



Block Play for All Children

How to help children with special needs enjoy this wonderful learning area.

By Jennifer Prescott

Helping Children with Visual Disabilities

The preschooler with a visual disability needs to explore construction toys with both hands in order to learn about their shape, size, texture, weight, and other characteristics. Encourage the child to feel the toys all over and describe what he or she feels. Your comments and questions will help her become conscious of the toys' basic traits: "That block is curved. Feel the curve." "Is the block a square or a circle?" The child might also feel what other children are building (with their permission), to get an idea of how to play with the construction toys.

- Once a child begins to build with construction toys, you may draw attention to concepts that other children learn by looking at the toys as they use them or by watching others during play. For example, "You used lots of blocks to make this wall. It's long. Feel it." "Who has more blocks, you or Carlos?"
- Emphasize the concept of number, which can be especially difficult for children with visual disabilities to understand: "You have two blocks on the top of the tower. Feel them: One ...two ..."
- Encourage other children to talk as they play and to tell the child with a visual disability what they're doing. This will draw the child's attention to concepts as well as involve her in social play and conversational language. For example, "Carlitta, tell Renee about the long road you're making."
- Children learn a lot about problem solving by trying out their own ideas, watching others solve problems and adapting those ideas, and working along with other children to arrive at solutions. Adults should actively encourage a child with a visual disability to share ideas and work with others. When the child successfully solves a problem, talk with her about it in the vicinity of others: "How did you get those blocks to stand up like that?"
- Adults may ask other children to describe their solutions to problems and suggest that children work together. When a child with a visual disability gets "stuck," offer help by describing ideas that others have tried: "Duane made his tower on a board so it stays up better." "Natalie put bigger pieces at the bottom. That worked, too."

Helping Children with Hearing Disabilities

- Language and cognition go hand in hand. When children see something that is long, they are better able to understand that concept by giving it a label that describes the object (long block).
- Children with hearing disabilities are not always aware of math words that other children pick up more easily. You can help by observing their play and from time to time encouraging them to use relevant terms as they play with construction toys. For example, "I see you're making two towers. Which one has more blocks in it?"
- Young children are learning to solve complicated problems by using words to express their feelings. Periodically encourage a child with a hearing disability, who may be reluctant to speak, to talk about a problem-solving situation and how he or she resolved it.

Helping Children with Physical Disabilities

- Children learn by doing. If children with physical disabilities avoid building with construction toys, they miss many opportunities. Helping a child find materials and body positions that allow him or her to participate actively can itself become a lesson in problem solving.
- Set out several types of building toys and ask the child to find out which are easiest to work with. He might also experiment with positions, such as on his tummy with his chest over a bolster and his arms forward, lying on one side with a support behind the back, or propped in a sitting position in a corner.
- Finally, help a child feel less frustrated as he manipulates materials by presenting difficulties as construction problems to solve. For instance, ask, "Cody, what might hold your building steady while you work on it? Could you use tape or clay to hold it down somehow?"

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