

Building Upon Ideas
Winnetka Public School Nursery
Winnetka, Illinois

Midway through the school year, our three year-old class discovered the large wooden blocks in our classroom and how they could build with them as opposed to simply on or around them. This was a big draw and suddenly the block corner became a very popular area in our classroom. Although we were excited that it had become an area of interest for the majority of the children, it had also become an area of conflict, as we were dealing with a lot of sharing, negotiation, and spatial issues. We invited small groups of children into our studio space to work with small wooden blocks on a table-top. We felt this was a more manageable way for them to test their ideas. We also provided small plastic people, reference books on construction and design, and paper and pencils.



While figuring out how to make a roof, Miles recalled our rule about building higher than our shoulders.

“We can only build up to our shoulders or it’s not safe.”

The children then discussed using a blanket for the roof instead.



Elizabeth’s stairs collapsed when she put the people on top. Miles and Katie helped her.

Miles – *“I know! We could use tape!”*

He tested his theory, but the block structure fell apart.

Katie – *“You don’t use tape or glue with blocks. You just stack them up.”*

Katie then helped Miles stagger the blocks in such a way that they were supported.



Katie proposed that they make tables and chairs. Ellie used two triangular blocks for chairs.

Elizabeth – *“Hey, it looks like a slide!”*

Elizabeth added another level to the “slide” making it longer and steeper.



Katie – “I don’t know how to make a table and chairs.”

Teacher – “Why don’t you try drawing your idea first?”

Katie – “I think we have a problem. Tables are round and we don’t have any circle blocks.”

Teacher – “Are all tables round?”

Katie – “Yes.”

Teacher – “I wonder if there is another way that we could make a table?”

Logan – “We could just use another circle, like a clock or a picture.”

Although the children’s plans and focus continued to fluctuate, throughout this experience they shared ideas, collaborated in bringing these ideas to life, and used multiple resources to problem-solve.

The day after this first meeting, photos of the “stairs” and the “slide” were posted in the block corner. Elizabeth, Ellie, Miles and Josh immediately decided that they wanted to recreate the stairs, on a larger scale. They soon realized that their “stairs” looked more like the picture of the “slide”.

Other children became interested in trying the slide out. They gathered around, taking turns rolling cars and cylinder blocks down the slope. A teacher placed a basket at the bottom to catch the cars and blocks. Soon there were several children involved and the situation had the potential of becoming a bit chaotic. Fortunately, and to our delight, as the children confronted problems, they came up with a list of rules, such as:



- No trucks because they are too big*
- *One at a time*
- *The slide can only be as tall as your shoulders*
- *Stop and wait if a child is pulling their block or car out of the basket. You can say, “Red Light”*

We continued to provide current visual documentation, and the children continued to rebuild variations of the original slide through the end of the school year. When safety issues needed to be addressed, they came up with new rules and posted signs. They even improved the original design by adding “safety walls”. By the end of the year, the block corner, which had once felt unproductive and chaotic, was now a constructive, cooperative space, where children were making connections and setting intentions, formulating and communicating plans, revisiting and expanding upon ideas, and negotiating rules and safety.