

Building in the Library

The Importance of Block Play

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Some libraries have had puzzles, toys, and blocks as part of their children's room offerings for more than twenty years. For others, the emphasis on play as one of Every Child Ready to Read's five practices has inspired them to add these to their collections.

Building with construction toys helps children develop many different skills—creative problem solving, engineering, learning through mistakes, language to communicate with others who are building with them, and exercising their imagination when explaining what the structure they have built is meant to be. They also may be matching colors, looking for patterns, using planning skills, learning patience and persistence, cooperating with others for group builds, having fun, and experiencing a boost in self-confidence when they finally succeed in building what they intended to build. Written materials specifically for children's librarians and early childhood educators explain the value of these activities and provide many developmental tips for parents and caregivers. Below are a few recommended resources.

"Ten Things Children Learn from Block Play"

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/mar2015/ten-things-children-learn-block-play>

Young Children is the publication of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The online March 2015 issue contains a few articles regarding block play; this one is a brief list that can easily be used as developmental tips for parents and caregivers.

"The Importance of Play, Particularly Constructive Play, in Public Library Programming"

http://www.ala.org/alsc/sites/ala.org.alsc/files/content/Play_formatted.pdf

ALSC's own Sue McCleaf Nespeca wrote this white paper that was adopted by ALSC's Board of Directors in 2012. Describing the stages of block play and how constructive play in library programming affects literacy and STEM skills, this paper also includes links to sources for blocks and bricks as well as recommended books, articles, and websites.

"Read! Build! Play!"

http://www.ala.org/alsc/sites/ala.org.alsc/files/content/Read-Build-Play_Librarian-Toolkit.pdf

"Read! Build! Play!" is a toolkit for librarians created by ALSC and LEGO DUPLO to develop early literacy in young children. It includes a booklist for a "Things that Go" Storytime, suggested questions to ask of children as they are building, and outreach program recommendations.

Block Play: Building a Foundation of Early Learning in the Library

<https://continuinged.isl.in.gov/block-play-building-a-foundation-of-early-learning-in-the-library-1-leu/>

<https://youtu.be/9Mxhr6dY3zI>

The Indiana State Library's Continuing Education Toolkit for Library Professionals provides access to this free, archived YouTube video that

describes how the Allen County (IN) Public Library tackled the challenge of adding more play, specifically block play, to their program offerings, giving recommendations to libraries big and small for adapting their initiative.

“Block Play”

<https://extension.msstate.edu/publications/block-play>

Written for caregivers by Dr. Louise Davis and Elizabeth Thorne from Mississippi State University Extension, this piece offers simple suggestions for creating a block center, making blocks, and supplementing block play. Suggestions for how to support block play with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are also provided.

Building Structures with Young Children

https://books.google.com/books/about/Building_Structures_with_Young_Children.html?id=VZLoCAAQBAJ&source=kp_book_description

Part of the Young Scientist Series by Ingrid Chalufour and Karen Worth, this science curriculum for children three to five years old has also published resources on discovering nature and exploring water with young children. Although designed for teachers, it offers useful background information on building and exploring science through play, along with guidance for creating impactful block play environments that can be incorporated into established block play areas, used to create a program series, or even shared with caregivers. Many chapters can be accessed via Google Books.¹

“Let’s Build!”

<https://www.pbs.org/parents/lets-build>

PBS Kids has assembled a number of building and engineering resources including building challenges and digital games for children ages two to eight, along with brief articles on how to support young learners.

“Five Ways to Build Reading Skills While Playing with Blocks”

<https://www.scholastic.com/parents/books-and-reading/raise-a-reader-blog/5-ways-to-build-reading-skills-while-playing-blocks.html>

This article by Christie Burnett on Scholastic’s website asserts, “Blocks are great for promoting literacy skills related to speaking,

listening, reading, and writing.” The piece shares five simple ways to promote literacy learning during block play, including using paper and pencil in block play, playing the “You Build, I Build” game, creating alphabet blocks, making a set of building challenge cards, and adding books to construction play, with a list of recommended books.

“The Role of the Teacher in Block Play”

<https://www.communityplaythings.com/resources/articles/2018/the-role-of-the-teacher-in-block-play/>

Community Playthings, a company that makes wooden play structures as well as blocks, also publishes articles that relate to the items they create and sell. This article addresses topics such as when the adult should insert themselves into the block play, how to respond to conflict in the block area, how to set up the environment to support block play, and effective strategies for cleanup time.

“‘They Want Toys to Get Their Children into Harvard’: Have We Been Getting Playthings All Wrong?”

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/nov/24/have-toys-got-too-brainy-how-playthings-became-teaching-aids-young-children>

The Guardian’s most recent piece on play by Alex Blasdel takes a historical look at the relationship between toys, play, and child development. The belief that educational toys need to be sophisticated to prepare children for school has permeated the early learning landscape and is at odds with a growing body of academic and market research. The results of a longitudinal study examining the relationship between toy type and the complexity of play are shared and assert the critical role open-ended toys, like blocks, play in developing cognitive, language, and social skills.²

Some public libraries even offer block-building programs. For instance, the Wright Memorial Public Library in Ohio runs early literacy programs called “Books and Blocks.” The Baltimore County Public Library in Maryland offers LEGO programs regularly, along with building with paper bag blocks. Museum-quality exhibits, like Block Party from the Omaha Children’s Museum, have also made their way into library spaces. &

References

1. Ingrid Chalufour and Karen Worth, *Building Structures with Young Children: Trainer’s Guide* (St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 2004).
2. Michael Rouleau, “Ten Years of TIMPANI: Annual Study

Investigates the Paradox of Play,” Eastern Connecticut University, February 1, 2020, https://www.easternct.edu/news/_stories-and-releases/2020/02-february/timpani.html.