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Block play with no blocks

How can you have block play when you have no blocks?

Ever since I began working in early years at the beginning of the 1990s, I have known that blocks and block play were an important part of our early years provision. I didn't learn about Froebel's theories about gifts and blocks until some time later, but block play was always an intrinsic part of the offer and never something to be omitted. It is one of those things that has become mainstream early years, and I, like many others I expect, just accepted this, without knowledge of the theorists. So, when in 2017 I moved to working in a wholly outdoor provision, in the forest, I faced a dilemma. How do you provide opportunities for block play when you don't have any blocks? One solution would have been to buy some blocks and take them to the forest every day. But this didn't really fit in with our forest school ethos, and, as we were already taking all our food, water, a toilet, and toilet tent, it would have added one more thing to carry. Moreover, precious wooden blocks would be ruined by mud and rain, so we had to think of another way.

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Our solution was, of course, logs, sticks, branches, and a few old planks we had acquired and hid in a bush each night. These made great construction materials. But were they block play? I have been reflecting on this recently

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as part of the level 5 early years lead educator apprenticeship I am doing. It has made me revisit things I thought I knew and see them with fresh eyes. I started by going back to Froebel's gifts. *Gifts Three to Six consisted of a variety of wooden prisms – based on square, triangular or rectangular bases… Froebel recognised the child's impulse for self-activity and taking things apart and re-forming them, so initially explained his thinking in how to use the Gifts in explicit ways. Later, finding these instructions were being used too prescriptively (Liebschner 1992), he advocated free play with the blocks but explained how the blocks should be opened and put away in the spirit of 'freedom with guidance'.* [1]. Clearly my logs, sticks and pieces of wood were not the same as Froebel's gifts. They did not stack neatly into prisms, for a start. They were odd shapes, mis-matching, with natural bends and curves that make trees so unique. Froebel's gifts were also not the blocks I had known in the numerous early years settings where I have worked.

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Jane Whinnett explains that, today, the blocks in most settings are actually based on a set of unit blocks developed by Caroline Pratt in 1913 and these are related directly to Froebel's 4th Gift, the rectangular prism, in a ratio of 1:2:4. Caroline Pratt rejected the idea of a fixed curriculum and, influenced by Froebel's kindergarten, developed methods focussed on play, encouraging children to freely choose their play projects. In 1933, following years of observing children's block play in the classroom, Harriet Johnson[2] identified several stages that children go through as they develop their play. She writes about the stages of block play in

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her book The Art of Block Building. I wondered if these stages would apply to my 'not block' block play in the forest.

Transporting

Johnson describes how very young children move blocks from place to place, sometimes stacking them in 'irregular, conglomerate piles before the period of construction begins'. This is definitely true of logs, sticks and branches at forest school. Transporting them is commonly seen. Children use baskets, hand pulled trollies, bags or anything else they can access. They load up their woodland finds, transport them somewhere else and leave them in a heap.

Forming Rows and Stacks

This is one of the most common forms of block play in the woods. Young children love to line things up or stack them on top of each other. The row of logs (picture 1) was constructed by a three-year-old. Each log is heavy, and it took him nearly an hour to roll them all from different parts of the forest to make this arrangement. When he had finished, he left them there. It seemed that the process was more important to him than the result, or maybe he was really satisfied with the product and wanted to leave it there for others to see. The stack (picture 2) was created by a four-year-old, who spent time testing out what pieces would sit on each other to create her tower.

Harriet Johnson identified several stages that children go through as they develop their play

Bridging

Creating bridges is more difficult in the woods with bits of stick and branches that don't balance well, but that doesn't deter children. That is especially so if there is water involved. Quite recently, two four-year-olds worked together to


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build a bridge over a large puddle of water created by a surprise downpour. They used tree stumps and branches to create their bridge, carefully testing it to see if it would hold their weight as they gingerly walked across it.

Creating enclosures

Making enclosures is also a popular activity at forest school. I have one child who is so knowledgable about dinosaurs, he knows all their names and if each dinosaur is a carnivore or herbivore. He often makes an enclosure from sticks or stones for a dinosaur he has brought with him. The enclosure (picture 3) is made from sticks pushed into the soil and houses stones transported from the fire pit.

Prompted by a recent trip to the beach, I wondered: can you have block play without any logs, tree stumps or sticks? Can it exist with just stones as the construction material? Picture 4 was a structure found on the beach. It definitely is an enclosure, but what it was designed to enclose, must have long gone home with its builder.

Can you have block play without any logs, tree stumps or sticks? Can it exist with just stones as the construction material?

The final three block play stages include more complex structures, using blocks to represent real things. Children may identify their constructions after building them (early representation) or before beginning to build (later representation). As children grow and develop, you can observe the change from naming something after it is built to saying what they are going to build before they start. The purpose of the structure also becomes more important. Pictured is an impressive castle (picture 5), built and identified by a four-year-old. Interestingly, when another child had asked him during construction what he was building, he had first said he didn't


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know; then he had said it was a house. When it was finished, he announced he had built a castle with a dragon at the top. The next structure (picture 6) is a fairy house, built and then named by a five-year-old.

The final pictures are of found structures that, I think, were made by older children or even adults. The complexity and planning that has gone into them suggests that they were built with the final structure in mind. Pictures 7, 8 and 9 all seem to illustrate that final phase of later representation.

So, back to my original question: can you have block play without blocks? I think you can. Sticks, logs, branches, bark, and tree stumps all make great block building materials in the forest, and large pebbles and stones work on the beach where you don't have any trees. The stages of block play described by Caroline Pratt can be observed, from the early transporting of materials to the later planning and building stage. Froebel's original recognition of the child's impulse to take things apart and reform them also would be true of structures created in the forest and on the beach with the natural material to hand. The essence of block play is alive in the woods, even where there are no blocks for play.

The essence of block play is alive in the woods, even where there are no blocks for play

[1] Whinnett J, (2020) *Froebel's Gifts and Block Play Today* available at https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/Froebels-gifts-and-block-play-today.pdf, accessed on 3/11/2022.
[2] Johnson H M, (1933) *The Art of Block Building*, The John Day Company, New York

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