Why Are Children Playing?
For the young child, play and work involve the same actions: interacting with people, manipulating objects, and making discoveries that help make sense of the world. Learning happens naturally through play. Play is the work of children. For school success, children must develop physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and creatively. Play is a crucial part of this development of the whole child.

What Is the Block Center?
The block center – sometimes called the block corner – is an area set aside in the classroom for play with blocks and block accessories. The blocks available in the center vary from maple unit blocks to hollow blocks and smaller building blocks. Accessories serve as props for building with blocks and may include toy vehicles, animals, and people. Blocks and accessories are ideal to help children create worlds they can manage.

What Are Children Learning?
The block center is ideal for large motor development and coordination skills as young children lift, move, and stack the blocks. Children refine different motor skills when they crawl and move vehicles along “roadways” or set up furnishings and people in doll houses.

Young children are acquiring critical social skills as they work, share, and talk with other children while creating with blocks and block accessories. When they work together to build large structures or to set up pretend play scenarios, children are learning the discussion skills needed to reach compromises with others.

Children’s communication and language skills grow along with their understanding of people as they engage in pretend play with blocks and block accessories. They learn how to listen and observe to understand what others are trying to tell them. They also learn how to communicate with words, expressions, and gestures so that others can understand their thoughts.

Children are acquiring knowledge and skills that will provide an important foundation for later learning. From the raw materials of wooden shapes, children solve problems and gain confidence as they refine critical-thinking and decision-making skills. Block play encourages children to practice scientific, trial-and-error thinking when they attempt to build a tall structure or bridge an opening.
Block play exposes children naturally – with lots of hands-on experience – to math principles and basic concepts. As children manipulate blocks, they learn to recognize basic shapes and what numbers stand for. They make comparisons (more/less, taller/shorter), classify objects (by shape, size, color, etc.), match and sort. Through play, children are given opportunities to learn seriation (ordering by size) and equivalence (noticing relationships among the blocks).

Other learning opportunities in the block center include exposure to basic scientific principles. Children experiment with balance while building. They discover that a wide base is more stable than a narrow one, that a short construction is less tippy than a tall one. They experience gravity when setting up and playing with cars on ramps and inclines.

Because it is completely open-ended, block play encourages creativity. There are as many different ways to build structures as there are children to build them. And because these structures aren’t permanent, it’s impossible to fail. Block constructions can always be rebuilt, refined, or “remodeled.”

What Can You Do to Encourage Children’s Learning?

• Set up a block center that is appropriate for the age of the children that will use it. Infant and toddler block centers may include lightweight vinyl-covered foam blocks, cardboard or plastic bricks, small wooden cubes (at least 2”), and shapes without any sharp points or edges. Simple vehicles and push toys with firmly attached wheels and rounded shapes are safe for younger children’s block play. Include some safe chunky-sized play people, also.

• For children preschool age and up, providing a good set of mathematically related unit blocks in the block center is the most valuable thing you can do to encourage learning. It is through manipulation of precisely dimensioned unit building blocks that most of the mathematical and scientific learning takes place. Other blocks may be included to extend the play experiences. Some smaller or larger scale wooden, plastic, or foam blocks can be useful. A variety of vehicles, traffic signs, and play people that are in scale with the block constructions will suggest many play scenarios.

• Place the block play center in a protected, defined area out of traffic paths where children can build undisturbed and structures cannot be knocked over easily. A short-napped rug or carpet will keep the noise level down without interfering with building.

• Adding a variety of papers and writing implements to the center or placing them close to the center will encourage children to make signs or “blue prints” of their structures. Materials like road maps, travel brochures, and books about places or vehicles will inspire play with a literacy connection.

• Have other play props available to rotate in and out of the block center. Construction hats and tools or police and fire hats add to the drama of block play and increase the focus. A barn or doll house may suggest play themes. Scarves, fabric squares, boxes, and other “found” materials encourage creativity as they become tents or apartments.
• Talk with children as they build and play. Describe what they are doing. “I see you are building really high!” “Now you are putting the square block on the rectangle.” Ask open-ended questions to encourage critical thinking. “I see you are ready for a roof. How are you going to build it? What blocks will you use?”

• Get down and build with the children. Always check first to see if adult involvement is desired or appropriate at the time. Follow the children’s lead as they set the theme for play. Be respectful of their constructions and their desire and ability to build independently.

• With a set of good quality, mathematically related blocks and supportive adults who respect children’s abilities to learn through block play, children are empowered to construct their own knowledge across the learning domains.