

block play: it's not just for boys anymore

Strategies for encouraging girls' block play

by Barb Tokarz

It is center time in the four-year-old class. Groups of boys and girls are busily engaged in play in the dramatic play, the art center, the library, discovery center, and with table games. The teacher notes that since she has changed the dramatic play area to an ice cream parlor, boys as well as girls are enjoying creating and serving 'frozen treats' for their friends. However, an area of ongoing concern is that the block center has only boys playing in it once again. Two girls stand on the perimeter, looking at the skyscraper that the boys are building and appearing as if they would like to join in. However, the boys are using most of the blocks and are so involved in their building that they don't acknowledge the girls, so the girls move on to the art center where they begin painting at the easels.

As teachers of young children, most of us have seen this situation, with some variation, played out in our classrooms.



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The absence of girls in the block center concerns early childhood educators because block play provides valuable opportunities for expanding language, social, cognitive, and motor skills. Lucy Sprague Mitchell (as cited in Hirsch, 1996) best describes the importance of block play in saying, "Blocks have been found to be the most useful tool for self-education that young children can play or work with." This information makes us question how block play became primarily a boys' activity. What steps can we take as teachers to encourage girls to become involved in block play?

Choosing play activities

When it comes to choosing the block center for play, the decision seems to be based to a large extent on gender and what toys are considered appropriate for boys and girls. This attitude is based primarily on society's gender expectations. Although there have been great strides made towards equality in recent years, gender stereotypes die hard. Louise Derman-Sparks (1993) believes that although a child's gender is determined at conception, society has a significant impact in ascribing gender roles to children. This process begins during pregnancy, as traits are ascribed to the unborn child based upon cultural

perceptions. Babies who are more active and kick frequently in the womb are thought to be boys; a quieter child is thought to be a girl. After birth, parents decorate and choose clothing for the child based on gender expectations.

Children are socialized into what is considered to be gender appropriate behavior: the toys, activities, and playmates that are appropriate for each gender.

- Boys, who in our culture are perceived to be more active and assertive, gravitate toward activities that are deemed to be more appropriate for them, such as woodworking, blocks, and active outdoor play.
- Girls frequently gravitate toward traditional female activities, such as housekeeping, puzzles, drawing, and books.
- Even when girls are interested in joining in block building and outdoor activities, they are often discouraged by boys through their words and actions (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002).
- In addition, girls see few women in the building and construction trades

which reinforces their belief that these are boys' activities.

Research tells us that by age 4, children are strongly influenced by their perception of society's expectations, often establishing firm boundaries around gender roles and segregating their play groups around gender (Teaching Tolerance Project, 1997).

Styles of block play: Is there a difference between genders?

There are variations in the interaction and play styles between boys and girls that will help teachers understand their behavior in the block center and will encourage increased participation by girls.

- Anderson (1998) characterizes the play behavior of girls by the use of enabling styles of conversation which tend to acknowledge, express agreement, and support what their partner is doing.
- Boys, however, are more oriented to the issues of competition and are focused on getting more than their share of the resources, using their speech as a way to get play partners to withdraw.

Sluss and Stremmek (2004) observed in their study of peer collaboration in the block center that girls were supported by not only the play level of their peers but by the level of social interaction. Girls engaged in almost double the number of assisting behaviors during play (making statements such as "if we need more, we can get them") in comparison to boys. As a result, they were able to scaffold the play behavior of a less experienced peer and their play became more collaborative as a result. When girls entered a play situation (Sluss & Stremmek, 2004) with girls they did not know, they spent a few minutes interacting socially as opposed

to boys, who engaged in play immediately.

Based upon research and observations of girls in block play, girls use blocks as a way to represent and extend their role in the world. In Rejskind's (1988) discussion of Block's Theory of Gender Specialization, he describes Block's view of girls as creative assimilators of information who are oriented to their social structures, strive for continuity, and support accepted values. As girls play with blocks, they engage in many of the behaviors that they have been socialized into: supporting; affirming; giving assistance; and, as a result, they develop strong interpersonal skills. Many of the structures that girls build — such as houses, stores, offices, and churches — are associated with the familiar world that they are a part of and whose structure they support.

Boys on the other hand are seen by Block as being creative accommodators who create new schemes and who are curious and ready to explore. When boys play with blocks, they are focused on the task of building and tend to be unaffected by the communication of another peer. Sluss and Stremmel (2004) have noted that boys often play with their own materials in isolation because they are so focused on their work. Much of boys' block play is focused on creating more elaborate structures and finding innovative uses for materials.

