



Froebel Trust Podcast Transcript : Episode 4 May 2023

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:39:22

Colin

Hello and welcome back to the Froebel Trust Podcast. This is episode four and the start of another series. My name is Colin Kelly, and in our previous three episodes, I started my journey to explore the Froebel approach to education and how it can help children, parents and educators today. And if you haven't already, it's worth listening to those episodes first, to hear my expert guests explaining more about the life and work of Friedrich Froebel, who invented the term kindergarten, his vision for early years education and the Froebel principles which underpin much of the work that Froebel educators do today.

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Colin

If you spend time inside a Froebel setting, you'll hear a lot of talk about two important elements of a Froebel education: blocks and gifts. Blocks in particular are the focus of this episode. Yes, they are blocks of wood, but with particular qualities in the hands of a child, can be transformed into, well, anything really. The blocks are included among the Froebel gifts.

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Colin

These are educational play materials originally designed by Froebel. There are six gifts in total, starting with soft felt balls in various colours often used by infants, then wooden shapes - sphere, cylinder and cube. Gradually becoming more complex, with sets of more advanced wooden blocks for young children, including cubes, planks and triangular prisms. To help me understand all this, I'm joined by a panel of expert guests who you'll hear from in a moment.

00:01:35:13 - 00:01:58:15

Colin

We have Jane Whinnett, associate tutor on the Froebel and Childhood Practice course at the University of Edinburgh and a traveling tutor for the Froebel Trust. Paula Phillips is a member of the senior leadership team of Tops Day Nursery Group with early years settings throughout the south of England. And we have Lauren Gray, senior early years officer at Larbert Village Nursery near Falkirk in central Scotland.

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Colin

You can find out more about all my guests in the podcast description. But let me ask Jane first. Jane, when we talk about children in nursery and block play, is every block play different? I'm imagining lots of towers getting built.

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Jane

Yes. Colin I think you could see patterns of behaviours like that that we call schema. Children tend to go through those kind of different stages, so very young children might be just exploring and carrying, transporting blocks and then we might start to see them building up and knocking down. Of course, they love to knock down towers. And then we begin to see a slightly more complex building.

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Jane

So maybe, you know, one block going across the top of two blocks to make a bridge type structure and then moving on to more like enclosures. So knowing about these possible stages can help people who had observed, make really incisive observations of other people then know exactly what you're describing. And I think that's that's really helpful. Also, that development of representation in the blocks, I think surely important so we can see them being used in different ways.

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Jane

So depending on the shape and size of the block it might suggest something to the child that links with their inner idea, and they might use that to express that idea. Some people talk about putting other things in their blocks and that can be quite controversial because sometimes you think you know, where do you balance what that what the child wants to do with actually that huge benefit of only having the blocks and only having that open ended resource that the child can use in any any way.

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Jane

I should also say I think it's really important that the blocks are plain wood. You know, probably in the past we've seen blocks that have been painted in bright colours and sometimes people think that actually bright colours are really important for young children, whereas actually, I mean, yes, we can have a balance of colours, but not in our blocks.

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Colin

Why not?

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Colin

What's the problem with that?

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Jane

Well, you know, I think young children can get quite fixed on colour. And actually, if we're looking at structure, sometimes having plain is better. They're also more open ended so that they can get past the colour of a particular block and use it in more ways than they might if it was only, you know, a single colour. Same with having letters and numbers on blocks.

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Jane

They can restrict what children might do. Whereas, you know, having the plain wood I think is really important.

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Colin

Lauren, tell me a little bit about the children's relationship with with block play and where it fits into the day. Is it is it something that they really enjoy? Is it something that they all look forward to? I mean, if I'm being honest, the first time I saw it, I did wonder if it looked a little bland. But you've seen you've seen the things they do with it, so maybe you can convince me otherwise.

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Lauren

And so, yes, our block play is one of our most popular popular areas. We've got it inside the nursery and we've got blocks outside. So it is one of our most popular, it's the first thing that they go to. And they always usually work together to to build whatever they're going to build that day. So we've actually got a big area

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Lauren

And it is an area that we have revisited it on numerous occasions, especially at the start in just to make sure the area was right for the children, that it was a decent area in that there wasn't a lot of traffic like other children want to get through and things. So it was a big enough area, things displayed nicely.

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Lauren

So it was inviting for the children like the blocks all displayed. So it was inviting for the children. And also that we found really important was for them looking after the blocks and putting away so usually we've got symbols or a sort of shadow, if you like, of the blocks so they know where they have to return them when they finish.

