

I made a unicorn!

Open-ended play with blocks
and simple materials



By **Community Playthings** with:
Tina Bruce, Roehampton University
Lynn McNair, University of Edinburgh
Sian Wyn Siencyn, Trinity College, Wales

For my mother, Mary Raecher Wiser, who delighted to accompany children in their learning; and for my father, Art Wiser, who made Community Playthings' first blocks in the 1940s and – at eighty-eight – is still making children's playthings with the same enthusiasm.

Helen Huleatt

Community Playthings, 2008



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Tachbrook Nursery School
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and Save the Children



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Open-ended play with blocks and simple materials



Open-ended play is intrinsic to childhood; children have an impetus to explore and create. When free to experiment with the simplest materials, they find ways to express and develop their thoughts in imaginative play.

Play

Five-year-old Kaiya is skipping homeward, singing to herself. On reaching some steps, she slides nimbly down the railing. Her seven-year-old brother Jamal is digging his vegetable plot, with the same energy and concentration he imparts to the imaginative games he and Kaiya play.

Play, for children, is not just recreation – it's their approach to life! Every action is undertaken with the whole being: mind, body, and spirit. Play is basic to children's well-being; it's their way to discover the world around them and to express how they feel and, sometimes, to cope with difficulty. Children's play must be respected.



Francis Wardle



Francis Wardle



Save the Children

A group of children are playing outside a refugee camp, using natural materials and discarded objects. Even though each of them has suffered, their play is joyful and vibrant. The spirit of childhood is an awesome force – and play seems at the heart of it.

Open-ended play

Although children's play just 'happens' spontaneously, it is complex and comes in myriad forms. One universal type is **open-ended play**, also known as free-flow play (Bruce 1991), in which the children themselves determine what to do, how to do it, and what to use. Open-ended means 'not having a fixed answer; unrestricted; allowing for future change'. In the course of such play, children have no fear of doing it wrong since there is no 'correct' method or outcome; and observant adults are privileged with insights into children's development and thinking.



Active learning

Children perceive life differently from grown-ups. To adult eyes, a sheet hanging on the clothesline is there to dry; for a child, that sheet offers intriguing possibilities. Children need opportunities to apply their own logic. The Scottish guideline, *A Curriculum for Excellence*, advocates children as leaders of their own learning.



The Welsh *Foundation Phase Framework for Children's Learning 3–7 Years* also demonstrates respect for childhood, stating, 'Children learn through first-hand experiential activities with the serious business of "play" providing the vehicle.'



Francis Wardle

This **active learning** starts from birth as babies use all their senses to discover the world around them. Exploration of tactile objects in treasure baskets typifies babies' hands-on play. In time, they want to find out what can be done with things. One- and two-year-olds feel compelled to collect, fill, dump, stack, knock down... As mothers know, many household utensils provide such activity. Heuristic play (Goldschmeidt and Jackson, 2004) allows toddlers to experiment with objects and 'find out for themselves' what happens when various bits are tried in combination.



As they grow, children continue to need ample opportunity to playfully investigate and create in their own ways, at their own pace. This is what Friedrich Froebel meant by 'self activity'. This frequently leads to the discovery of meaningful hobbies. When children are free to follow their individual interests, they learn to think for themselves. Open-ended play is essential throughout childhood.

Imagination

Lively music is playing in the art corner. Leonard, age five, takes crayons and draws a figure with three legs. Rhianna, next to him, protests – but Leonard responds, ‘Well, sometimes when you dance you **feel** like you have three legs!’

Imagination, the ability to override the boundary between reality and fantasy, is an attribute of childhood worldwide.



Imagination is the key to empathy. Albert Einstein said, ‘Imagination is more important than knowledge.’ Sally Jenkinson’s perceptive book states that ‘Social imagination, which first appears in germinal form in the imaginative games of early childhood, is the kernel around which all mature and tolerant societies are formed.’
(The Genius of Play)
Open-ended play gives imagination free rein.



This morning the children built a bridge with hollow blocks. Christopher and Mark decided to be sharks catching people falling from the bridge! Then Heather wanted to be a dolphin. The boys welcomed her, discussing how sea creatures live together. It’s good to see them work things out.



