Director’s Corner: Exploring Building

At the recent National Coalition for Campus Children’s Centers conference that I attended in Chicago, the Community Playthings representatives modeled engagement in block play for the center directors while creating an elaborate block structure with an internal marble chute. One of the Kodo Kids representatives gave a seminar on exploring engineering, or what she calls “tinker thinking” (http://kodokids.com/blog/tinkerthinking/). In both cases, they promoted the value of children exploring the physical, social, and aesthetic properties of their own constructions and encouraging educators to allow time for such play (see http://www.communityplaythings.com/resources/articles/2014/the-power-of-play).

A 2001 study by Wolfgang, Stannard, and Jones found that “block-play performance in preschool is a predictor of mathematics achievement in middle school and high school.” Children typically progress during the early childhood years from carrying and otherwise exploring blocks, to building mostly in rows (either horizontal or vertical), to bridging spaces, to enclosing spaces, to making decorative patterns, to naming structures that they build intentionally (e.g., saying they’re making a zoo), to symbolizing known buildings with blocks. In the process, they explore concepts of gravity as they relate to balance and stability, count and measure building features, strengthen geometric concepts and spatial skills, and discover multiple solutions to building problems (Discovery & Exploration). They strengthen eye-hand coordination, build strength to handle large blocks, manage body movements to avoid bumping structures, follow safety procedures with blocks, etc. (Physical Capabilities / Health & Safety). Given enough time, they can experiment with design, notice varied features of buildings, imagine new constructions, etc. (Artistic Expression & Appreciation). In school, children often work on block building with peers, so they strengthen their skills for sharing materials, coordinating actions, and negotiating cooperative designs (Interaction & Cooperation), as well as practice Communication by discussing plans, writing labels or drawing blueprints, etc. Throughout the exploration, they develop confidence by mastering diverse materials, taking responsibility for cleaning up the space, managing emotions when structures fall, etc. (Self-Esteem & Independence).

As adults, we can support children’s explorations by:

• Building WITH the children to gently support progress without directing or frustrating them.
• Taking the child’s lead, following the child’s interest, and providing only the support needed.
• Adding people, animals, vehicles, etc. to the selection of blocks to extend the play.
• Allowing children to combine a variety of blocks, as well as diverse recycled materials.
• Allowing children to continue working on a structure for a period of days.
• Encouraging children to dissemble buildings as they assemble them – one block at a time (i.e., rather than knocking or kicking them down).

Now that the weather affords more outdoor play, shift the building from blocks to rocks (and other outdoor “loose parts” like sticks, logs, leaves, and moss). Construction with natural materials that have different features challenges the children’s understanding of balance and sense of aesthetics in ways that prompt renewed interest, plus the fresh air and open space have a way of offering inspiration of their own. Be ready with the camera to document the children’s ingenuity!