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Fostering Social Development Through Block Play

by Dwight L. Rogers

Playing with blocks can help develop social skills and give children an opportunity to practice positive behavior.

Blocks have been described as the “most important” material found in the preschool or kindergarten classroom (Benish, 1978; Starks, 1960). They are “nonthreatening” and more desirable for children who feel uncomfortable with messy materials such as clay and finger paints (Cartwright, 1974).

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Blocks’ adaptable qualities provide children with “opportunities for growth” and the choice of playing alone or with a group (Starks, 1960).

According to Hirsch (1984), block play promotes the development of numerous cognitive skills such as spatial awareness, problem solving, decision making, and an understanding of part-whole relationships. In addition, it reinforces the concept of number and promotes language development. Balance, hand-eye coordination, and small and large motor control are examples of

physical skills developed during block play. The uniqueness of the form and function of blocks offers children the opportunity to create something concrete of their very own. This in turn may facilitate the development of a positive self concept.

Although much has been written for teachers about the educational value of block play for stimulating cognitive and physical development, little has been written regarding the relationship between playing with blocks and the development of social skills. However,

the research suggests that block play has the potential to foster positive social exchanges between young children. Whereas many teachers refuse to let their children play with blocks because they believe there is too much antisocial behavior during block play, Rogers (1985) found that kindergarten children playing with both large hollow and unit blocks exhibited much higher incidences of positive social behavior than negative social behavior. These children in this study seldom threatened, hit, or threw blocks at another child. There was almost no crying or screaming and they never engaged in physical fights. Comparing a composite of behaviors classified as prosocial (comfort, help, and give) to a composite of behaviors classified as aggressive (hit, threat, and take), the prosocial behavior was three times as likely to occur as the aggressive behavior during large hollow block play and twice as likely to occur as the aggressive behavior during the children's play with unit blocks. Bender (1978) observed four-year-old boys playing with large hollow blocks. Her findings showed evidence of peer cooperation and disputes settled without teacher intervention when an adequate supply of blocks were available to the children. In another naturalistic observational study, Kinsman and Berk (1979) observed 37 preschool and kindergarten children during play situations in the block and housekeeping areas. They reported a "very low" occurrence of "negative affect" in the block area.

Although Bender (1978), Kinsman and Berk (1979), and Rogers (1985) observed a comparatively small number of young children, it would appear that the results of these studies represent the potential for positive interaction occurring during block play. As Yarrow and Waxler (1976) indicated, preschool children are at least as prosocial as they are aggressive during their "free-choice time" and their prosocial behavior varies depending on the setting. Therefore, since young children appear to exhibit at least equal amounts of prosocial versus aggressive behavior during most preschool free-choice activities, blocks may provide a greater opportunity for a child to be-

have in a prosocial or altruistic fashion than do other free-choice activities.

Along with the probability of positive social interaction occurring during block play, Kinsman and Berk (1979) emphasized that the block area also has the flexibility to meet "a variety of children's needs from retreat, withdrawal, and absorption in private activity to active group participation and cooperative efforts of other children" (p. 71). It appears that block play allows children the choice of which level of social participation they wish to engage in while simultaneously encouraging cooperative or group play. In other words, blocks seem to provide a forum which gently promotes group play situations while still allowing the socially immature child the opportunity to participate near other children in a parallel or solitary fashion. Group play offers children the chance to develop and practice social skills through interpersonal interaction, while parallel play affords children the chance to acquire appropriate social skills through observation and imitation.

Learning Social Skills

Young children are highly influenced by the positive social interactions of their peers and tend to imitate prosocial behavior while spurning the antisocial acts of other children (Hartup & Coates, 1967; Vaughn & Waters, 1980). Therefore, the block area would appear to be a place where social development could be facilitated because children have the opportunity to observe the predominantly positive social exchanges of others. In addition to the chance for children to observe positive social behavior, the prosocial nature of block play also provides opportunities to practice positive peer interaction. According to Charlesworth and Hartup (1967), young children will reinforce the positive behavior of their peers by "rewarding" those prosocial children through friendly social responses to their actions. Similarly, children will discourage antisocial behavior of others by "punishing" (through negative social responses and exclusion from play) those children acting in a socially inappropriate manner.

