IMPROVING PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH BLOCK PLAY

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Blocks are one of the most popular playthings for children. The purpose of this article is to describe the use of block play in developing parent-child relations. This paper has two major parts. First, a brief historical overview highlights the critical roles of child's block play in learning and development. Block play contributes to children's cognitive development, social-emotional development, and motor development. Second, we discuss block play time as an opportunity to enhance parent-child relationships. A Reciprocal Model of Parent-Child Interaction is developed and discussed that involves four strategies: observing, listening and supporting, talking and extending, and understanding. Use of these strategies increases healthy relations and communications between parents and children in family settings.

Play and Development

"Developing through playing" has become a well-known saying in early childhood education. Historically, the idea of child development through play is based on research and observation by many psychologists and educators. Looking from the present to the past, several famous educators (e.g., Froebel) introduced and developed this idea. According to Froebel (1907), "play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man....It gives joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. Play is the highest phase of child development...." (pp. 54–55). Cognitive theorist Piaget (1951) regarded play as an adaptive behavior that facilitates children's thinking and cognition. By engaging in different types of play, children practice and consolidate skills, such as eye-hand coordination and sensory-motor skills. Each type of play is essential to cognitive development at different stages of childhood (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Psychoanalytic theorist Erikson (1902–1994) believed that play activities help children learn to manipulate objects and develop self-esteem (Hughes, 1999).

Psychological theorists have provided different views of the role of play in children's development. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) argued that play makes a critical contribution to children's emotional development by enabling the removal of negative feelings and assisting with the handling of frustrations resulting from unpleasant experiences (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). In brief, play is at the core of children's growth and relates to children's physical and mental representations. Through play, children feel free to explore different behavioral combinations as well as enjoy greater flexibility and creativity. Furthermore, play also promotes children's motivation, curiosity, and invention, and encourages them to be their own hosts.
Block Play and Children's Development

Children play with a variety of toys, but blocks may be one of the most popular objects. Hill (1868–1946) and Pratt (1867–1954) made major contributions to the study of children's play with blocks (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2001; Wolfe, 2002). Both began their study at roughly similar points, with the development of large blocks to be used by children in play involving construction. However, Pratt also designed small unit blocks and different shapes that are mathematically precise ratios between one block and another. She called these blocks “free materials” because they can be used in a variety of ways according to children’s creative impulses. Pratt believed that children give meanings to blocks via use of their imaginations.

Child’s block play can be grouped into three developmental areas—cognitive, social-emotional, and motor development (Sawyers & Rogers, 1988). This grouping emphasizes processes and products of children development.

Cognitive Development

Play provides chances for children to gain real experiences and use those experiences to organize concepts that enable them to better understand the real world (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). Children gain basic cognitive knowledge about language, science, and mathematics through block play. With regard to language, children increase their awareness of sentence structures, linguistic rules, grammar, and vocabularies by learning to recognize and say the name or label different shapes of blocks. Making up stories requires certain levels of language development. By communicating and interacting with playmates, children have opportunities to express their ideas through the use of language. These language experiences are seen as indicators of the early emergence of reading and writing abilities.

In science development, Moffitt (1984) believed that children learn the properties of different kinds of blocks, such as their sizes, shapes, weights, and relationships with other blocks. Space is another important science concept derived from block play. Children discover how to build with blocks, to limit block building based on size and scope, and to control the sizes of buildings to fit the sizes of the blocks. In addition, children learn about balance and stability by stacking blocks as high as possible. Through trial and error, they discover that they must stack the blocks on a solid foundation.

In terms of mathematical learning, Leeb-Lundberg (1984) believed that children learn concepts of length, height, width, and depth through block play. For instance, children put blocks next to or pile blocks on top of each other and make comparisons of their length or width. In addition, children learn about the meaning of numbers. When a child begins to count blocks from 1 to 10, they come to use language and to understand that six blocks are a greater number than four blocks. Blocks represent concrete language skills and enable children to “see” quantity.

Social-Emotional Development

Brody (1984) believed that blocks are
simple and useful materials for facilitating socio-dramatic play. As children develop their imagination and creativities, they use blocks as houses, boats, shops, trains, and buildings to develop themes for their stories. While engaging in fantasy using play blocks, social attitudes develop. Children learn to engage in the development of different ideas, play according to those ideas and thoughts, communicate and negotiate with playmates, and use problem-solving strategies (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999). In addition, children also learn to see things from other’s perspectives to work together as a team, to take turns and share blocks, and to help others in block-building processes. Children develop the ability to organize thoughts and activities so that each person involved feels a sense of responsibility and contributes to the team.

