Creating structures: Common and uncommon ideas

Consider the descriptions associated with the word structure: arrange, organize, construct, and form. These words describe the actions adults see children do and enjoy. Structure, by definition, is the action of building or constructing something or arranging in a definite pattern of organization.

Children naturally create structures. Outdoor environments and interesting loose materials inspire children to find ways to use the materials. They may line up sticks, arrange rocks, build mini-forts, or create clever combinations of materials. The material, space, and ideas act as encouragement; they create structures large, small, and otherwise!

Think outside the blocks

A common structure familiar to early educators might be a block tower or building, but the term structures invites more meaning than just block buildings. Structures may surface in many areas of an early childhood program, including the block area, art areas (sculptures, collages), dramatic play (tents, tunnels), sand/water table (bridges), outside areas (forts), and even in food (stacked cheese cubes).

Structures show relationship to children’s developmental skills and age. A very young child may be developing skills to use materials, such as an infant grasping and mouthing blocks. Toddlers may attempt stacking and organizing materials. Preschoolers may draw and write plans to symbolize their ideas as well as use complex language in describing the structure, such as balance, weight, gravity, and symmetry.

Structures may also show clear connections to children’s life experiences, such as a child creating a house, airport, or zoo. Others tap into fantasy and creativity, such as a fairy house, a dragon city, or the self-titled egg cooker-zoopty-doo-1166549 (as shown on the left after painting a portrait of her block structure).

“The adult’s role

The adult’s role in helping to build structures consists of providing materials, conversations, observation, and environments. Fill spaces with interesting, safe, and developmentally appropriate materials for structuring. Choose areas where materials can be explored freely with enough space to work comfortably. Invite discussions about the materials and model structure vocabulary (heavy, light, base, foundation, wobbly, sturdy, balance, pattern, symmetry, design, and geometric shapes: square, rectangle, etc.).

When creating structures, children use prior knowledge, experience, and skills. Ask open-ended questions to discover what they already know.
Programs that support broad concepts of structures, common or uncommon, support children’s natural curiosity and factors contributing to quality early education. The experience of creating structures sparks relationships, logical exploration, and application of developmental skills. Structures allow children to work over periods of time and process ideas and strategies while participating in enjoyable experiences.

Possible materials used for structure

Base materials
floors, tables, trays, cardboard, mat boards, benches, chairs

Building materials
blocks, cans, boxes, tubes (paper rolls, carpet rolls), wood, foam, wire, cardboard, large fabric pieces (blankets, sheets, etc.), plastic gutters, PVC-type pipes, hula hoops

Natural materials
sticks, stumps, logs, rocks, pebbles, pinecones, leaves, water, dirt

Art materials
collage items: paper, glue cardboard, wood, straws, tape, paints, clay fabrics, string, yarn, pens, markers, crayons, and recycled materials such as egg cartons, paper tubes, lids, corks, plastic cups, etc.

Planning and extended structure work materials
paper, pencils, markers, cameras, recorders (voice, video), books, pictures, blueprints

References: