

## A UNIQUE CHILD BLOCK PLAY



Seb has built the wooden structure and road track, thinking about what are the best pieces to use. He tells his mother he needs a 'partner' for the

half-brick he holds in his hand. When the work is complete, he drives toy cars along the track to a narrow tunnel which they fit through perfectly.

### PRACTICE IN PICTURES

# Stage design

Block play allows a child to mix creativity with mathematical problem-solving, says *Anne O'Connor*

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Seb, aged three, is playing at home with his mother. He has built a structure out of wooden bricks and has added a road track, cars and small-world figures to his building. His mother responds to his directions as he creates a dramatic scenario for their play. He talks about what he is doing and his reasons, describing his thought processes as he finds a better brick for the fireman's pole and when he is hunting for exactly the right brick to fill in the gap along the top.

He knows he needs a matching 'half-brick' to create the right hexagonal shape and tells his mother he is looking for a 'partner' for the one that he has in his hand.

When the building work is completed, he drives cars along the road to the tunnel and dictates to his mother (the gatekeeper) the words that she must use before the cars are allowed forward. She is uncertain whether the car can fit through the tunnel, but Seb judges it with perfect accuracy.

### GOOD PRACTICE

**Playing with bricks is an activity that all children enjoy and is valuable for their learning.**

In this brief play sequence, Seb is using his creativity and imagination to invent a dramatic scenario as well as employing mathematical and spatial awareness to solve problems and test out his hunches.

The work of the Froebel Blockplay Research Group and the resulting book *Exploring Learning: Young children and blockplay* (Paul Chapman) are very valuable resources in helping us understand the importance of children's block play.

Ideally, most settings will have available a complete set of unit blocks, but Seb is playing here with the random mix of building and alphabet blocks that children are more likely to have in their homes.

The Froebel block play project has helped practitioners and parents to appreciate the importance of blocks as

creative learning tools and as 'objects to think with' (Gura 1992 p11).

**2 One of the ways that children 'think' with blocks is to use them as 'stage design' for their dramatic and imaginative play.**

Seb does this here with his construction that is part fire station and part car park, complete with a knight on horseback at the entrance! Children will describe and name their structures (as Seb does) and talk about what is taking place in the scenario. But not all brick play is about scene setting.

Some children prefer to make shapes and configurations with blocks that seem to be more about pattern than about story. The Froebel research describes examples of 'patterners' and 'dramatists', as well as a third group who were able to mix the two styles. What is clear from the research is that children need lots of

opportunities for 'pure' block play in order to become competent users of blocks and to be able to develop their ideas through them.

**3 We can also see evidence in Seb's play of what the researchers call 'visual harmony'.**

Seb knows how he wants his structure to look and uses specific shapes to create it. When he runs out of the required bricks he knows how to fit two together to make the same shape. He calls the one he has in his hand a 'partner' and hunts around until he finds the other one to match. He can then put them together to create the desired shape and is satisfied with the end result.

The Froebel block play researchers looked at this element of naming bricks. Using the unit blocks, they were able to describe them in ways that related to their 'form' rather than their function, so as not to influence the children's perceptions of them. They described how they struggled and negotiated to find terms they all agreed on and how they recognised the way that children do this also 'in order for them to learn to translate the language of everyday discourse into the language of mathematics' (Gura 1992 p96).

Not only is it clear what Seb means, but we also get an understanding of how his language as a whole is developing. He is able to make use of a word with quite a complex meaning because he has experience of it in one

context and feels confident in applying it to another. As his experience widens and his vocabulary develops further, he will arrive at alternative and more mathematical language, but his ability to express his conceptual understanding at this age is impressive.

**4 Seb has chosen to include a selection of other toys in his block play.**

He has used a plastic road construction set and incorporated cars and small-world figures into the 'set design' for his play scenario. Mixing scale and resources like this provides creative stimulus and can also provide realistic opportunities for problem solving.

Seb has created a bridge with blocks over the road. One of his cars is bigger than the others. Will it fit under the bridge? His mother is dubious – from where she's sitting she thinks it won't make it. But Seb's play experiences have helped build his developing spatial awareness and he is prepared to test his theory. He has the satisfaction of proving his mother wrong and goes on to test the bridge with more cars.

**5 Seb's mother is his playmate in this play sequence and he is very much in charge of the play, directing the scenario and the role play involved.**

Having alongside a sensitive adult



### REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- 'All about...block play', *Nursery World*, 5 April 2007
- *Exploring Learning: Young children and block play*, edited by Pat Gura with the Froebel Blockplay Research Group directed by Tina Bruce (Paul Chapman)
- 'Stacking up' by Daniel Spry, Pauline Latchford and Annabel Hollis, *Nursery World*, 8 September 2010
- [www.communityplaythings.co.uk](http://www.communityplaythings.co.uk)

who is 'tuned in' to the child's interests and motivations is about more than just moving the learning forward. The opportunity to take charge and feel 'listened to' builds confidence and self-worth for Seb, and the warm reciprocity between the two of them affirms the nurturing and 'feel-good' element of the play experience.

His mother's interest and enthusiasm in the scenario he has created confirms for Seb that what interests him is worthwhile and of value.

**6 Practitioners who play alongside and get involved with children's block play help raise the status of what can still sometimes be overlooked as an important area of learning.**

Researchers and practitioners who have taken a close interest in block play have found that their heightened interest has also increased the motivation and enthusiasm of children (and their parents) towards block play, as it gave the clear message that block play is always worthwhile and something to be valued. ■



### LINKS TO THE EYFS

- **UC 1.1** Child Development
- **PR 3.3** Supporting Learning
- **EE 3.2** Supporting Every Child
- **EE 3.3** The Learning Environment
- **L&D 4.1** Play and Exploration
- **L&D 4.2** Active Learning