**Motor Development**

Playing with blocks requires physical manipulations that offer children opportunities to practice their fine and gross motor coordination. For instance, when children pile one block on top of another and build structures, they put blocks in exact positions in the piling process. These actions help children practice eye-hand coordination, for example.

In sum, building blocks provide children with opportunities to discover and experience different dimensions of knowledge. Learning from play is one of the foundations of education (Johnson, et al., 1999). Children learn and develop through play, whether at school with peers or at home with siblings or parents. Early learning occurs at home and involves parents, who have been acknowledged to play a significant role in children’s learning. If parents facilitate and support their children’s learning during playing with blocks, for example, then this early intervention will affect children’s development in many areas. However, the question is whether parents are aware of the significance of block play for children’s development. Are parents in a firm position to and willing to participate in children’s early lives?

**Improving Parent-Child Relationships through Block Play**

Usually parents are the first people to interact with their children. They help children develop their personalities, creativities, and behaviors (Md-Yunus, 2007). Macdonald (1992) proposed that parent-child relationships are related to children’s emotional development and behaviors. Other research (e.g., Overbeek, Vollebergh, Engels, & Meeus, 2003; Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts & Dornbusch, 1994) also has shown a link between parent-child relationships and later emotional adjustment. A low affective quality of the parent-child bond is related to anxiety (Gerlsma, Emmelkamp, & Arrindell 1990), depression (Burbach & Bourduin, 1986), and poor social skills, as well as popularity with peers (Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus, & Dekovic*, 2001; Ladd & LeSieur, 1995).

Nowadays, dual-earner families are the norm. With both parents busy at work, the parent-child relationship is easily ignored because parents have less time to meet with children at meal times, talk as a family,
and engage in fun occasions. In many Asian and western nations, it is normal to see “latch key” children stay at home alone after school until their parent finishes work and returns home late in the evening. Younger children, who are not old enough to stay at home by themselves, may stay with neighbors or relatives and wait for their parents to pick them up.

Under these circumstances: (1) how much time do parents really spend with their children; (2) How much talk occurs between them; and (3) how do they develop and maintain their parent-child interactions and relationships? The prevailing and overall concern is how to develop and nurture healthy parent-child relationships under these circumstances. To improve parent-child relationships through block play, a reciprocal model of parent-child interactions and four strategies (observing, listening and supporting, talking and extending, and understanding) are offered to parents and described in the following sections.

Reciprocal Model of Parent-Child Interaction

The Reciprocal Model of Parent-Child Interaction (Figure 1) consists of four strategies—observing, listening and supporting, talking and extending, and understanding.

Observation is the most basic aspect of the process. In order to provide appropriate support and responses to children, parents need to observe children carefully (Step 1) during play. After parents receive children’s signals through observation, they then move on to next steps (Step 2)—listen to what children say and provide appropriate psychological or behavioral support, talk to children and guide them in extending ongoing play, and understand children’s needs or emotions at the moment.

Once parents accomplish any of these three actions (e.g., listening and supporting; talking and extending; or understanding) in Step 2, parents return to observation again (Step 1) and decide which actions to follow. In other words,
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observation is the “hub” that connects the three other strategies. Observation enables parents to choose one or more strategies that best fits their children’s current situation.

The Four Strategies—Observation, Listening and Supporting, Talking and Extending, and Understanding

Parents should plan to spend personal time with their children each day. They may do so by joining in children’s play and responding to children’s requests or questions. Based on the Reciprocal Model of Parent-Child Interaction, the following illustration shows how parents and children can develop healthy relationships while engaging in block play. The four modes are based on Miller’s (1981) views of interactive parent-child relationships.

Observation (Step 1). Developing an understanding of children and healthy relationships is possible through parents’ observation of children and their activities (Baker, 1998). In doing so, for example, parents can assess their children’s “cues”, typically via facial expressions, body movements, and emotions. Parents’ observations of their children provide them with clues about their children’s behaviors and needs. For example, when children are moody or distraught when playing blocks, parents can ask them what happened at school or check to see if children are tired, hungry, or ill. When children become angry at building structures which have fallen down several times, parents can support and guide them. However, parents should be careful not to intervene continually in children’s playing (Mellou, 1994). For example, a parent interrupts children’s play by saying, “This building does not look like a castle. You should build two towers and make the walls higher.” This intervening response may easily decrease children’s confidence and impede the ability to create thoughts and objects.

Observing is a way to show parent’s care, concern and interest in their children. For example, eye contacts let children feel they are loved, respected, and valued by their parents. Thus, when children are playing blocks, the position of parents should be opposite to children so that they can easily see children’s eyes and faces (Miller, 1981). When children are responding to parents or parents are answering children’s questions, parents see their children’s behaviors in context which become meaningful.