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Lauren

But yes, we find that the children all go to it, it is very much a popular area that they are working together and they're sharing.

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Colin

Well, what do you think it is Paula, about building things and working with the blocks that so appeals and engages children?

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Paula

I think it's certainly that that inner desire, but it's also that they can keep control of their own play, that they're building through things that that they want to be doing. I mean, again, they may not realize, but subconsciously, that perseverance, that sort of resilience, that try and try again and that that, you know, is exciting, trying to, like Jane said, you know, build a bridge.

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Paula

Well, how how can I do that? I don't know until I've learned the skills that I need to know that the balance, the balance or the size or the shape of the block I'm using is going to work. And if we think about sort of a tall, tall tower, if if we're building upwards a tall tower and we can be using things like a step or small step ladders or things, and the adults knowing and valuing that, that time to leave the children.

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Paula

And, you know, there is a real sense of excitement whether they're alone. And that's that's important as well for children to be creating themselves on their own, but also in a group and the excitement of sort of getting higher and higher and higher and higher than the me as a as a child, you know, when's it going to fall over and how's that going to be?

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Paula

I think it's it's just natural that children just want to continue and continue their play. They might also be sort of trying to represent some things. So we might have pictures, pictures of buildings around the block play or books or things, photos where they've been, you know, things like that. And actually, you know, that that perseverance and that wanting to create something either from within my myself it within my head based on real life experiences or a picture that I'm copying actually, you know, they they want to be doing it.

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Paula

There really is that desire to do it.

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Colin

What happens if the tower does get too high and and topple over? I mean, we've mentioned already the importance of the right space. So presumably making sure that nobody gets hurt.

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Paula

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, the children themselves, obviously, according to that, their age and stage of development and how how crucially it's how experienced they are with the blocks. So if it's the first time they've seen them, actually it doesn't matter what age they're going to need to experiment and explore with them. But you know, whoever they are, as long as they're involved in their own risk taking, which again is very Froebellian then actually the adults, of course, are looking and with their sort of slightly more experienced eyes, we wouldn't just be saying, stop, don't do that.

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Paula

We'd be explaining, you know, Oh, hang on a minute, let's have a look at this, what's going to happen, whatever. And including them in the thought process, which again, is building those skills are not just for block play, but for life itself.

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Colin

And Jane, I was looking at the pamphlet that you wrote that's on the Froebel Trust website. People can go and download it and see it for themselves. Some amazing constructions that people have created using blocks. Can you just maybe pick a couple of a couple of the most interesting things that you've seen people building?

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Jane

Well, that's a tricky thing because for every child, the their best, you know, kind of creation is a different thing and it's meaningful to them. I think things that come from children's real experience sometimes are interesting, you know, when they've maybe been away doing something like the child who had been visiting London and had seen London Bridge and and had created that in the blocks and had and, you know, little blocks as people waiting to cross.

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Jane

So some of the real strong features of the architecture of the bridge, you could see in the building.

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Colin

And why do you think or why would Froebel think that it's better to recreate that with those plain wooden blocks than something like coloured Lego or Duplo or Meccano or something?

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Jane

Mm hmm. That's a good question, Colin. I think the I think it's because the resource transforms itself. And so that different children can use it in different ways. So if it is a very fixed resource, then you've not got that flexibility to allow others to you know, it might be a one off thing. And then it can only be that.

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Jane

Whereas I think one of the real strengths of the blocks is that they can be so many different things and it doesn't have to be a huge experience like, you know, being away somewhere, seeing something unusual. It can be their daily experience. So one of the examples in the in the pamphlet is children using blocks as game controllers and and you know, using other blocks as screens.

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Jane

So you know yeah it's transferring from that everyday experience that they have and using that in their constructions.

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Colin

And is that something you'd agree with Lauren I mean presumably some of your children are also playing with Duplo and Lego and it's not, it's not either or, but it sounds like the Froebel blocks are quite different. It's quite a different experience.

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Lauren

Yes, I totally agree with I think the blocks can be anything as and when they choose. For example, we had a wee one that was obsessed with clocks and he had been down to London with his family on the train. And he used to always wear three watches on his arm because he just loves clock faces.

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Lauren

Each one was different. Obviously, he'd seen Big Ben, so wanted to build Big Ben, but first they had to go and travel to Big Ben. So he had used the blocks to make a computer and a screen and they were pretending they were booking their the train, but they ended up they couldn't get a train, so they built an aeroplane

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Lauren

him and his friends got on the aeroplane And they went down to London and then they seen Big Ben So then they had to go and build Big Ben. So it was amazing, amazing to watch this unfold. But yeah, they're just they're so transferable. And the same outside, they build cars, they build swings, so transferable. Some some of the smaller blocks are just little cars for them to play with.

