

Playing with Blocks

The Building Blocks for Early Learning

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Visit any toy store and you'll find rows upon rows of "educational" products with electronic lights and sounds, yet the humble building block can be just as entertaining and teach children many valuable lessons. This classic toy helps them develop hand-eye coordination as well as math, science, creative thinking, language and social skills.

Getting Ready to Write

When young children use their "pincers," by pinching their index finger and thumb together, they are developing the skills they will later use with writing tools. Encourage your child to pick up blocks using his or her "pincers" and stack them on top of one another to build a tower. Playing blocks with your child increases his or her fine-motor skills and hand-eye coordination.

Learning Math and Science

Building toys teaches children about shape, color and counting. Blocks also can teach children lessons in measurement, such as short and tall. Talk to your child using math and science words when asking for a block. For example, say, "May I please have the short, red cylinder?" Use clean-up time for more learning, by saying: "If you put away all the tall cylinders, I'll put away the short ones."

Thinking Outside the Block

Children need to manipulate and organize blocks to create something. Their imaginations help them to solve problems and create. These skills can be supported

by asking your child to build multiple structures with the same set of building materials. Take pictures of each structure, then talk to your child about how they are similar and unique. Support your child's creativity by having him or her combine different building materials and other toys, such as Lego building blocks, miniature cars and stuffed animals, in his or her play.

Starting Conversations

Playing with other children or adults provides children with opportunities to practice their communication skills. Help their language development by letting them take the lead in the building. Use math and science terms when you ask your child where he or she would like you to put a certain piece. As the play progresses, ask him or her to tell you a story about the structure, who lives there and what they like to do inside.

Encouraging Problem-Solving Social Skills

Sharing blocks during play promotes interactive social skills. Block play motivates children to talk to playmates to obtain blocks, discuss what and how something should be built and how to compromise so that a structure can be completed. Demonstrate how to take turns when you are playing with your child. For example, "I can tell you want to use the yellow dump truck. I'm playing with it right now to carry my blocks to my construction site, but I'll drive it over to your building when I'm done."

About the Author

Celia Chang Takahashi is the Oahu coordinator for Good Beginnings Alliance (GBA). GBA is dedicated to initiating and organizing efforts toward the creation of a coordinated statewide system of support and services that ensures all children in Hawaii are safe, healthy and ready to succeed. Visit goodbeginnings.org for more information.