



# Block Play: Experiences in Cooperative Learning and Living

by Sally Cartwright

In good early childhood settings, unit blocks help to build child-initiated, cooperative learning. And such learning helps to build the roots of democracy:

*Five four year olds in our nursery classroom are building in the unit block area. As teacher, I sit nearby watching, taking notes. My interest supports the children. Our little school is in a fishing village, and many of the fathers turn to the sea for their livelihood. Travis and Noah have outlined a harbor with blocks. Todd wants to connect his public works garage to Sam's store across the harbor by road. After considerable discussion with the other children, he builds an elevated causeway across the shallow end of the harbor. Emily insists that Todd build the road to the main door **and** the emergency entrance of her hospital. Todd is reluctant, but others say how important both entries are. Sam gets more blocks for Todd. Travis builds a wharf on the harbor near Noah's lobster boat and tells him, "You sell your lobsters to me. I'll take 'em in my truck to the store."*

*"And bring some to the hospital," chimes in Emily. "We want lobsters for lunch." Travis makes a lobster car (a salt-water storage float) with its shed and weighing scales (a square block and imagination). Noah weighs and dumps his catch (1" cubes) into the lobster car. Meanwhile, Todd buys some string at Sam's store. "Pretend it's telephone wire." Sam and Todd run this wire between their buildings. Todd calls over to Travis, "Want a phone at your wharf?" "Yup," replies Travis. Emily says, "The hospital's got to have a phone, too, don't forget."*

The children are absorbed in their building and play. As they learn important social skills and values, they taste democracy at their level through firsthand

experience. When children learn to work together and help each other, they identify with group success. Conversely, the group depends on each member's constructive involvement.

In shared block building and play, the children themselves, ages three and up, learn to pool their resources and thereby respect diversity. Their shared structures — buildings, roads, bridges, and boats in three-dimensional boldness for all to see — engage their hearts and boost their self-esteem. It is their deep involvement, self-esteem, and warm mutual respect which help the children resolve conflict without violence.

In a good setting, informed and caring guidance often means that we provide a reassuring adult presence without intervention. In a good setting, the children's daily practice builds individual responsibility toward effective group process.

What makes a good setting for group building and play? Given a simple, relaxed, consistent, and reliable child care or classroom environment, there are six significant, interrelated parameters in the block setting itself which help the children develop effective group learning:

1. An open floor area with firm, unpatterned carpet is best. Up to eight children playing at once need a minimum 10' x 12' space. Traffic unrelated to blocks should be routed around, not through, the block area.
2. A sufficient number of unit blocks (400 for up to eight builders) should be stored — visibly sorted by sizes — on low, open shelves adjacent to the building space.



3. Keep toys and accessories stored in view and accessible, but separate from the blocks. Toys should be few, simple, and in scale with the blocks. For example, adult dolls should be about 5" high. Plain, wooden, homemade toys, which intentionally leave much to the child's imagination, are best. Where elaborate metal or plastic toys are used, block play often suffers. Five year olds and up can make some of their own accessories at a carpentry bench.

4. Children should take from the shelves only what they plan to use immediately. An adult may occasionally and quietly pile up any stray blocks to keep the area neat and open for more building. At a specified clean-up time, for which — in recognition of the children's play momentum — a ten minute warning is given, three and four year old children should always return all blocks to the shelves. Ideally, if space is available, the block schemes of five to eight year olds may be kept in place for days or weeks. Building and play then become far more elaborate and rewarding. Adult help during clean up is often needed, and an adult role model is particularly valuable at this time. In contrast, except when handing blocks to a beginner for gentle encouragement, adults should not help children build. If you help a child build, she will not have done the work herself and cannot be honestly praised nor can she develop self-esteem with integrity.

5. Blocks (and children) must be treated with care. While freedom for constructive child initiative is important, there are times for undisputed adult authority. Say in effect to staff, "Convey your love to a young dissident, but gently disengage him from the blocks and say with full assurance in your heart, "I can't allow that." Except for special, controlled situations, there should be no crashing of buildings, no touching another's building without permission of the owner, no hoarding, swinging, throwing, or dropping. No stepping, sitting, lying, or rolling on unit blocks. Although signs may be attached to blocks with masking tape, the blocks themselves should never be marked in any way.

6. Finally, adults need to respect the children (and their limits), trust them, and approach them with honesty, humor, knowledge of child development, wise intuition, and unflinching love.

Field trips, reading aloud, and group discussion are essential, shared enrichment for effective group learning with blocks. But, through years of experimen-

tal work, we found that as long as content was close to the children's experience, predetermined information, i.e. selecting which facts we would like young children to know, is not important when compared to the *ways* they learn. When children work together, when they pursue information through firsthand experience, through their own action, when they are curious, excited, and deeply involved in finding and using information, this is child education at its best.

In my own experience with children, their daily cooperative learning with blocks opened my eyes. This lively sense of caring purpose, this group intentionality proved a marvelous lift to learning. It drew the children to their work. It kept them going. Each morning, these small explorers shared stumbling, laughter, and plain hard work toward deep satisfaction in both individual and group achievement. Unlike the competitive atmosphere in many schools, our warmly cooperative setting invited unique, personal accomplishment toward group goals.

The process was intrinsic to the children's spontaneous building and play. Individual child constructions were soon linked together by roads, bridges, tunnels, pretend waterways, and, of course, by shared interests — Travis sold his lobsters; Emily bought and served them for lunch. By mid-morning, the youngsters had usually constructed, quite on their own, an interdependent community which they could *see, feel, and do*. This first half of the morning became a magic time of child endeavor, of group enthusiasm for learning which touched every child.

A remarkable outcome was the degree of sustained mutual concern and support that prevailed not only when construction went smoothly, but through frustration, fatigue, and disappointment. With open affection, the children helped each other. With caring respect, they settled their own disputes. Seldom did teachers need to intervene. Comradeship in learning made our classroom sunlit.

**Note:** In a follow-up study, we learned that most of these children won academic honors in the local public school. But what especially pleased me was their marked ability to meet new situations with poise and shared invention.

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