Forman and Hill (1980) endorsed the use of block play to promote social

development. They believed a child's relationship to the physical world may help that child make "more accurate judgments about the social world" (p. 68). For example, if a child realizes that her blocks can stand on end in the same manner as the blocks that another child is using, then she will not feel the need to take the other child's blocks.

Further support for blocks as a medium for enhancing social development is set forth by Honig (1982), who suggested that children need "opportunities to respond to real victims in situations of distress or misfortune where the child can offer sympathy and actively participate in helping" (p. 61). Blocks provide young children with these opportunities to respond to "real victims." During block play a child may be left out of a group building project or her block structure may be accidentally or purposely knocked down. These situations provide children the chance to help another child in "distress."

Children must also engage in "social problem" solving when playing with blocks. For example, they must make decisions — who will get the last triangular block, what to say or do to Sam after he kicks down Jeff's building. In addition, block play often puts children in many "forced cooperation" situations in which they must either share some of the blocks and build together or forfeit constructing the grandiose structure they had planned to build. They learn to share out of necessity and self-interest, but in the process gain an understanding of how sharing and cooperation can be beneficial to other children and to themselves.

Unit and Large Hollow Blocks

The unit and large hollow blocks referred to above are made of hardwood and are primarily rectangular shaped. They are commonly found in many preschool, day care, and kindergarten classrooms. Large hollow blocks are much larger and heavier than unit blocks. The standard unit block is 5½" × 1⅜" and weighs only a few ounces, while the standard large hollow block is 24" × 12" × 6" and weighs several pounds. A young child can easily trans-

port and manipulate several unit blocks at a time, but some children require the assistance of another child when transporting or building with large hollow blocks. The large hollow blocks are big enough for children to make structures that they can actually crawl into or climb. Unlike large hollow blocks, the unit block set contains a variety of differently shaped blocks as well as rectangular and triangular shaped blocks.

The difference in the size and weight of these two types of blocks appears to contribute to differences in the social behavior of children playing with each type. To encourage positive social development the availability of both types of blocks is suggested because it gives children the chance to engage in all levels of social play. Although group play predominates with both types of blocks, solitary and parallel play are more likely to occur with unit blocks than with large hollow blocks (Rogers, 1985). However, children appear to have more opportunity to practice their social interaction skills with large hollow blocks because group play seems to occur more frequently with them.

Aggressive behavior is less likely to happen during either type of block play if an adequate supply of blocks and enough space to build is provided by the teacher. The block literature recommends two distinct block areas with about 500 to 700 unit blocks and 70 large hollow blocks for an average kindergarten or preschool class (Hirsch, 1984). Any more than five or six children using this number of blocks at once would probably lessen the chances of positive social interaction.

Sex Differences

The findings from studies investigating the question of sex difference in participation in the block areas suggest that girls enjoy playing with blocks as much as boys do. Girls often do not get a chance to play because the boys tend to dominate the block areas and claim them as their "turf." Although Varma (1980) initially reported that boys played more frequently with blocks than did girls, she later found that girls spent more time with blocks after they were given equal access to block play by doubling the number of

blocks and opening a new block area. Rogers (1985) found where equal access to blocks was assured through mixed-sex grouping of children, no sex differences were found for the amount of time children spent playing in the two block areas. Therefore, it is suggested that because of the probability of boys dominating the blocks, implementation of measures to ensure girls' equal access to the block areas may be necessary.

Grouping Children

Unfortunately, just providing opportunities for peer social interaction for both boys and girls through unit and large hollow block play may not be enough. The teacher or caregiver may need to facilitate the development of the less socially competent children through a variety of teacher-directed activities and play-intervention strategies. The teacher should begin by observing and identifying those children who are socially inept and those who appear to interact positively with their peers. She then may want to attempt to enhance the less socially developed children by grouping them with their more socially competent peers.