Listening and supporting (Step 2). “Wait time” refers to the duration between the parents’ questions and children’s response (Tincani & Crozier, 2007). Research (e.g., Tobin, 1987) showed that students’ responses increase in the length, spontaneity, quality, and the level of cognitive thinking when the duration of wait-time increases. Thus, parents should provide their children with “wait time” so that children can express their own personal opinions and feelings. To build healthy relationships and communications, parents need to listen to children’s feelings and talk with them withholding judgment. Once children feel valued and supported, healthy relations and communications with parents can be developed.

When children are blocks building, they make up stories and soliloquize thoughts
in their minds. This is a good opportunity to express freely, to combine experiences realistically, and to use diverse thinking creatively (Johnson, et al., 1999; Russ, 1993). Although the context of fantasy and block play may not fit adult logic, parents should encourage children to imagine rather than interrupt or make judgments about their thinking. For example, parents should commenting, “These kinds of block play stories are interesting and detailed. I can see stories unfold in your description of block play stories”. Parents should establish comfortable atmospheres and hold open-minded attitudes so that children are willing to express feelings and thoughts with them. Being a good listener is not just hearing children’s words, but paying attention to what children say and get further clues about the message behind (Smith, 2002). Once children talk freely and feel valued by parents when playing, they may be willing to share their lives and connect with parents more often in daily lives.

Talking and extending (Step 2). Through block play, conversations occur naturally. In order to extend conversations, parents should open up conversations rather than using dead-end questions, such as yes or no question (Smith, 2002). For example, parents should ask children “Tell me interesting stories about your block buildings.” instead of “Are you building a castle?” In addition, parents could repeat children’s answering again so that children know their parents are listening and paying attention to them. This not only improves children’s self-esteem but also their trust on parents. Talking with each other is the primary element to develop a healthy relationship.

Except for extending the conversations, parents can also help children broaden their playing plots. For example, parents could guide children that, “The tower you build is fantastic! What can you do to make it be a big castle? Who is inside the castle?” or “What other kinds of house could you build for the little Lego boy?” Parents continue their talking according to children’s responses and playing. They may have children some toys simple in design (e.g., Lego, dolls) and ask their children to use. These objects that are relatively simple in complexity and design assist children to broaden their imagination and playing scenarios (Frost, 1992).

Understanding (Step 2). “Empathy” means “one accurately senses another’s thoughts and feelings so that the other feels understood (Vondracek & Corneal, 1995, p.168).” Thus, in this model, understanding is related to elements of empathy. Parents, for example, reflect empathy by short statements like, “I can see you are feeling sad/happy/excited/angry.” Through reflecting children’s feelings and emotions in words, children not only feel understood but learn how to identify their own emotions as well.

Research (e.g., Denham, DeMulder, Levitas, Sawyer, & Auerbach-Major, 2003) suggested that the family’s discuss about emotions, express of positive emotions, and acceptance of emotional exhibitions are associated with higher level of emotion understanding and emotional competence. Parents should encourage children to show their different feelings as they play with blocks and accept their positive and negative emotions with empathetic attitudes.
For example, when children are happy with building a high tower or other creative objects, parents can tell them, "What a wonderful creation! I know you are very proud and happy because of your masterpiece!" On the contrary, when children are frustrated in building blocks, parents can console them with saying that, "I can see you are upset now. Don't give up! Let's try it again and find out together what the problem is!" Because children express their different emotions naturally while playing, parents get familiar with children's personality and temperament. For example, they know what kind of emotions children have the most and under what situations children's emotions are more likely to be aroused. When children share feelings more often with parents and parents understand children's feelings, it is possible for them to develop and maintain healthy relationships.

In sum, it is important for parents to observe their children when children are playing. Through observing, parents become familiar with children's physical and mental situations and decide which actions (e.g., listening and supporting, talking and extending, or understanding) they are going to provide for their children.

Conclusion

Blocks not only have different shapes nor are they simply playthings—they are materials that are full of educational meanings that stimulate children's development in numerous respects, including language, science, mathematics, social and physical growth, and art.

Nowadays, parents must focus on developing purposeful parent-child relationships in children's early lives. However, those parents who are very engaged in work often overlook the importance of the parent-child relationship. These days, the amount of time parents spend with children is diminishing. Block play provides parents with an opportunity to stay in touch with their children and show their consideration and respect for them. Through block play, parents investigate children's behaviors, emotions, and needs, thereby raising their awareness of their children's current mental and physical development. Whenever parents are willing to listen to and support their children's ideas, talk with them, help them extend and enrich their play, and gain a better understanding of their feelings during block play, the distance between parents and children lessens.

The reciprocal model of parent-child interaction can be applied to other play activities, such as socio-dramatic play. The more time spent by parents on parent-child communication, the better the parent-child relationship will be.
References


