

Learn with Outlast blocks

A guide for early years professionals • by Ellen Veselack and Eric M. Nelson



Introducing Outlast blocks to children

Involving children in the whole process – from ordering the blocks to unpacking them when they finally arrive – will increase their sense of ownership and interest in the new materials.

- Show children the Community Playthings catalogue. Explain that they will be getting new blocks for the outdoor area. Identify which set is being ordered. Discuss how many blocks are included, and which kinds.

- Create a scrapbook using catalogue or website pictures. The children can revisit the block scrapbook and anticipate what they could build with the blocks when they arrive.

- Brainstorm with children where the block area could be in the outdoor area. Involve children in preparing this space for the blocks.

- When the blocks arrive, have the unopened boxes moved outdoors near the new block area. Unpack the blocks one at a time. Allow children to identify which block it is, using the catalogue or scrapbook as a reference. Have the children sort the blocks by putting similar blocks together.

- After all the blocks are unpacked, count the different types of blocks. What is the total number of blocks? Does it match what is in the catalogue?



- Talk about where and how the blocks will be stored and how children and teachers will work together to put the blocks away when they are not in use.

Using the blocks

Outlast blocks are designed to encourage creative play and child-directed discovery. Children will need lots of time and repeated opportunities to explore the properties of their new blocks.

- Give children time to explore the blocks. They will most likely play with individual blocks before beginning to build larger structures.

- It is important to remember that these blocks, unlike other wooden blocks, can get wet and be used in sand and water play. Children may need to be told this specifically so they feel free to use them in this way. The catalogue or website photos can help children understand this. "Mud kitchen" props can be provided to encourage play.



- Let the children take the lead in determining how to use the blocks. Before establishing guidelines about how to use the blocks, give the children the opportunity to find out for themselves what guidelines are needed.

- Unlike Hollow blocks, the Outlast blocks' unique interlocking feature allows children to build completely stable structures on uneven ground. Initially, children may appear to struggle as they experiment with and practice aligning the holes and buttons to make the blocks "lock" together.

- Observe children using the blocks. Are children building with a specific goal? Or are they building for the pleasure of moving the blocks and creating?

- Resist the urge to over-narrate or suggest to children what they are doing or what they need. Simple questions such as, "What else do you need for your home?" or "Where could you find that?" are often effective in offering support while allowing children ownership of their play.

- What are the children talking about as they build? Are there themes? What props could you offer which would support their interests? Place a basket of natural loose parts (pinecones, acorns, seed pods) nearby for children to use in their play.

- Make a nearby area stocked with paper, clipboards, pencils, rulers, or other drawing tools. Explain that drawing your structure at the end of the day is a way to "save" the structure or share the structure with parents, even if the blocks are put away. Children might also like to "plan" their structure on paper before they build.

- Keep a log of the structures that children build. They may build the same structure or type of structure for several weeks. This develops mastery and confidence in building skills.



- Set up provocations for play. If the children are reluctant to use the blocks or have not used the block area recently, setting up the start of a block structure before they arrive is a way to say, "Come on in and continue building. Let's find out what this will become." Be supportive of children's plans and efforts to build.

Possible learning outcomes

Every experience children have holds the potential for learning, yet each experience is unique to that child or children at that particular time. Children learn best through hands-on manipulation of materials and from having meaningful experiences.

Let's consider this experience:

Four children, all four years old, are in the outdoor block area constructing a vehicle. They talk with one another about what parts they need: wheels, a door, a steering wheel and seats. They share what they know about cars and lorries in their discussion. As they talk, they gather blocks and begin to put them together. They estimate how many blocks of each shape they will need, and make piles. They look for the pieces that are the right size and shape to fit into their vision of what they need. They have a discussion about the way the blocks fit together and use the term "lock" as they figure out how the blocks work. The children

work together to lift the heavier blocks and negotiate with one another where each block will go. They build, refine, change and reset the blocks in their vehicle. When they are satisfied, they grab two steering wheels and climb up onto the seats they made. Two sit in the front and two sit in the back. There is rich language and storytelling as they set off on their adventure. The children look over a map a teacher has offered and discuss which way to go, plotting their own route using paper and pen. They have gathered pine cones, leaves and sticks as their food to eat along the way. They stop and get out, filling the car up with petrol and then continue on their way.



What are these children gaining from this experience? Here is a sample of the skills used and strengthened during this simple scenario.



Maths skills:

- Whole/part relationships
- Counting and estimation
- Height, weight and quantity
- Sequence (which blocks must come first)
- Ordinal and cardinal numbers
- Size relationships
- Geometry—3-D shapes
- Parallel and perpendicular



Science skills:

- Gravity
- Cause and effect
- Experience with the natural world
- How machines work (steering wheel, the need for petrol, wheels)



Construction and engineering:

- Stacking, balance and stability
- Bracing, supporting and propping
- Ramping
- Elevation, bridging and covering
- Interior/exterior, making enclosures
- Changing the shape and structure



Kinaesthetic:

- Walking, balancing
- Full body exploration
- Navigating through space
- Bending, squatting
- Reaching, pulling
- Lifting, carrying
- Gripping, grasping, holding
- Small motor (creating the map)



Social skills:

- Sharing knowledge and experiences
- Working collaboratively together
- Building on one another's ideas
- Communicating ideas to others
- Building relationships
- Negotiation
- Considering the ideas and needs of others



Language skills:

- Vocabulary
- Naming and describing
- Asking questions
- Using prepositions
- Multi-word sentences
- Recall and storytelling
- Reciprocal conversations
- Expressive language
- Receptive language
- Written language—creating a map
- Using instructional and directional language
- Following directions



Other skills:

- Planning and critical thinking
- Visual-spatial
- Authentic play
- Creativity and imagination
- Focused attention for an extended period of time
- Bringing and using prior knowledge to play
- Memory and recall
- Transference—real objects becoming something else in play

About Community Playthings Outlast blocks



Finally, wooden blocks made for the outdoors!

There's no better place for learning than the great outdoors. Extending your classroom outside connects children with the natural environment on a daily basis.

Extremely durable, weatherproof and aesthetically beautiful, Outlast products will transform your outdoor space, adding new possibilities and dimensions to your curriculum.

- communityplaythings.co.uk
- sales@communityplaythings.co.uk
- 0800 387 457

About The Outdoor Classroom Project

Children's health, development, learning and well-being have been seriously compromised by decades of changes that have dramatically altered childhood. Key among these changes has been a significantly reduced amount of time spent outdoors, which is linked to a number of other detrimental trends. The Outdoor Classroom Project (OCP), an initiative of the Child Educational Centre (CEC), Caltech/JPL Community, in La Cañada, California, is founded on the belief that early care and education programmes have the power to address these challenges by providing rich and engaging outdoor learning experiences.



- ☀ outdoorclassroomproject.org
- ☀ outdoor-classroom@caltech.edu