

Blocks Play

What Do Scholars Learn from Block Play?

“Block Play involves the whole person—muscles and senses, intellect and emotion, individual growth and social interaction. Learning results from the imaginative activity, from the need to solve and pose problems.” —Elisabeth S. Hirsch, The Block Book

What Does Blocks Play Look Like?

Scholars play and build with blocks for an extended period, while the teacher observes how they approach building and problem-solving. The teacher then intentionally selects the appropriate moment to ask probing questions, guiding scholars to take their thinking and building to the next level.

On days when discoveries are made, scholars build especially advanced structures, or a group overcomes a social issue, the teacher should leave 5-10 minutes to highlight this during a wrap-up. In the wrap-up, the teacher strategically chooses scholars to share and facilitates a discussion so that these scholars teach the rest of the class what they have learned.

During block play, you will set clear expectations for how scholars will behave in the blocks room and how the time is structured. However, because this is a play-based time, it will look different than a typical lesson. The volume level will be higher than usual, and scholars should not be instructed where to sit, who to work with, or what to build. Instead, give scholars the freedom to engage in unstructured play and to monitor themselves and problem-solve independently.



Setting Up a Blocks Room

1. Cultivating the Right Atmosphere

The physical environment should clearly communicate that the blocks area is a valued, central part of the curriculum.

- **Inspirational Displays:** Cover walls with high-quality photos of real-world architecture, buildings, and structures. Display examples of exceptional student work to celebrate and inspire complex designs.
- **Clear Labeling:** Label *everything* in the room using both a picture and a corresponding name.
- **A Dedicated Space:** Store away any unrelated materials or furniture to maintain focus and prevent clutter.



2. Strategic Organization and Layout

Thoughtful organization is crucial for ensuring safety, maintaining smooth traffic flow, and facilitating effective classroom management.

Room Layout Fundamentals

- **Designated Paths:** Establish a clearly marked walking space between the block storage area and the main area where students construct their projects.
- **Traffic Management:** Separate the most frequently used blocks (such as unit blocks and doubles) into two different storage areas. This prevents overcrowding during play and minimizes bottlenecks during cleanup.

3. Managing Accessories

Accessories should enhance construction and imaginative play, not distract from it.

- **Storage:** Use clear, neatly labeled bins with pictures for all accessories (e.g., small cars, people, animals).

- **Controlled Access:** Only release a limited number of accessories at a time, in small quantities. This encourages students to be selective and purposeful.
- **Documentation Tools:** Provide students with materials such as Post-it Notes, index cards, and pencils so they can label their structures, create signage, or plan their construction.
- **Inspiration Bins:** Include a bin with laminated pictures or cards showing famous works of architecture to provide new ideas and prompt complex designs.



Blocks Room Setup Checklist

Educators can use this checklist to ensure a safe, organized, and engaging Blocks Room environment is established and maintained.

Atmosphere and Environment

- ☐ Walls are covered with inspirational photos of architecture/buildings.
- ☐ Displays of student work are featured prominently.
- ☐ All materials are labeled with both a picture and a name.
- ☐ All unrelated furniture and materials are stored away (the room is dedicated to blocks).

Organization and Layout

- ☐ A clear walking space is designated between storage and building areas.
- ☐ A specific, spacious area is set aside for hollow blocks.
- ☐ High-traffic blocks (units, dublongs) are stored in two different areas to prevent overcrowding.
- ☐ Unit blocks are stored on low, open shelves adjacent to the building area.
- ☐ Parts (half units) and wholes (units) are stored next to each other.
- ☐ Unit blocks, dublongs, and quadlongs are stored with their length visible (orientation check).
- ☐ Stacking height is marked with tape (no more than 5 blocks high).
- ☐ Labels are placed on both the front and back of the unit block shelves.

Accessories

- ☐ Accessories are stored in clear, neatly labeled bins with pictures.
- ☐ Only small quantities of a few accessory types are put out at a time.
- ☐ Documentation tools (such as Post-its, pencils, and index cards) are readily available.
- ☐ A bin of laminated architectural pictures is provided for inspiration.

