



By Karen Stephens

Block Play Activities for Home, Child Care, or School

Blocks are a versatile, entertaining children's toy that's educational, too. Children enjoy playing with blocks whether at home or child care. For classroom use, a sturdy set of wooden blocks, called *unit* blocks, is best. They come in natural wood and are smoothly sanded and preserved to prevent splinters. Unit blocks come in many sizes, each size based on a multiple of the basic unit block. That makes playing with unit blocks a great way to introduce kids to *hands on* learning. Unit blocks allow children to explore adding, subtracting, and even multiplying and dividing; all while having fun creating buildings.

To give creativity free reign, a typical early childhood classroom may have 200 to 400 different shapes and sizes of unit blocks. They are usually purchased at children's educational toy stores or from catalogs that specialize in early childhood classroom products. Your local child care director can give you excellent referrals.

But for home play, kids don't need hundreds of blocks. That's the good news, because most home budgets can't afford the price tag! If that's your situation, don't give up. With some ingenuity on your part, your children can still reap the many benefits of playing with blocks.

First, put in a request for a beginner's set of blocks on the children's holiday wish list that you give to family and friends. Second, take the time to make affordable homemade blocks of your own. Making a *homegrown* set of blocks gives children a great lesson in the value of recycling, resourcefulness, and creativity. When children are involved in actually making the blocks, they develop a sense of independence and industriousness. It builds their confidence and sense of resourcefulness as they problem solve ways to make their own blocks.

To enrich play, provide accessories that kids can use with their blocks. These, too, can be low cost. Sticks propped up in play dough balls become trees. Acorns or pebbles can represent cars. Matchbox cars, doll house people, or small plastic airplanes can be used to make block play more interesting, too. You get the idea.

Ideas to help you set the stage for block play in your home are listed below. Once you've assembled the blocks, designate a level area for play. A smooth carpet increases comfort and warmth and gives building more stability. Provide a convenient container for blocks and a storage area that children can easily reach. If you don't have a shelf for storage, a large laundry basket is handy floor storage for blocks. It makes it easy for kids to move and carry their blocks, too.

Don't forget to teach children to pick up blocks after play. It will build organizational skills, independence, and self-help skills. It builds pride when children know they can contribute to your home's safety by preventing tripping hazards.

Homemade Blocks

- **Sponge blocks:** Good for even very young toddlers, a selection of different-sized kitchen or cleaning sponges are great for stacking. (Use only the sponges that don't have soap already in them.)
- **Shoobox, oatmeal, detergent blocks:** Tape lids closed on a collection of empty, clean boxes. Children can decorate plain boxes with markers or crayons. Or if you like, boxes can be covered with adhesive contact paper for a matching set.

“ Making a
homegrown
set of blocks
gives children
a great lesson
in the value
of recycling,
resourcefulness,
and creativity.”

- **Big blocks:** Shipping boxes, from dishes to appliance boxes, offer opportunities for large scale building. These are particularly handy for backyard block play.
- **Milk or juice carton boxes:** These boxes can be cleaned thoroughly, stuffed with newspaper, and taped flat to close. Cover with adhesive contact paper.
- **Margarine, soft cream cheese, or whipped topping tub blocks:** Collect empty, clean plastic tubs of all sizes. Snap lids on for building. These are fun blocks for bath time, too. The kids can stack them on the top of the bathtub wall.
- **Paper bag blocks:** Fill paper bags with newspaper, fold opening to close, tape shut. Shape sides so they are as flat as possible for easier stacking.
- **Styrofoam shipping forms:** Unique shape and molding of forms that protect shipped items encourage children to come up with intriguing designs of their own.

Block Play Activities

During block play, children like to recreate scenes from their own community, such as a zoo, farm, airport, or school. But if you'd like to introduce other ways to play with blocks, here are some to try out:

- **Roads, Train Tracks, and Tunnels:** Provide blocks to create roads or train tracks for miniature cars or trains. Cut round boxes in half to create tunnels for them to travel through.
- **How Tall?:** Children stack blocks as tall as they are. How many blocks does it take?
- **Knock 'Em Down:** Margarine tubs are best for this. Children stack them up, then with flourish, knock them down. Of course, everyone applauds. Then you do it all over again. Kids love the drama and repetition, so hang in there.
- **Name It:** Ask children to *write* their initials or first name using blocks instead of paper and pencil. Stretch it out across the whole room.
- **Chain Reaction:** Remember how you stacked dominoes for a chain reaction? You stood them on end, side by side, and then touched one to set off a rippling line of tumbling dominoes. Your child can do the very same thing with blocks if you provide 20 or more of the same size.
- **Block Maze:** If you have a pet mouse, hamster, or guinea pig, children can build a block maze for their pet to play in. (Make sure kids are way past the stage of throwing blocks.)
- **Stuffed Animal Homes:** Have children build block homes to fit different-sized stuffed animals.
- **Ramp It:** Create a variety of ramps with blocks. Roll a small ball down the ramps. Which incline makes the ball roll slower? Faster?
- **Mirror Images:** Provide a table-top three-way mirror. Children build with small blocks in front of the three-way mirror. The children learn to use the reflections in their design.
- **Making Patterns:** Provide blocks of different shapes or colors. Create a pattern for children to repeat, such as square, rectangle, square, rectangle. Or red, blue, red, blue. Ask children to create new patterns for you to repeat.
- **I Spy a Block:** Place a variety of blocks in the middle of the floor. Encourage children's observation skills by describing blocks for them to find. Use characteristics that help children focus on shape, color, or size. Example: "I spy a triangle block. Where is it?"

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

© Karen Stephens 2007