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Lauren

They're just it's absolutely endless the things that come out.

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Colin

Yeah, it sounds incredible. Jane, I want to come back to you now, I think a lot of people will be able to see a connection between block play and STEM and things like maths and things like symmetry. Does it help children in any other ways? And tell me maybe a little bit about, you know, the difference that block play can make?

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Jane

Well, I think block play really can help children's holistic development. And so all areas of their development and I think we've talked quite a bit about that, about emotional social development, about our physical development. And probably one of the things I should say is of course our modern blocks are very much based on those original planks. So they're in the same ratio as those planks and it's.

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Colin

There are a lot bigger. I mean, that's the thing I noticed, they're a lot bigger than a Lego brick.

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Jane

Absolutely. The scale's interesting, I think because, you know, Froebel's original gifts were quite small and we do in modern times get small wooden blocks like that. But some companies make sets of blocks that relate to each other. So the ratios are correct. So it means that when you're building with them, they fit together exactly. And of course, that's one of the huge differences between blocks and Lego or Duplo.

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Jane

You can place them in so many different ways. With Lego, you can only join by the fixers, so there are no fixers to blocks. It's all about skill and balancing and learning about, you know, how you do that. So when you get older children, of course they start to discover things like buttressing so using blocks to actually stop the spread or using blocks to make an arch where you've actually got a keystone, it can extend right through primary school.

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Colin

Lauren, you spoke so enthusiastically earlier about, you know, the joy I suppose, that the children have for block play. And it's a kind of a highlight and they look forward to it. Does it work for all children or are there some that just are disengaged by it? Maybe.

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Lauren

And I'm actually quite glad you asked that. I was just going to carry on from what Jane was saying there. So for the majority of children, I've had children that do not have language, physical language themselves, and they just love blocks and I can see different emotions coming through that. So it does. attract all children for different reasons.

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Lauren

When I did my Froebel project a good couple of years ago, I was introducing it to staff and students and signposting them for different resources and support through the Froebel Trust,. But I was speaking to the head teacher of our school we're part of a school and I was just telling her all about the benefits of the blocks, what the children were getting out of it. We had workshop workshops with families that the children showcase so the families could see the benefits.

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Lauren

And my headteacher absolutely loved it and was blown away with it and actually bought blocks for each stage from Primary 1 to Primary 7 so everybody could access blocks. And it was great from when the children move on from nursery and they're going up through the school that they still have access to these blocks.

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Colin

And can you take block play outside?

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Lauren

Oh, definitely. And yes, we are very lucky that we have seen different sized blocks outside as well. So yes, inside and outside.

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Lauren

It can.

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Lauren

They can be used.

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Colin

Now, Paula, in the course of your work, you visit and support educators in all sorts of different early years settings and nursery schools all over the country. What are the common things you've noticed about those settings where they give time and space for children to play with blocks? What are the benefits that the setting gets out of that?

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Paula

There's many, actually. I mean, one of the things that shines through is the understanding and passion of the educators when they've seen the benefits from the children. And that sort of builds a sort of shared understanding, a sort of community effect. The benefits are sort of widespread when you're when you're seeing it throughout a nursery or, like Lauren

said, even better throughout, you know, progressive age groups all the way up because you do see the advancement in the skills.

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Paula

And I think that that's wow moments for everybody involved.

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Colin

Now, Jane, I know that you served as head teacher at two local authority nurseries, tell me a little bit about the budgets involved. You know, how much does it cost for a center to buy these blocks?

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Jane

Well, I'm afraid, Colin, it is quite expensive, so it needs a bit of a commitment to funding because good quality blocks are expensive and it's worth investing in the quality because partly because, you know, that is coming from a sustainable resource. And that's important as a Froebellian that you know, that you're not cutting down trees for the sake of it, not replanting.

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Jane

You want to buy good quality blocks and also, as we said before, they're a kind of system. So we want you want blocks that relate to each other mathematically so that actually it's causing children to think and make those relationships themselves. So a lot of the producers of blocks will sell them in different sets so you can buy different amounts.

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Jane

Generally you need like a half class or a class set, you know, and that doesn't mean that all children are going to be using them at the same time. I think through our observations it can really tell us about children's interests. And I mean, we would hope that at some point every child was going to be interested in some way that, you know, they made a connection to it.