As stated above children exposed to altruistic peer models were found to exhibit more prosocial behavior than those children not exposed to these models (Hartup & Coates, 1967). Vaughn and Waters (1980) and Moore (1981) claimed that the behaviors of the most socially competent children are most often watched and imitated, whereas the aggressive or antisocial acts of the less socially competent children are usually rejected or ignored by their peers. It follows that one strategy for promoting positive social behavior would be for teachers to assign children who exhibit inappropriate social skills to block play groups consisting of more socially competent children. There may be some reluctance on the part of many teachers to intervene in children's play, and if children are engaged in positive sociodramatic play, they should not intervene. However, often less socially competent children have little opportunity to observe and interact with their more socially developed peers. Therefore, grouping antisocial children with those who are more

socially competent may help promote positive social development for children lacking in prosocial skills. At the same time, these groups may help ensure that both the socially competent and the socially inept child would be exposed to just enough "social conflict situations" to create opportunities for the type of social problem solving with "real victims" that Honig (1982) claimed are so important for continued prosocial development in all children. Grouping is also one way of providing girls with opportunities for prosocial development by assuring them equal access to the block areas (Rogers, 1985). Finally, as Rogers and Ross (1986) suggested, grouping children with limited or inappropriate social negotiation strategies with peers who are highly skilled social negotiators may improve the negotiation skills of the less competent children.

After grouping children, teachers should carefully observe the group to determine if the size and composition is such that positive social interaction is occurring. If not, then try regrouping some of the children, changing the numbers and the individuals who make up the group. This may take time and experimentation until groups are formed which have the right social dynamics to encourage positive social interaction.

Stimulating Positive Social Interaction

If grouping does not appear to enhance a child's development of positive social skills, then a more direct form of teacher intervention may be necessary. Smilansky (1971) and Christie (1982) offered instructive suggestions to teachers as to how to identify socially inept children and help them learn how to interact with other children in play situations. The following is an example adapted from Smilansky (1971) of how a teacher might encourage social interaction for a child who is often found playing alone with small cars: The teacher could say, "How is your car running today?" The child might answer, "Fast" or "Bad." To which the teacher may say, "You know, no matter how well my car is running I always have the oil changed," or "If you are

having problems, you better have your engine checked.” Then the teacher could, building on the child’s lead, take this child to the block area where some “mechanics” are busy working on cars in the garage they built. The teacher might then say, “Tell this mechanic what kind of oil you use and how much you need,” or “Tell this mechanic what’s wrong with your car.” Now the teacher would stop her intervention, step back, and observe to see if the children included this child in their play.

If the child begins to play and interact with the group, then the child needs no more help from the teacher at this point. However, if the child still doesn’t interact, the teacher should get directly involved in the play situation, playing with the children structuring the play to encourage interaction and at the same time modeling appropriate social behavior. As soon as the child begins to interact with the other children, the teacher should step out of the play situation.

Rogers and Ross (1986) stressed that the use of intervention strategies does not negate the need for interaction free of adult intervention. Intervention helps children learn the skills and attitudes necessary to negotiate relationships more effectively. However, as Mead (1930) noted, individuals grow through conflict, through frustration, and through the confrontation of problems. Minimally supervised block play provides a context in which such growth can occur, in which children can test the validity and worth of skills and attitudes learned in other ways. The opportunity to practice social interaction with equals is not enough to assure that children will learn to negotiate identity and relationships successfully, but it is vitally necessary. Developing skills without the opportunity to practice them and judge their effectiveness is fruitless.

Conclusion

The development of children’s social skills is a vital part of any preschool, child care, or kindergarten curriculum. Research suggests that providing young children with opportunities to play with unit or large hollow blocks with their peers may be an excellent

means of enhancing positive social interaction because these materials appear to stimulate prosocial behavior. Block play also seems to promote social development by providing the less socially competent child with the chance to participate in the same activity as his or her more socially adept peers. Because prosocial behavior is likely to occur and children have the choice of engaging in either solitary, parallel, or group play, the block area offers many opportunities for positive social behavior to be modeled, observed, and practiced by young children. Conversely, occasional occurrences of antisocial acts during block play may also enhance social skills development by providing children with the chance to practice social negotiation and the opportunity to respond altruistically to others who are victimized by their peers.

There are a wide variety of teaching strategies and activities that teachers and caregivers of young children can use to promote positive social interaction. This article provides early childhood educators with information about the potential for encouraging children’s social development through large hollow and unit block play. Teachers hopefully will take this information and try to apply it to their own teaching situations by adapting, adjusting, and refining the recommendations to meet the needs of the children in their classrooms. However, it is important to recognize that although the research does suggest that block play may promote positive social interaction and opportunities for children to observe and practice social skills, not every child’s social development will be enhanced by playing with blocks. Children have very different interests and needs, and a good teacher responds to each child individually in a manner uniquely designed to help that child.

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