Materials

Margaret McMillan said, 'Most of the best opportunities for achievement lie in the domain of free play, with access to varied materials.' These **materials** need not be complicated or fancy. In fact, sophisticated resources tend to thwart true play; children often become bored with prescribed games or mesmerised by electronic paraphernalia.



Tachbrook Nursery School



Kate Greenaway Nursery School

Where detail is built in, children's ideas cannot freely guide the play. If a nursery has elaborate costumes for every storybook and cartoon character, for example, little is left to imagination. Dressed in an ornate knight's outfit, a child can be only a knight. However, with tea cosy on head and stick in hand, he can be a knight now and a fireman later – or anything he pleases. A few old hats, shoes, handbags, and fabric pieces will serve the dress-up area richly.

Likewise, home corners are often supplied with plastic fruits, vegetables, and other food in intricate detail – but a plastic fried egg can never be anything but a fried egg! Open-ended materials such as sand, dough, clay, acorns, corks, lids and scraps of cloth readily become anything a child envisions. The simpler the plaything, the more versatile it is, supporting play that is sustained over time. A piece of wood may be a mobile phone, a camera, a bulldozer – even a baby – so children use it repeatedly.



The children are playing 'family' in the garden. Kate as Mummy is tucking her twig children into bed. Liam as Dad picks up a stick 'to slice the bread for supper.' Kate, horrified, snatches it – 'You can't cut **that** one! It's the **baby!**' She hands him a different piece of wood – '**That's** a loaf of bread!' – and the play continues harmoniously.

One-year-old Chin-Hwa is eating a piece of bread. After taking several bites, he notices its new shape and 'walks' it across the table, saying 'woof-woof!'

Even food can be an open-ended material. A child might pretend his pudding is concrete and his spoon a spade. Another might wrap a marrow in a blanket as a doll.

Time

Children who have always been told what to do, or who are used to commercial toys and screen activities, may need **time** to get involved in open-ended play. Allow them that time, free of pressure. As they observe other children spontaneously engaged, they will gradually be drawn into the action. All children have latent curiosity and imagination; once these are stimulated, each experience suggests another. Ideas multiply, confidence grows and creative play becomes self-perpetuating.



Kate Greenway Nursery School



Children who are familiar and happy with free-flow play still need lots and lots of time to experiment, discover, create and re-create. Children live in their play; the more engrossed they are, the more frustrating interruptions become. Adults who recognize the value of such play will not be quick to make children clear up to prepare for the next activity. Considering all the satisfaction and learning it brings, open-ended play warrants the longest possible stretches of time.

Moira is new in our nursery, seeing heuristic play for the first time. I sense her interest in the rings, pegs, tins, etc; but rather than manipulating them, she seems to expect them to perform, like a toy that beeps when you press it. She keeps returning however – her curiosity has clearly been roused – so we will support her in trusting herself. In a few days she will probably be fully involved.

Nature



Yesterday my children decided the fallen tree was a chocolate factory. Each broken branch was a tap for melted chocolate!



Nature provides endless scope for free-flow play. It also fosters emotional well-being (something technology cannot do). Children's favourite climbing frames are trees, boulders and logs, which through imagination become mountains, horses, fishing boats, castles, fire engines...

Kate Greenaway Nursery School



Water in any form is tremendously attractive. Children discover rainwater in puddles or tree stumps and bring bits of bark, mud or vegetation to mix into it; or they 'paint' it onto fences and picnic tables.



Twigs, pebbles, seashells, acorns, conkers and fir cones are among the favourite outdoor playthings. Children often use these to build miniature villages and fairy gardens. Under the roots of trees they set up playgrounds for pixies and leprechauns, or tiny flats with moss cushions and seedpod dishes. And everyone has seen sandcastles at the beach decorated with bottle caps, seashells and bits of glass or in the sandpit adorned with daisies and buttercups. **When children create these small worlds, they are the 'big people' controlling what happens.**



Construction and small-world

Similar play occurs indoors in the construction and small-world areas, where children set up an environment with unit blocks or similar materials and use miniature figures to act out their experiences and fantasies.

