

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF LANGUAGE

Playing with blocks aids language development in children as it ultimately leads to the creation of words and ideas.

What is the connection between playing with objects, like building blocks and construction toys, and language? Mental concepts or 'schemas' are necessary for what the psychologist Piaget called 'object permanence': the knowledge that objects continue to exist even when they are out of sight. This is necessary for memory and language development. Children acquire mental concepts (abstract ideas) through imaginative play. As children play with objects they begin to understand more about their qualities. Older children begin to make up stories and scripts for these objects. An important leap in understanding occurs when the child learns to substitute and combine mental categories. For example, a toy truck can be driven along a chair and soon the chair becomes a 'road'. Such development is essential for 'executive function': the ability to set goals, make plans, and remain focused on an activity. This development is important in impulse control because children can use a mental image of an object to satisfy themselves while they wait for the real thing. Children who play more imaginatively have hence been shown to have better impulse control.[\[1\]](#)

In one study[\[2\]](#), sets of moulded plastic building bricks were distributed to a random group of families with children aged 1½ - 2½ years who were registered at a paediatrics clinic. The parents also received 2 newsletters with 'blockactivities', suggestions of things that they could do with their child and the blocks (sort blocks by colour, see how big a stack they could make, etc). [Not to worry; children in the control group received the same number of blocks at the conclusion of the study.] 175 families agreed to participate in the study, and a total of 140 families (80%) completed exit interviews.

Most of the children who received blocks reported playing with them. Receiving blocks was associated with significantly higher language scores in a sample of middle- and low-income children, 6 months later. Scores on the MacArthur-Bates Communicative Development Inventories were significantly higher among children who had received the building blocks, compared with the control group.

The researchers conclude that playing with blocks can lead to improved language development in middle- and low-income children.

[\[1\]](#) Jerome L. Singer. (1994). Imaginative play and adaptive development. In J. Goldstein (Ed.), *Toys, play and child development*. Cambridge University Press.

[\[2\]](#) Dimitri A. Christakis, Frederick J. Zimmerman, & Michelle M. Garrison. (2007). Effect of block play on language acquisition and attention in toddlers: A pilot randomized controlled trial. *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, 161, 967-971.