

ROUGHT TO YOU  
BY LIFE & TIMES

**PULSE** family

# LEARNING WITH BLOCKS

Playing with building blocks can teach a child necessary and important skills, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

**“W**AA!Waa!” The sound of a baby wailing pierces the silence of the night and wakes a new mother. She turns to look at the clock on the bedside table. It’s 2.38am.

Weary, she gets up to attend to her child. His eyes are swollen from all the crying. When she picks him up, he says only two words: “Mama. Phone.”

Fast forward to today. I am seated opposite the mother, Zahirah Bahruddin, who’s recounting the episode that occurred many months ago. She confides that she was actually horrified when she realised that even though it was the dead of night, her child, Muhammad Rizq Rayyan, had sought comfort from a gadget.

As Rayyan was barely one at the time, Zahirah, 30, knew she had to break her son’s addiction to the device.

She decided to look for a more appropriate toy to give to her son, something that would be a lot more beneficial. She found what she was looking for in Mega Bloks by Fisher-Price. With the larger than usual block size, it is suitable for younger kids who have small hands but huge imagination.

**SAFETY ISSUES**

Reaching for a colourful and manageable storage bag, Zahirah pulls the zipper and turns it upside down. Multi-coloured blocks tumble out noisily onto the coffee table at a cafe where we are seated.

Pointing to the blocks, she says: “As you can see, these blocks are big.”

Size, she adds, is important. If they



Ang says the blocks help improve dexterity.

were smaller, little Rayyan could have easily swallowed them.

Why blocks though? Aren’t there other games that children can play, especially since Zahirah herself didn’t have these sophisticated toys when she was a child?

In fact, she shares with me her recollections of happy days outdoors playing simple games like Jump Rope and netball with her siblings in Jitra, Kedah.

A father of two young boys, James Yap Wee Chun, who is also present, chips in with an answer: Today’s parents are afraid for their children’s safety.



James Yap and Zahirah are strong advocates of building blocks as educational tools.

He confides: “Even though we live next to a playground, I don’t let my children go there.”

Shaking his head, he adds: “Anything can happen and the equipment in the park is also not properly maintained.”

Picking up some of the blocks, James stacks them up. Incidentally, it was his parents who bought Mega Bloks for his son, Jayden Yap Kai Xuan, four years ago. When Jayden could differentiate between the bright colours, James was comforted by the fact that his son was not colour blind.

**ALL ROUND DEVELOPMENT**

Dr Angeline Ang Swee Kim, a consultant

paediatrician, says that apart from colours and size, playing with building blocks allows a child to develop properly in terms of his physical, mental, social and even spiritual aspects.

“It is even more so in the first five years of a child’s life. This is the formative phase of their lives,” she adds.

For emphasis, she says when these blocks are introduced to a child when he’s about to turn one, it helps him improve his coordination, dexterity, muscle tone and strength. These skills are the foundation for other pre-academic skills such as writing and drawing.

For a child, though, playing with blocks is a window to learning to socialise



Scale tone, coordination and other skills are honed by playing with blocks.

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and interact with other people. James demonstrates this when he shares the story of how Jayden now teaches his two-year-old brother, Jansen, how to stack the blocks.

He adds: "Sometimes, when Jansen stacks the blocks one way, Jayden will tell him, 'No. It's not like that'. He then shows his brother how he thinks they should be stacked."

What surprises James is his son's creativity and imagination. During one particular play session, young Jayden built a house with a garage. James was curious about the addition of this garage and asked his son for an explanation. Jayden's answer was that it was for the car. "I never thought that he can think of such details," says the cyber security expert.

Jayden, 5, has, in fact, come up with a problem-solving strategy. A garage means the car will be safe. No one will steal it and the car won't be left out in the hot sun.

#### LIVING DREAMS

With a smile on his face, James confesses that there is a growing collection of toy cars in his house because he's living his dream of playing with them through his sons. He qualifies this curious statement by saying: "My parents didn't think that toys could help in a child's development. The only toy I can remember is Transformers. Instead, I had a lot of books."

While the Yap boys play with cars,

little Rayyan's focus is on something altogether different. Zahirah shares: "He was only 18 months old at the time. He said that one day he would use these blocks to create the *sayap* (wings) of a plane."

The customer marketing coordinator understood that her son had become used to air travel to visit her parents in the north and shows a fondness for aeroplanes.

All this time spent playing with blocks also provides Zahirah with the opportunity to teach Rayyan other skills such as learning to count, the names of shapes and length. Indeed, when play is over, the task of collecting and putting away the blocks is something that Zahirah wants her child to learn.

"Cleaning up and keeping all the blocks in one place will make him more organised and responsible," she explains.

Now that play using building blocks is an established practice in both households, do the children still demand for the mobile phone and other electronic gadgets?

Both parents say "yes", but add that access to them is limited. Whenever Rayyan spends more time than necessary on the phone, Zahirah quickly distracts him with the blocks and the boy is much happier.

James agrees and says: "I don't want them to spend too much time on a tablet. That isn't going to help their communication skills. Besides, I also don't want my kids to ruin their eyesight."



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