

Block Building and Make-Believe for Every Child

It's choice time in a class of 4-year-olds. The block area is filled with boys, while girls occupy the dramatic play center. The teacher approaches Rosella, who is playing grocery store, and asks if she'd like to play in the block area later. "Nah, there's no pretty stuff in there, and the boys play too loud with the blocks," Rosella says.

Glancing at the block center, the teacher sees Hakeem and several other boys building a farm. She walks over and encourages Hakeem to join the dramatic play center after he finishes making the barn. He declines. "Baby dolls are for girls. Boys don't like to cook, and you got too much pots and plates in there," he says.

When you look around the room during choice time, do you usually see boys in certain centers and girls in others? When you try to persuade children to explore new centers, do they react like Rosella and Hakeem?

Children's center choices may be closely related to the things they hear and see on television, in magazines, and from observing family interactions. Often, stereotypical gender roles include ideas like only females wear pink, cook, or wash dishes and only males build houses or race cars. When boys pretend to feed a baby, set the table, or iron shirts, they are practicing positive and supportive roles as family members. When girls plan, measure, build, sort, or classify with blocks, they are exploring scientific and mathematical concepts. Learning centers are important places where all children can develop cognitive, social, and emotional skills as they imagine, create, converse, and clean up together.

In our program, we put our heads together and began making changes in the classroom. These changes made a difference in the children's play choices. When we encouraged children to take materials from one area to another, they moved naturally between centers as they extended their play scenarios. Children carried cups and plates to have a picnic in the block center. They



used blocks to cook beef stew and build elaborate cribs for the baby dolls. As boys and girls began using both centers, we noticed that they collaborated more in the dramatic play center. The girls took leadership roles there.

Here are some tips for encouraging boys and girls to try out the centers they do not usually visit.

Make dramatic play more appealing to boys

- Invite a man—a father, grandfather, retiree, family friend, volunteer, or teacher—to play in the area.
- Purchase furniture and other items in neutral colors that are not stereotypically associated with one gender (for example, avoid pink stoves).
- Add a bucket of river stones or other smooth rocks. The boys in our class love using them for “cooking.”
- Display photos of men carrying, feeding, nurturing, and caring for babies.
- Include a wide variety of clothes and props. Garage sales and thrift shops are great places to acquire ties, suit jackets, shoes, tools, and sports paraphernalia like baseball cards and athletic trophies. Join the Freecycle Network (www.freecycle.org) or visit the “free”



section of Craigslist (www.craigslist.org) to give and get free clothing, appliances, and household props.

- Include disposable cameras and old cell phones. Encourage children to “fix” them with tape and toy screwdrivers; in our class, they use pencils. (If you allow children to actually take apart electronics, adult supervision is mandatory to ensure safety.)
- Display books that show nurturing boys and men in ways that inspire active play, such as *The Daddy Book*, by Todd Parr; *Families and Loving*, by Ann Morris; *Ira Sleeps Over*, by Bernard Waber; *Olie’s Bedtime Walk*, by Grete Janus Hertz; *My Daddy Is a Giant*, by Carl Norac; and *William’s Doll*, by Charlotte Zolotow.

Make the block area more appealing to girls

- Ask a woman—a mother, grandmother, retiree, family friend, volunteer, or teacher—to play in the area.
- Provide lengths of brightly colored fabric in various textures and sizes.

- Include a basket of adornments for block structures, such as strings of beads, small fabric pieces, seed pods, and silk flowers.

- Display photos of women working as mechanics, construction workers, architects, and carpenters.

- Cover unit blocks with 3" x 5" photos of each child. Seal the photos onto the blocks by laminating or using clear, wide packing tape. The children can then put themselves and their friends into their constructions.

- Provide stuffed animals, dolls, and small animal and family figures to add an element of dramatic play to block building.

- Offer books such as *Arches to Zigzags*, by Michael Crosbie; *Minerva Louise and the Red Truck*, by Janet Morgan Stoeke; *Raise the Roof*, by Anastasia Suen; *Roxaboxen*, by Alice McClerran; *Shape Capers*, by Cathryn Falwell; *This Is Our House*, by Michael Rosen; and *Tools*, by Ann Morris.



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SUPPORTING DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Teachers’ intentional efforts to entice girls into the block area and boys into the dramatic play area will be even more successful if they keep in mind the children’s cultures and languages. When you add new components, make sure they are authentic and familiar to the children so they can build on prior knowledge.

Don’t just add things—announce them! Create labels in children’s home languages to help you learn to say key words like *trophy*, *hammer*, *basket*, and *flower*. Then, take children on a tour of the areas and demonstrate how to use the new materials.