

## 4.2 Tumbling Towers with Toddlers: Intention and Decision Making Over Blocks

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### Connections to *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*

- Chapter 1: Intentional Teaching: Complex Decision Making and the Core Considerations
- Chapter 6: Creating a Caring, Equitable Community of Learners
- Chapter 9: Teaching to Enhance Each Child’s Development and Learning

### Case Overview

This case study takes place in a classroom of 2-year-olds in a Reggio-inspired preschool. Children range in age from 2 years, 1 month to 2 years, 10 months. At this stage of development, children present a wide array of skills, interests, and dispositions that make learning both a joyful and complex process. A challenge of working at this center is that while the program is grounded in child-centered, play-based pedagogies, educators are responsible for providing ample evidence of children’s learning according to a specific framework informed by the curriculum of the larger K–12 school of which this early childhood center is part.

Blocks are often seen as both tools for constructive play and as a material that provides insight into children’s mathematical development. However, blocks also provide opportunities for complex decision making and social interaction that, properly scaffolded, build confidence, deepen relationships, and promote logical–mathematical intelligence. In this case, you will observe children of varying ages building with blocks and Magna-Tiles. Case vignettes are followed by brief reflections on the teaching strategies involved.

### Learning Objectives

1. Identify effective teaching strategies (Masterson 2022, 183–84) used in the case study.
2. Analyze the benefits of using a small group format for open-ended play experiences with specific materials.
3. Identify methods to extend children’s inquiries through multiple modes.
4. Elaborate on ways to meaningfully engage with children of diverse interests and varying levels of skill and development.

### Case Narrative

Sunlight fills the room with a cool autumnal light. Mere minutes have passed since 15 two-year-olds have dispersed throughout the classroom, seeking their own pursuits. Some head directly for the sensory table, which is sloshing with blue-hued water. Others visit the atelier, eager to get their fingers to work with wire and clay. Most popular, however, is the block table.

As the final children leave the meeting rug, I pull a chair up to the block table. The children are enthralled by the smooth, bright, wooden blocks, as am I. Some transition swiftly into building, stacking blocks up high. Others, however, I invite to begin with a simple prompt: “I wonder how you will use these blocks today?”

A minute or so into our building, I encourage Alana (2 years, 3 months—henceforth 2y, 3m) to begin building by handing her a wooden block. She takes the block, examines it, and then places it on the table. As she does this, I place another block on top of it, demonstrating one way to use the material (Masterson 2022, 183). We share a brief look, and Alana retrieves another block and stacks it. We continue stacking blocks for the next couple of minutes, taking moments in between each additional block to admire the evolving creation. Will (2y, 10m) approaches us at the table.

“What are you making?” Will asks.

“You might ask Alana,” I offer.

“What are you making, Alana?” Will asks.

Alana remains silent, and so I narrate her process so far.

“She seems to be stacking up blocks, one by one, on top of one another.”

“Oh, like this? I like to stack blocks,” Will says, and begins stacking some himself. “One, two, three . . .” Each additional level is carefully added, and eventually the blocks tumble.

As they fall, I observe Will, not intervening, noticing the way he repositions the blocks on top of one another, sure to balance them. I remain silent and sit with the children at the table, observing. All continues in this way until Will grabs a box of Magna-Tiles from the nearby shelf and starts to build with them. He makes a square and then begins to put blocks on top of the Magna-Tiles.

Narrating, both for Alana and for Will, Alana’s thinking about her own intentions is an example of scaffolding metacognition. This narration also connected two children to one another by revealing, in a sense, the mind of a silent peer to a child who was more wont to share their thoughts through words. Through “narrat[ing] the children’s actions and strategies,” I was able to “engage [the children’s] thinking and to draw attention to [the] effective strategies and interesting ideas” (Masterson 2022, 196) that Alana had. These ideas, in turn, inspired Will down his own path of inquiry and improvisation. Given that expressive language skills develop along highly differential trajectories, this translation between children’s minds, ideas, actions, and educators’ words may not only be helpful but sometimes vital.

Notably, despite the challenges I observe Will experiencing, I do not intervene. A patient observation can be as powerful and as intentional as direct scaffolding of social and metacognitive processes. I felt comfortable allowing Will, the oldest in our class with a wealth of experience with school-like contexts and materials, the cognitive and technical challenge of figuring out how to balance his creation. Will was a unique individual, which meant that despite my knowledge of his personality and interests and my ideas about where his ideas may be leading, I had to acknowledge that his intentions might be changing as our interaction evolved. Therefore, refraining from action was ideal. (See core consideration 2, individuality, in Bredekamp & Willer 2022, 13.)

This distance and my own intentional silence also provided an opportunity for Will to strengthen already strong skills in executive function. He would likely have had less success “filter[ing] distractions and maintain[ing] the focus necessary to manage [this] activit[y]” had I begun intervening (see Masterson 2022, 186).

As Will builds with a new combination of Magna-Tiles and blocks, a child at the other end of the table attempts to do similarly, but with less success. A cry of frustration erupts across the table, and I move myself closer to James (2y, 5m).