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Jane

And you've also got children who would spend all of their time, you know, in blocks. And that's why it's so great that they're so, you know, they support so many different areas of children's development and curricular outcomes.

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Colin

And once you've got the blocks, of course, you need somewhere to put them. And I gather that Froebel was quite prescriptive about how they should be stored and the way in which they should be displayed. So do you need to set aside part of a wall or a storage unit to accommodate all these blocks?

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Jane

Well, Froebel's blocks, of course, were in much smaller boxes, little wooden boxes. So our blocks tend to be on shelves so that they're easily accessible. And we try to organize them so that children can see the relationships between the different shapes. So have similar shapes on maybe the same side of a cupboard so that they can see how many of a particular small shape maybe make the next shape.

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Jane

And I think Lauren talked about, you know, that tidying process because actually that's a really good way of seeing children's sorting, you know, finding the same shape to put back. And of course, we can't underestimate the role of the adult. I mean, the adult's role is crucial in block play, if you've got no children ever going to block play, then you have to question what the value that the educator is putting on it.

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Jane

I think even being in the area, not even necessarily building yourself, can really generate interest. And then it's about, you know, commenting on what children are doing, not a constant bombardment of questions, but, you know, really looking at what they're doing and picking out specific features that you think are interesting and and, you know, kind of gently feeding those back to the child.

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Colin

Lauren, maybe if we could come back to you, could you maybe think of the last time you were in the room with block play going on? If you can think of get that picture in your head and maybe describe the scene. So if I came in there with you, what are the children doing? And also what's the educator doing?

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Colin

What am I seeing and what my hearing?

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Lauren

Okay. And so, yeah, if I even just think of this morning when they were coming...it was our Sports Day yesterday. So they were coming in and obviously sports day there was different things for jumping over there. Different things for balancing. And so they were building their own obstacle course. So they were going and they had walls built with the large hollow blocks.

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Lauren

They had a wall built. This was their their starting point where they were sitting having a little drink of water before going. So there was a couple of children sitting there and there two of the other children were putting the blocks out. So where you start your wee obstacle and where you finish. So there was a lot of symmetry coming up where the

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Lauren

the different obstacles were starting and the different ones were finishing. We're quite lucky. We've got a decent sized area for our blocks. At first there was not really an educator in the play there was somebody sitting just at the next area, but they were observing what was going on. At times when things were maybe building too high, the educator was just there just to make sure, maybe just asking the question saying, 'Do you think that's okay?'

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Lauren

Do you think that's safe? Just risk assessing.

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Colin

And then ever been in a situation where a few kids are building a wall, someone comes and takes a block out of it, runs away, spoils it? What does the educator do there?

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Lauren

So seeing how the child responds to that, for example, again, that did happen this morning. They had the hollow blocks, but they had some of the little blocks inside. One of the younger children had took one of the blocks out because he was building something and it needed that particular shape of block and the educator would just see what was happening, just observing how they were going to respond.

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Lauren

But then if the other child started to get really upset and say, No, I want that bloke back and trying to pull it back off or whatever, then that educator would come in and just sit down with the child and discuss it. Saying 'I know you were playing with it and that child was wanting it. How do you think we could work out

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Lauren

I work through it and just asking the children to try and work it out themselves, just asking the appropriate question and saying, 'Well, I know you're upset but you're grabbing that block off him and they're getting a bit upset' and just trying to to work through it with the children asking them to, to try and solve that, that little problem.

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Colin

It sounds like, Paula, one of the great things about these blocks is it's it sounds like a leveller. It doesn't matter what disability you might have or what language you might speak, or maybe there's no language. And it's that common experience. It's that common goal. And I guess the block play is a common language all by itself.

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Paula

It certainly is. It's and it doesn't actually matter whether I'm playing alongside someone, whether I'm independently playing, whether I'm actually engaging with them, then you don't almost need language. On the other hand, it's an absolute key time when all those personal social skills come out and it is a huge communication language area. So it can be anything or everything.

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Paula

And it would be different every time you watched, even in the same room, potentially with the same group of children, it would be still different and those interactions would be different. That sort of again, sense of community and almost the respect for the resource, respect for the environment, the respect for the educator. I mean, we've got the Froebelian phrase 'freedom with guidance.'

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Paula

You bring the guidance in there when when it's needed, or it might be about looking after that resource as well. So, you know, we don't sort of put the blocks in the water tray and why not? And explain explaining that. But you've got those common guidance, those common boundaries amongst the children, regardless of their physical ability, their language ability or whatever it is.

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Paula

And so there's that shared understanding.

