the blocks. "You put the blocks in a circle." "All of the blocks you are using are touching." "You made a space in the middle." "You put the long block on top of the columns, now the cars can go underneath the bridge." "Some of the blocks are standing up and some are lying down."
- # Talk about how two or more children are working together. "You are working together, Jessica is bringing the large blocks and Dylan is bringing the small square blocks."
- # Talk about the number of blocks used. "You decided to use 6 more big blocks on this new building."
- # Talk about balancing. "You were very careful when you put that little block on the top. You wanted to make sure it wouldn't fall."
- # We need to show children that we value their block structures, whether they represent specific things or not. Instead of asking a child, "What did you make?" start a conversation by saying, "Tell me about what you made." This type of question can get interesting conversation started.

You can use this type of conversation to expand children's thinking. Here's how: Ask questions to help children think carefully about the type of building they are working on. If a child is making an apartment building you might ask her, "How do people get to your building? Do they drive cars, ride bicycles, or buses?" This might get a child to add new features to her building. Help the child who wants to make a bus stop next to his apartment building for dramatic play.

One of Wisconsin's contributions to the world has been the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, which has influenced the way buildings around the world look today. Wright once said that his interest in designing buildings came from his early experience with wooden unit blocks. Inspire the genius in the preschooler playing on your own kitchen floor!

Source: Better Kid Care - Satellite Child Care Training Program, Penn State, April, 1999.

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