“You seem upset! I notice your tower is falling down.” I lay a hand on James’ shoulder.

“I can’t do it!” James says, sadness evident his voice.

“You’re trying to stack all the Magna-Tiles on top of one another, it looks like,” I say.

James confirms that this is true. I turn to Will, still building and balancing.

“Will, I wonder how you did it. James is trying to do the same thing that you did.”

Will approaches us and turns his head to one side. “It’s just going like this,” he says, taking the block and arranging it with care.

I interpret: “It seems that when it’s like this, the blocks aren’t too heavy. They balance.”

“Yeah, balance,” Will says.

James and I make two structures using the technique explained by Will. “Will really helped us out. Thanks, Will!”

As a 2-year-old with less experience, James needed a more direct intervention. Masterson (2022, 197) writes that a key component of effective teaching with toddlers is to “provide gentle assistance when children need help coping or handling frustration or disappointment” (197). In response to this need, I both consoled James *and* invited Will to teach him how to work with the materials. This encouraged the sort of “direct interactions” (193) that, despite my facilitation, constituted an important initial step toward solidifying a community of learners where it is simultaneously alright to not know *and* to consult one’s peers for help.

Within fifteen minutes, the children have transitioned to other pursuits; the atelier with its paints, the sensory table with its water and scoopers, and the dramatic play area with its comforting ritual of family life have all beckoned them away. Nonetheless, the next time that these three are ready to approach the building table, it will be there, waiting, and ready to offer new challenges, new wonderings, and new opportunities to learn, connect, and grow together.

## Takeaways and Next Steps

Toddlers are always in awe, constantly curious, and endlessly emotional. Effectively teaching and engaging with them, therefore, requires both flexibility and intention. This case illustrates that the intentional provision of materials can lead both to new insights and to frustration. Had, for example, our classroom included only traditional wooden, non-magnet blocks, Will would not have devised a new scheme of building, and James would not have had an opportunity to manage disappointment and be supported by a peer. Had building been a one-on-one endeavor, perhaps Alana and Will would not have ever connected over their mutual interest in constructive play. The list could go on and on, and yet at its core rests the tenet that every choice matters.

There are a variety of possibilities for potential directions in which to take this learning as well as a few important takeaways that guided the interactions detailed here.

For instance, first and foremost, there is the maintenance of open-endedness: Rather than directing children, for example, to build a particular structure or even asking them something like “What do you *plan* to build?” inviting them into a dialogue with a question like “How do you plan to use this material?” leaves room for possibility. It is an implicit invitation, permission even, for a child to explore their own interests and give them “active agency in decision making and ownership of [their] learning” (Masterson 2022, 189).

A potential next step might be to document the unfolding learning. Documenting children’s work through photographs and video is both a chance to explore process and to allow children to take their efforts on one day and bring these efforts and experiences forward to another. For example, on a subsequent day I might bring in a photograph of Will offering his assistance to James to remind them of their previous work together. I might also use a video of the two building in order to show, in motion, the process of their building. Such documentation can then be used for other purposes, such as assessment, to share with families and even for larger group discussions with the children.

Extending and integrating children’s learning across multiple domains (for example, large and small motor engagement, play, literacy, math) is a critical piece of early childhood pedagogy and enables children to engage with an idea or ideas in ways that are most accessible to them. Although the above case focuses primarily on building, there are myriad ways that children’s learning could be enriched and extended. For example, how might books about structures (both successful and failed) link children’s interests in building with their development of literacy skills? How might we facilitate other opportunities (for instance, for dramatic play or math) that integrate children’s affinity for building?

### Case Discussion Questions

1. How does the teacher model intentional scaffolding of children’s learning? What else could he have done? What might you have done differently?
2. Where do you see the children being invited into the metacognitive processes of considering their own intentions, goals, and actions?
3. How might this case have looked different if the teacher had stepped back from the activity and participated merely as an observer? What avenues might the children have explored?
4. What could have been done to increase challenge for each child?
5. What are some ways you might connect some of your own learning goals and professional objectives to the situation described in the case?
6. How might provisioning the block table with a clipboard, a few sheets of paper, and a writing implement have influenced and/or extended children’s work there?
7. What might have happened if, later that week, the teacher had printed photographs of the children working together and put them up near the building table for the children to reference?

### General Discussion Questions

1. What particular supports might a community of toddlers need to effectively engage with open-ended materials such as blocks?
2. What could have been done in the environment to support children diagnosed with disabilities who are learning to use materials such as blocks? How might the teacher have used tools such as photos, pictures, or sequences to support a child who is just learning to build with blocks?

### References

- Bredenkamp, S., & B. Willer. 2022. “Intentional Teaching: Complex Decision Making and the Core Considerations.” In *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*, 4th ed., NAEYC, 5–23. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Masterson, M. 2022. “Teaching to Enhance Each Child’s Development and Learning.” In *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*, 4th ed., NAEYC, 181–214. Washington, DC: NAEYC.