BLOCK PLAY

Block Play is one of the most valuable play experiences available in an Early Years setting, providing opportunities for high-quality learning across all curricular areas.

As an open-ended resource, blocks support children to symbolically recreate their world through building and dramatic play. Blocks are a universal resource that all children can explore and experience success with, regardless of their developmental stage.

The area provides rich opportunities for children to engage in schematic play, especially enclosing, transportation and positioning.

7 STAGES OF BLOCK PLAY

The 7 Stages of Block Play demonstrate the steps that children progress through when learning with blocks.

Stage 1 - Carrying

During this introductory stage, children carry blocks around, exploring weight and using a variety of containers to transport blocks. At this stage, blocks are not necessarily used for construction. Block play promotes sensory exploration, with children tapping or hitting blocks together to create sound or investigating how the blocks feel and smell.

Stage 2 - Rows, Stacks & Towers

This is where building begins as children learn to stack blocks vertically in towers and horizontally in rows. Children may stack blocks for the sole purpose of knocking them down.

Stage 3 - Bridging

Children begin to create simple bridges, bridging the space between two upright blocks with a third block. This opens up greater possibilities for children to extend their buildings and creations.

Stage 4 - Enclosures

Purposefully lining-up blocks to enclose a space, starting with four blocks and eventually moving onto circles, ovals and joined enclosures. Children develop cognitive understanding of spatial orientation, as they develop knowledge of which way to turn blocks in order to create these enclosures. Adding small world animals, people, or natural loose parts can extend children's play.

Stage 5 - Patterns & Symmetry

Children show more imagination in their building and incorporate balance, patterns and symmetry into their creations. Selection of blocks becomes more intentional and the number of blocks used increases.

Stage 6 - Naming Structures

Demonstrating their mastery of basic block building skills, children create structures which they can assign meaning to and name. The naming of these will typically reflect the purpose and function of the building that will then be used to enhance role-play.

Stage 7 - Later Representations

At this final stage, children create representations of places and buildings that they know from either real-life or stories. Children can often be seen planning and designing their creations before building starts. More intricate and actual details from known structures are incorporated into their designs.

CURRICULAR & DEVELOPMENTAL

Health & Wellbeing

As children stack, balance and make blocks work together successfully, they enhance their coordination, gross and fine-motor skills.

Block play enables children to build self-esteem and feel a sense of achievement as they complete their designs and tell stories around their creations.

Through learning to assess and manage risk, children develop understanding of how to protect themselves and others, navigate space, and learn safety rules that can reduce potential harm.

Alongside independent play, children develop social skills such as cooperation, sharing, patience and resilience.

Literacy

Exploring a variety of media – such as books, images and technology – can help children gather useful information to plan their ideas and serve as a point of reference throughout the building process.

Within block play, children can explore mark-making and writing using various materials as they play, label and record their thoughts and ideas.

Block Play supports the extension of existing vocabulary, providing opportunities to explore new vocabulary that can be used to talk about creations with others.

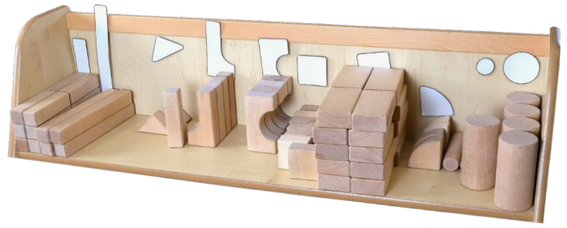
Maths & Numeracy

Block play helps children develop problem-solving skills through opportunities to test limits, think critically, and discuss strategies and solutions.

Children can explore mathematical concepts, such as number, fractions, positional language and 2D/3D shapes.

Exploration of size and measurement concepts introduces mathematical language. For example, "*big*, *bigger* and *biggest*" when comparing tower sizes.

Playing with blocks enables exploration of patterns and symmetry alongside enhanced spatial awareness.



The provision of shape shadows or block images on storage shelves can support the early exploration of matching and sorting.

Other

Block play affords freedom to discover and choose ways to be creative using various materials.

Through role-play and retelling stories around both real and imaginary situations, children can engage in and lead their own dramatic play.

Children can explore and discover different ways to document their ideas. For example, using a digital camera to record their model that represents their experience of the world around them.

Block play supports children to recognise engineering in the world around them as they plan and create bridges, towers and buildings.

ROLE OF THE ADULT

By using high-quality interactions and open-ended questions, practitioners can scaffold learning, supporting development of children's creative thinking and problem-solving skills.

Practitioners should understand and value potential learning opportunities, including the 7 Stages of Block Play and different forms of schematic play. They should use observations to effectively plan and support children's development, introducing resources and materials to help extend learning.

Adults should support children to evaluate risk and adopt a risk-benefit approach. For example, helping children risk-assess how to build a tower safely.

ROOM STRUCTURE & LAYOUT

The Block Play area is likely to be one of the largest in the playroom. It should include adequate space for children to move freely and be creative.

Blocks should be easily accessible, stored and organised in a way that supports choice and independence. Consideration should be given to the amount and range of blocks on offer to allow for the creation of complex models.

Block play can generate 'purposeful noise.' Therefore, it's important to remain mindful of areas adjacent to the space. Thought should be given to which areas would benefit from being close by, such as Small World or Small Construction, both of which can help to extend play.

There should be opportunities to engage in Block play both indoors and outdoors. Settings may have separate blocks for outdoors or allow children to transport them from indoors.

RESOURCE IDEAS

Wooden blocks with a natural finish
A variety of blocks ranging from large, medium to small. For example, unit blocks, large and small hollow blocks
Natural loose parts: twigs, shells, logs, stones, pinecones, wooden pegs, cotton reels, curtain rings, bike tyres, decking strips, cardboard tubes and guttering
Cable reels in a variety of sizes
Scarves and large pieces of material
Tape measures and spirit levels
Clipboards, pens, pencils, blank and graph paper
Reference books, inspirational images and plans
Small world resources: people, cars and animals

REFLECTION POINTS

- Is there a good range and sufficient number of high-quality blocks on offer?
- Taking into consideration any schemas that may be present, is the space large enough to allow several children to build simultaneously?
- In what ways can practitioners promote gender equality and encourage all children to engage with the Block Play area?
- Are children supported to risk assess when building higher, wider or longer creations? Are all practitioners in the team consistent in their approach?
- To what extent are practitioners mindful of the way that their language can impact upon children's creativity? For instance, saying to a child *"if you take all of those blocks out, you'll have to put them away"* can discourage children before they've even started building.