

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO CREATIVE BLOCK PLAY

Small Children Learn by Playing

A set of quality building blocks is a wonderfully unsophisticated, versatile and fun toy. This set of solid maple building blocks is based on a 1:2:4 proportion so that each block works with the other blocks in the set and are also interchangeable with other 1:2:4 unit block sets.

The 19th century founder of the kindergarten, Frederick Froebel, considered the basic building block a "divine gift". Early childhood educators say blocks are the single most important toy a young child can have and block play is the single most productive activity. Practically every preschool and elementary school classroom has a center for block play. The simple shapes and mathematical proportions teach children the fundamentals of architecture and design, engineering concepts, math concepts, spatial relationships and physics. World-famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright claimed that early block play sparked his lifelong passion for design.

How Does Creative Block Play Help a Child Learn?

Unit blocks involve the child as a whole - the way they move their muscles, the way they discover how different objects feel in their hands, the way they think about spaces and shapes and the way they develop thoughts and interests of their own. The following are some of the important learning centers stimulated by creative block play.

SOCIAL INTERACTION

Block play encourages children to make friends and share and may be a young child's first experience playing in a group. Older children work with others to solve problems using teamwork, cooperation and compromise.

PHYSICAL MOVEMENT AND COORDINATION

Block play involves movement of the whole body, developing gross and fine skills. Reaching for, picking up and fitting blocks together help children build strength in their fingers and hands and increase eye-hand coordination.

INTELLECTUAL STIMULATION

Blocks help children learn across many academic subjects. Young children increase their vocabularies as they learn to describe sizes, shapes and positions. Preschoolers and kindergartners develop math skills by grouping, patterning, adding, and subtracting. Spatial relationships are explored using concepts such as behind, in front, on top, etc... Older children make early experiments with concepts of physics such as gravity and balance and explore geometry using the proportional shapes of blocks. Math concepts are further explored with fractions, multiplication and division.

CREATIVE EXPERIMENTATION

Playing with blocks means no rules, no guidelines - only imagination. Children don't have to worry about "getting it right". Blocks give children the opportunity to create their own designs and the satisfaction of building structures that did not exist before they imagined them.

Developmental Stages and Block Play

Unit blocks are a good investment because children will enjoy them through many different stages of growth and development. Blocks provide quality play value for children of all ages and children will naturally progress from simply piling up the blocks and knocking them down to building houses complete with doors and windows using symmetrical designs.

INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Very young children enjoy simply feeling the blocks. As they develop more muscle control, toddlers will combine blocks, stack them or line them up. Toddlers may demonstrate their first attempts at building structures and show the beginnings of fantasy play. Even the smallest children enjoy the sound that two blocks make when clapped together and will squeal with delight at a toppling tower.

PRE-SCHOOL

Around the age of three, children learn how to balance the blocks and fit pieces together to build sturdier towers, then bridges and enclosures. Three and four year olds begin to recognize designs and patterns, their towers and buildings become works of art.

EARLY ELEMENTARY

In kindergarten and primary grades, blocks allow children to recreate structures, cities and landscapes from the world around them. Children in the early grades benefit greatly from the social interaction of working on a large block structure with other children.

Ideas for Creative Block Play

Children value their own block structures whether or not they represent specific things. Rather than asking a child, "What is it?" say, "Tell me about what you made." Ask your child questions and explore their creation with them. This will encourage a dialog and is a great way to introduce new vocabulary words, especially the names of the shapes they are using and the structures they are building.

- Suggest that your children create scenes with roads, buildings, parks and landscapes. Bring the scene to life with cars and trucks, dolls, action figures and stuffed animals.

Continued on reverse...

- Build a simple structure with your child and then encourage the child to improvise by modifying, expanding, shrinking, or embellishing the original structure,
- Supplement your set with wooden turnings from your local home center. These decorative pieces will add interest and variety to your set.
- Pattern recognition is an important pre-reading skill. Have your child create patterns using 2 or more different block pieces and then read the pattern to you. For example, placing triangles and squares in alternating patterns and having the child say triangle and square to describe the pattern.
- Use the blocks to make music. Try striking different pieces against each other. Different size pieces will make different sounds.
- A small child can pretend the blocks are cars, trucks, ambulances, etc. and will make sounds as they drive their pretend vehicle around on the floor.
- Ask your child to act out a favorite story using block play.
- Work with your child on spatial relationships such as in front of, behind, on top, inside, outside, etc...
- Your child will develop math skills as he or she counts

the blocks, sorts the shapes and identifies the fractional relationships between the blocks.

- Show your children that you are interested in what they are doing by getting involved. You'll have more fun than you think.
- Encourage creativity in everything your child does. Imagination and exploration stimulate all of the learning centers in the brain.

Care of Blocks and Lifetime Guarantee

As with all Maple Landmark toys, these blocks are guaranteed forever. To ensure safe, splinter-free fun for many years, the blocks must be kept in good condition. Clean by wiping them with a soft damp cloth and drying well. You can also sand any roughed up edges with sandpaper. See our website for guarantee details.

Additional Resources

Hirsch, E.S. 1996 The Block Book. (Third Ed.) Washington, DC

NAEYC. 1993. Block Play: Constructing Realities (video). Washington, DC

We would like to thank the National Association for the Education of Young Children for their participation in this Helpful Guide to Creative Block Play.

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