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Colin

Yeah, I can see Jane just wants to come in here. Jane, go ahead.

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Jane

I just wanted to mention about children with additional support needs or special educational needs and thinking about working with other agencies and other professionals, particularly people like physiotherapists and occupational therapists, quite often they will have, you know, they will come with a support plan for the child, and that can make you feel that that child has to be extracted to do something with an adult on a 1 to 1 basis, not in the room.

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Jane

And actually there's no need to be doing things like that because very often it's about building up strength and coordination and core like Lauren was talking about. And actually manipulating blocks is a really excellent way of doing that. And the way that you organize your blocks can support that. So you could, you know, you can put particular blocks at a particular a particular height.

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Jane

So, you know, the child might naturally do that. So it's not about extracting it's about including all children. Also, I've seen children, you know, autistic children who are really interested in positioning blocks and, you know, maybe lining things up and actually blocks work so well like that because they fit together mathematically and it can be quite absorbing.

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Colin

And Paula, it's quite amazing, isn't it, when we look at Froebel and we look at these blocks that, you know, we're in this age where children have so much choice, there's so much technology around us. And yet with all of that here we are coming back to these seemingly on the face of it, at least quite simple bits of wood.

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Paula

And that's that's probably why that's the reason that they spend an awful lot of their time generally, of course, not every child, but generally these days in a quite a fast paced moving world, potentially quite a lot of technology, even from a young age, whether it's themselves or older siblings or parents, and actually coming into an environment where actually I can I can even build the blocks around me to make an enclosure.

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Paula

And that's my own little space, you know, just as simple as that. That actually I can become separated and be an observer if I want to. I don't have to be doing, doing, doing. But on the other hand, absolutely, if I can be creating myself from my my own mind and we sort of always relate things back to Froebelian principles and sort of it meets all of all of the the key principles and having that that creativity and that sort of inner desire to actually build and create myself.

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Paula

And that's self activity just on my own, regardless of whether I'm actually in a group doing it or not. That actually that's, that's very different to an awful lot of things that might happen in their other environments.

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Colin

And Jane, what would you say would be a good first step for somebody looking to take this further and bring block play into their setting?

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Jane

I think having access to blocks is the first thing, because I think the educators need to know the potential of blocks themselves. And actually all you need to do is take two blocks and discover how many different ways you can combine those. You know, by rotating them, by changing the directions. So I think it's essential that the educators try the blocks first, and then, go to the Froebel Trust website and have a look at the pamphlet.

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Jane

And there's also a webinar there talking about blocks.

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Colin

And Paula same for you, if somebody is listening and they're looking to take that first step, what should they do?

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Paula

I think as as Jane alluded to, definitely it's it's you've got to have the blocks potentially. But even if you haven't just to know and understand. So immerse yourself in them and like the pamphlets, the websites that you can come on the the short course that we were talking about with Lauren to learn and understand what that what the value is behind it potentially is is the first part because then if you do go into it on however big or small scale, then you're going to get the most out of it because you're you're going to understand and have that that value of it almost comes back to the value of childhood in its own

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Paula

right of actually what is it that the children can get out of this? As you say, fairly simple on the face of it resource. If I'm understanding how much to value, what do I need to do as an adult? What's okay, what isn't and where does that freedom with guidance all sort of balance and and then yeah, just just embrace it.

00:29:43:10 - 00:30:02:16

Paula

And I can guarantee you that actually once you started, it will just get bigger and bigger and bigger and that will be the space, the amount of blocks, the time spent, the adults that are interested, the creations that are made, and that just the value, it never will go backwards. It will always go forwards.

00:30:02:18 - 00:30:29:11

Colin

Well, those words from Paula Phillips is where we'll leave it for another episode of the Froebel Trust podcast. Thank you also to my guests Jayne Whinnett and Lauren Gray, remember, you can find out more about them and all the work that they're doing by reading the podcast description. And be sure to click the link and visit the Froebel Trust website where you'll be able to find out more about the topics discussed in this episode, as well as downloading free resources from the Froebel Trust website.

00:30:29:17 - 00:30:52:09

Colin

That's at Froebel dot org dot UK. Thank you very much for listening. Please remember to subscribe to this podcast. And join me next time where I'll be continuing to explore the importance of young children's play and our next episode. I'll be looking at outdoor play and finding out why engaging with nature is at the heart of a Froebel approach to early use education.

00:30:52:11 - 00:31:12:05

Colin

Thanks very much for listening. Remember to subscribe and check out the website www.froebel.org.uk

(ENDS)