When young children encounter unit blocks in the construction area, they may first acquaint themselves with the shapes and play with them as individual pieces. Eventually a child will begin to stack and then create. Pat Gura writes, 'Repetition appears to be an important feature of materials mastery. As each block form is discovered, there is much practising, refining and variation within the familiar. A particular block form may be constructed so often that the procedure becomes effortless.' (*Exploring Learning, Young Children and Blockplay*) If left free to experiment, children soon start using the blocks to construct interesting patterns or purposeful projects – not only roads and houses, but imaginary ideas as well.

When I have a new group of children, I set out the various sizes of blocks in an inviting way in the construction area. Only after the children have become deeply involved, do I bring in baskets of natural materials and some small figures and vehicles. If I wait till the children are truly at home with blocks, the accessories enhance the play rather than distracting from it.



I just told my Year Two class a fairytale, and now they are busy in the construction area. Megan is using blocks to 'draw' a knight flat on the floor. Ellie and Chloe have built a castle and now are making paper tickets so they can charge admission. Daniel and Chung-Hee are constructing a dragon. Its curvy tail extends across the room. Its jaws of up-ended ramps are full of small wooden figures – the 'knights' the dragon has devoured!



The boys in my East End playgroup spend a lot of time in the construction area. Today Alfie (4½) built the Docklands Light Railway, tunnels, flyovers and bridges he sees each day. He used interlocking train tracks, unit blocks and even large hollow blocks and ramps. He stuck feathers in several locations as flags and had me write LONDON on a piece of cardboard, which he taped to a block. Then he chose vehicles, driving cars on overpasses and motorways but keeping trains on the tracks. Other children were watching and then joining in.



Completion of structures is not the end of the play. Children often decorate a tower with beads, buttons, scraps of cloth, pine cones, coloured yarn – whatever is accessible. They might use little vehicles and human or animal figures to enact their thoughts. Sometimes these figures are just clothespins or plasticine people.



Large construction

Where small construction enables children to build miniature worlds, large construction empowers them to create environments they can actually inhabit. Whether indoors or out, when children engage in **large construction**, they themselves become the actors; construction and role play flow together, opening tremendous possibilities for total involvement.



Important statements about play in the *Early Years Foundation Stage Framework* are particularly true of large construction:

- Children have to experience play physically and emotionally.
- Children may play alone or with others.
- In their play, children use the experiences they have and extend them to build up ideas, concepts and skills.
- While playing, children can express fears and re-live anxious experiences.
- They can try things out, solve problems and be creative, and can take risks and use trial and error to find things out.



Dens

One universal form of large construction is building **dens**. 'Children find something thrilling in creating their own special place, somewhere on their scale where the grown-ups can't go. Making dens usually involves taking the sofa apart, or draping old blankets over upturned chairs, but children also love to build outdoor dens.' (Fiona Danks in *Nature's Playground*)

Listening to the children's conversations gives me a window into their understanding. They are learning in so many ways as they set goals, negotiate efforts, experiment, change their minds – or sometimes create cosy places to be alone. As Marcella said, 'I'm building a nest for **Me!**'

Helen Tovey writes, 'Children create their own secret places, known variously as bush houses, cubbies, dens, forts or camps often in undefined, "in between" and "left over" spaces. These small, secret worlds are calm, ordered and reassuringly secure. They allow for privacy, imagination and temporary ownership, and are important ways that children can feel a sense of agency in shaping and creating their own special place, making their mark on the world.' (*Playing Outdoors: Spaces and Places, Risk and Challenge*)

Writing in *Nursery World*, Helen Bilton says that den-building 'is a pastime that generation after generation has enjoyed... But a den can only be a den if it is allowed to be an open-ended process that enables children to dictate the direction of the play... All the great designs of this world came about through a process, through trial and error, involving the making and rectifying of mistakes, involving standing back, pondering and considering.'



I've noticed that children's outdoor dens are often under a bush or in a tree, where light filtering through leafy branches gives a special feel. I brought some saris for my children to use with their hollow block constructions, because they let light through in a similar way and soften corners.



Hollow blocks

Of course large construction takes numerous forms apart from den building. Many settings have a covered outdoor area where children can engage in large construction year round. Hollow blocks, which come in several shapes, are usually the basic building unit as they are easy to grasp and manoeuvre. Milk and bread crates are excellent too. Even cardboard cartons can be used till they collapse; and pallets, planks, cardboard tubes, tyres, gutters, and cross-sections of tree trunks are useful. So are clipboards, paper, pencils, and measuring tapes, introducing writing tools.