The many benefits of block play

Blocks are a valuable learning tool that grow with children. As children use blocks to construct and represent their experiences in daily living, they grow across all developmental domains.

Social-Emotional:

Block play encourages children to make friends, share, take turns, and cooperate.

Children learn to take the perspective of others as they exchange ideas about how to build a structure. Children learn to care for materials and follow safety rules.

Physical:

- Children's small muscles develop as they place blocks to make intricate structures.
- Children gain strength in large muscles as they lift, carry, and stack blocks.
- Children increase eye-hand coordination as they reach for and carefully place a block in a structure exactly where they want it.

Language Development:

- Children increase their vocabularies as they have conversations about their structures, and they learn new words to describe sizes, shapes, and positions.
- Children develop writing skills as they create signs for their buildings.

Cognitive Skills:

- Block building increases the opportunities for children to problem solve and develop understandings that lead to logical thinking.
- Block building helps children strengthen symbolization and representation skills that are the basis for using and understanding the symbol systems of language and math.
- Children develop skills across a wide variety of content areas, for example:
- Children develop **math skills** as they learn about sizes, shapes, order, patterns, weight, length, and fractions.

- As children work with blocks, they learn the **science concepts** of balance and gravity.
- As children create structures that resemble the world around them, they increase their understanding of **social studies**.

Ways to include girls in block play

Since many girls avoid the block area, teachers have to make a special effort to include them. Many girls lack experience with blocks and may not know how to get started. In addition, they may be functioning at an earlier developmental stage in block building than boys of the same age (Dodge et al., 2002). By following these suggestions teachers will find that girls who are hesitant to join in activities with blocks may overcome their initial reluctance and become actively engaged.

- Communicate the message that all children may play in all of the learning centers in your classroom.
- Locate the block corner next to dramatic play. Children who are going shopping, to school, or to the doctors may come into the block center to build a car to travel in, or to build a structure that becomes the store or school. Allow children to borrow materials from dramatic play to bring into the block corner to support and enrich their play. Choose a time when the block center is not crowded and invite some girls to come in and play with you. Sit on the floor with them and begin building, asking open-ended questions, and supporting them in problem solving if the need arises. Dodge (2002) has indicated that girls feel more comfortable playing with blocks if the center has props to support and extend their play

and allow them to represent their understanding of their world.

- Some programs have instituted a 'Girls Only' block time where girls are coached in ways to use blocks to help develop block-building skills. When girls have mastered block-building skills, then they are encouraged to work in co-ed teams of three or four. In a literature review, Varma also encourages a separate area if possible in addition to the already existing block area where girls will not feel overpowered by boys.
- Display pictures of people in non-traditional occupations to counteract gender stereotypes: girls as construction workers and builders and boys as nurses, librarians, and caregivers.
- Select literature that supports the idea of women in building and construction. *Mothers Can do Anything* by Joe Lasker is a good resource.
- Add play props that appeal to girls such as plastic dollhouse furniture, multicultural figurines, and plastic animals. Include colored markers and paper so children can make signs and decorate their structures.

While block play is essential for both boys' and girls' social, cognitive, language, and motor development, girls do not engage in block play as frequently as boys. This situation can be attributed to the socialization process — children learn societal expectations for behavior and materials for both boys and girls — lack of experience for girls with blocks, and attitudes of peers that cause girls to feel unwelcome in the block center. There are important differences in the way boys and girls play with blocks; girls use blocks to create an extension of their place in the world whereas boys are often more intent on the creation of structures and the innovative use of

materials. Teachers need to be supportive and encouraging of girls to increase participation in the block center and to use diverse strategies to insure that girls gain the important skills that are associated with block play.

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Children's books

Branley, Franklin M. (1996). *Air is All Around You*. New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell. (Ages 3-6.) A scientist who experiments with air is a woman.

Burton, Virginia. (1943). *Mike Mulligan and his Steamshovel*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin. (Ages 3-7.) Mike and his steamshovel MaryAnn work as equal partners to dig a new town hall.

Klein, Norma. (1997). *Girls Can be Anything*. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company. (Ages 5-8.) Marina, along with help from her parents, shows her friend Adam that girls as well as boys can do a variety of jobs.

McPhail, David. (1991). *Annie and Company*. New York: Henry Holt. (Ages 6-9.) Annie, with her tool kit in the wagon, sets out to fix whatever needs it. The main character shows resourcefulness as she solves many problems.

