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"Building Up": Block Play After September 11

Lisa Edstrom
Bank Street School for Children

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5 "Building Up": Block Play After September 11

Lisa Edstrom

LISA EDSTROM has been teaching kindergarten for the last nine years. She currently teaches five- and six year-old children at the Bank Street School for Children. Lisa has a B.A. in folklore and mythology from Harvard University, and an M.S. in early childhood education from the Bank Street College of Education.

Like most people in New York City, the children in my class were affected by the events of September 11. However, not until five weeks later did these particular five- and six year-olds begin to make sense of what happened. Through the use of block play, they were able to explore the difficult emotions and questions we all had about the World Trade Center attack.

All the children were familiar with the Twin Towers. Some had parents who worked there. One father reported that on that morning he looked out his office window, saw the plane headed for the building and fled. Two other parents who worked in the building never made it to work that day. Luckily, none of the children lost parents. But many of them knew neighbors or family friends who died. Two of the children's parents work for major news organizations. Consequently, some children seemed as informed as the average adult.

As a class we engaged in much discussion of what happened, and what the children feared might still happen. Some of this talk took place in casual situations, such as lunch. However, as is our custom at Bank Street, we also had meetings as a whole class to discuss the children's thoughts.

Prior to the World Trade Center attack, our block area was used for a farms and markets curriculum. In the days immediately following the attack, there was some non-specific, but related play in the form of superhero and firefighter scenarios with manipulatives, but the block area continued to be used for farms and markets.

Block play is an important part of the early childhood curriculum at Bank Street. With blocks the children work out mathematical and scientific problems such as balance and fractions. They develop an understanding of spatial relationships. With social studies at our curriculum's core, blocks also provide young children with an opportunity to recreate their world and "play" with it. Over a third of the physical space of my classroom is devoted to blocks, and all the children work with them every week. There are a variety of management

strategies, including optional and assigned block tasks; independent and group work; freely chosen and assigned partners; free choice or assigned structures.

The week the children decided to start building the World Trade Center I felt the farm motivation had been exhausted. But I also felt the children needed time to make their own choice about what to build next. However, I did want the entire class to share the block area space. That meant all 23 children would have a building in the block area at the same time. I sent half the class at a time to work in the area. The children had assigned partners. While trying to figure out how to work within a limited space and still have enough room to incorporate individual ideas, one of the children suggested "building up."

The first pair to start building announced that they were making one of the World Trade Center towers. A nearby pair decided to make the other. These four children worked together, building matching towers. Their enthusiasm was contagious, and suddenly towers were being erected all over the block area. Not all of the children built the World Trade Center. Some built towers that still existed, such as the Empire State Building. One group of three children built a castle instead of a tower. The buildings looked just like any that a five or six-year-old might build with unit blocks. However, their size made them impressive. The tallest tower was as high as the tallest child in the class could reach while standing on a stool.

As a teacher, I watched in amazement. I did little but listen and observe as the children worked. The energy in the room was high, but the mood was somber. This was the first time that the children as a group, and many of them as individuals, had approached the topic of September 11 through play. As the week progressed, I had to calm parents who were upset by the images in the block area and the fact that their children were talking about hard topics.

The children were invested in keeping their buildings, rather than acting out the destruction of them. They built in safety measures to insure that their buildings could withstand attack. Several buildings had special reinforcements to make them stronger in case a plane crashed into them. Some even had warning lights.

The children constructed emergency exits, expressing concern for the people who were to occupy their buildings. Several children incorporated slides to enable people to escape from higher floors. One building had a diving board on top of it and a pool down below for people to land in. Several children made parachutes for people who jumped. In an attempt to support their problem

solving, I shared with them a New York Times article about innovative emergency escape ideas that have been considered for real buildings. The children had come up with nearly every solution mentioned in the story on their own.

As the children constructed their towers, there was much talk about the bad guys who might try to attack. The anger was clear in their voices as they talked about the jails they were including in their buildings. One building had a special device to capture a plane trying to crash into it in order to prevent any damage and to seize the bad guys. Even the group that built the castle included a large dungeon to hold the bad guys.

Once the buildings were all constructed, much of the ensuing play was about people escaping from the buildings. Although not a single plane entered our block area, and all the buildings remained intact, block people were continually being evacuated. Some were not so lucky. One image that stands out in my mind is of a boy repeatedly making a block person dive to his death, despite the evacuation slide he had built. Other play included stockpiling food for emergencies and plotting to catch bad guys.

I believe that this block play served three purposes for the children. First, it allowed them to express their anger about what had happened. The block area was a safe arena in which to discuss the "bad guys" who had really attacked the World Trade Center and to explore ways in which they would respond to them. Second, the children were able to explore issues of life and death. This happened in their dramatic play, during which the children repeatedly had the block people escape from their buildings or fall to their deaths. Finally, the children took control of the building process to make their towers "better" than the originals. Barbara Biber (1951) writes that play provides,

a relief from the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness that many children feel keenly as junior members of our well-ordered [or in this case not so well-ordered] adult world...[and a] chance to lay the plans, to judge what is best, to create the sequence of events (p.2).

The block play I observed was very much like the ordinary block play of five- and six-year-olds at Bank Street. The children recreated the scene of a recent experience and then through play they explored or tried to make sense of what they had seen and heard. In this case, however, the children were faced with the breakdown of the well-ordered adult world they usually explore. There had been a tragic failure of stability and security. Play provided them with the

opportunity to take control—if only for a short while—solve problems, and restore some sense of order.

The September 11 block work lasted about two weeks. The process was a natural one for the children. Blocks and dramatic play were a familiar, well used tool for making sense of experience. After this period, individual children revisited their concerns as needed, but the group as a whole was ready to move on and we returned to our social studies curriculum about farms and markets.

**See attached CD Rom for brief video of how the September 11 block building unfolded in Lisa Edstrom's classroom.*

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