Broom handles stuck into traffic cones or buckets of sand make good frames for some structures. Fabrics can be used in many ways. Keep an eye out for large cable spools and other manufacturing cast-offs. Helen Bilton emphasises that 'Den building can make the environment look messy, but be reassured this is okay. The best outdoor environment is a workshop, where lots of creations are happening...'



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Building 'shops' is a favourite. Today after erecting the shop with hollow blocks and planks, some of the children put together a cash register from various oddments and then decided to make money, which they carefully drew and cut from bits of paper and tag board.



It's important to have plenty of hollow blocks, as children get frustrated if resources run out. They cannot play freely when they feel compelled to guard their materials. But if the supply is plentiful, they can focus on carrying out their plans.



Tachbrook Nursery School

Large construction is indispensable for physical exercise and for children's sense of balance. And while their muscles gain strength, children's communication skills, understanding of the world, aesthetic appreciation, and confidence grow as well. Inductive thinking develops as children experience properties of matter and interaction of forces; this is where many maths and physics concepts are absorbed:

- Spatial understanding
- Size
- Shape
- Weight
- Gravity
- Stability
- Proportion
- Design
- Spanning
- Symmetry



I love how the children's personalities come out in their play. Dong-Sun and Ethan are working together, both in total earnest about the tractor they need to build. Ethan's going at it energetically, shoving hollow blocks around – while behind him Dong-Sun quietly rearranges them into perfect symmetry. One goal, two utterly different approaches!



I made a unicorn

Karen Miller says that block play 'could really form the core of your curriculum. Everything could be built around blocks!' Colleen Marin, who compiled *Writing in the Air*, believes that boys' potential for attainment in oral skills and writing is increased if they are given sufficient block play at a young age; the confidence established as children express their ideas with blocks supports their self-expression in spoken – and eventually written – language.



I'm amazed at the variety of my children's ideas. One day they each built their own private cubby with the hollow blocks. Next time they co-operated to erect a big ship. Other constructions this week were a motorway, a puppet theatre, a train, a slide with steps leading to it, a bus, individual thrones to sit on, and an aeroplane. Some of these took a lot of engineering!



Loris Malaguzzi of Reggio Emilia pointed out that children are 'not... excessively attached to their own ideas, which they construct and re-invent continuously. They are apt to explore, make discoveries, change their points of view... Creativity should not be considered a separate mental faculty but a characteristic of our way of thinking, knowing, and making choices.' (*Hundred Languages of Children*) Anyone who has watched children building, and re-building, will agree.

But the building phase – though so important – just sets the stage. Now the girls too become fully involved, often telling ‘Daddy’ what to get and where to put it. Children dash indoors to bring out a doll’s pram and blankets, dishes or other accessories – and the activity takes a momentum of its own.



This is play at its highest. As Jean Piaget said, ‘Dramatic play permits children to fit the reality of the world into their own interests and knowledge. One of the purest forms of symbolic thought available to young children, dramatic play contributes strongly to their intellectual development.’ (1962)

My children belong to a farming community, and much of their play reflects this. Today they all worked together, using hollow blocks to build a barn with surrounding paddock. Since Emmy was a cow, she did not help – but she told the others exactly where to build her fence! Then several children constructed horses of varying sizes all over the porch. Jessica was sitting on a structure that looked quite different. She whispered, ‘I made a unicorn!’



Conclusion

Since spontaneous creative play is supported by materials that invite hands-on exploration and impeded by 'closed' materials, a careful look should be taken at the surge in electronic activities for children. Are these products motivated by a sound understanding of child development – or by other interests? What long-term effects might such 'play' have? Children are at risk of deprivation through the junk food of entertainment, technology and commercialism.

Fortunately, there are daily opportunities to offer wholesome alternatives. Children's innate eagerness is the best ally.

A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for many of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life.

Rachel Carson



To retain their sense of wonder, children need adults who honour the way they learn. Children of all ages should have abundant time for active free-flow play, during which they take initiative, think imaginatively and build friendship. A wealth of open-ended play – with simple materials – can set children on the road to being confident individuals with a lively interest in life.

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Robertsbridge, East Sussex,
England TN32 5DR

www.communityplaythings.co.uk

Tel: 0800 387 457

