

Our LEGO® Stories

Episode 5: Build Vital Skills With LEGO Bricks



Introduction: What we'll cover in today's episode (00:00)

Julie: Every year 25% of our profits go to the LEGO Foundation to be reinvested in activities that allow us to impact more children with Learning-through-Play.

In this episode, we find out what the LEGO Foundation does to help autistic children build social communication skills, develop friendships and improve wellbeing – all with the use of Learning-through-Play and LEGO® bricks.

Michelle: Too many people often think of play as something that happens outside of school and learning as something that happens inside of school.

Gina: In Brick Clubs, the critical goal is for young people to collaborate and work together. So rather than building a LEGO model on your own, we're asking them to build as a team.

Ula: It's really great to see how connecting play can be for a child and how it gives them confidence in the way they move around the world.

Julie: You're listening to Our LEGO Stories. I'm Julie Foster and a proud member of the LEGO team.

Loren: And I'm Loren I. Shuster – another happy member of the LEGO team.

Julie: Take a peek into how we bring LEGO products to life and what we do to have a positive impact on the world in this new series brought to you by the LEGO Group.

In this episode, we've opted for identity-first language such as 'autistic child', rather than 'children with autism'. We appreciate that preference varies among people with the diagnosis, parents, caregivers and practitioner groups. We hope that you enjoy this episode in the good faith that it's intended.

Earlier this year, the [LEGO Foundation](#) announced a new partnership with [Play Included™ C.I.C.](#), a UK-based social enterprise led by clinical and child psychologists who specialise in autism. Together, we are reimagining and expanding the Brick-by-Brick™ program – an established Learning-through-Play concept involving collaborative LEGO play for children who need social communication support.

I caught up with Michelle Ndebele, a Play and Health Specialist at the LEGO Foundation, to better understand why we are such strong believers in Learning-through-Play and the story behind our partnership with Play Included.

Chapter 1: The LEGO Foundation and the power of Learning-through-Play (02:25)

Julie: So, Michelle, what is the LEGO Foundation's key focus?

Michelle: At the LEGO Foundation, we actually share a mission with the LEGO Group, and that is to inspire and develop the builders of tomorrow. So, through 25% ownership of the LEGO Group, the LEGO Foundation funds programs on the ground that reach millions of children around the world, And really gives them the opportunity to benefit directly from Learning-through-Play.

Our aims, really, are to redefine play and reimagine learning because too many people often think of play as something that happens outside of school and learning as something that happens inside of school. Whereas research actually shows that play gives children of all ages the tools to solve problems, to think strategically, to relate to others and to manage life's general ups and downs.

So, our programs and projects really aim to make children's lives better by making sure that the value of Learning-through-Play is truly understood, is embraced and acted upon around the world.

Julie: Why are we such strong believers in Learning-through-Play?

Michelle: We believe Learning-through-Play is the most powerful way for children to develop a breadth of skills that will help them thrive in today's complex world. We believe there are a few characteristics that really embody a Learning-through-Play experience. And so that's when an activity is experienced as joyful by children, it's when an activity helps children find meaning in what they're doing and what they're learning.

It involves active, engaged, hands-on, minds-on thinking, as well as iterative thinking. So, it gives them the chance to experiment, to test and really socially interact with others and collaborate with others as well. So, Learning-through-Play really teaches ways of thinking, of creating, of working together. And it helps us nurture really capable, confident children who become adults who are ready to take on the world.

Julie: You're part of the Social Ventures team in the LEGO Foundation. What is it that you're curious about exploring in that team?

Michelle: We are curious about exploring the power of Learning-through-Play and the power of the LEGO® brick and how we best harness that to support children with special educational needs. Our focus diagnosis right now are children with visual impairment, children with a diagnosis of autism or children on the autism spectrum.

So, right now, that means we are supporting and strengthening promising Learning-through-Play concepts that use LEGO bricks as a central material for supporting children with special educational needs and improves their overall wellbeing. And through all of this work, we also hope to help raise awareness, understanding and acceptance of children with special educational needs and disabilities. And really challenge the stigma of having a diagnosis around the world and take the opportunity to celebrate these children and their unique strengths and talents.

Julie: Earlier this year, we announced a [partnership between the LEGO Foundation and Play Included¹](#), which aims to reimagine and expand their Brick-by-Brick™ program, which is an established Learning-through-Play concept involving collaborative LEGO play for children who need special social communication support. Why is it interesting for us to partner with them?

Michelle: This is a really exciting partnership for us. We're partnering with Play Included because their concept methodology really aligns well with the Foundation's aim to build a world where Learning-through-Play really empowers children to become creative, engaged, lifelong learners. Although they're a small UK-based social enterprise led by two clinical psychologists, they really are the leading force for training professionals in the Brick-by-Brick™ program and providing supporting resources.

We're putting a much greater emphasis on Learning-through-Play in the program, including in the materials that are used to run Brick Clubs – children often refer to the program as Brick Clubs – incorporating playful facilitation training into their program and using the Foundation's evidence-based tools and frameworks to really support the adult facilitators in becoming much more

¹ Pressrelease: [The LEGO Foundation partners with social enterprise, Play Included™, to strengthen & scale LEGO® play based learning programme for neurodivergent children](#)

confident, skilled, playful facilitators who are able to support children's learning outcomes in playful settings.

I really feel like the collaboration is a truly dynamic co-creation process. We have Gina and Elly, who are the co-directors of Play Included – both with a background in clinical psychology, focused on autism. And then we have our experts around Learning-through-Play within the Foundation.

Chapter 2: Building confidence and relationships with Play Included (07:09)

Julie: While playing together at the Brick Club, children build confidence and relationships – all while having fun. And these are crucial skills. Studies show that 50-90% of young autistic adults are unemployed or severely underemployed, with many experiencing mental health issues. Play Included have been working with the evidence-based methodology behind the Brick-by-Brick program since 2004. Up next, it's Dr. Gina Gomez de la Cuesta, Founder and Director of Play Included. She speaks to Loren about the organisation's progress and learnings so far.

Loren: Gina, can you tell us a bit about the program? How does it actually work, and what are you hoping to achieve with it?

Gina: It's about giving positive social opportunities to young people who might otherwise be a bit more socially isolated or excluded from those social opportunities.

So, in Brick Clubs, the critical goal is for young people to collaborate and work together. So, rather than building a LEGO model on your own, which you might do at home – a lot of these kids are brilliant LEGO builders, and they can just build incredible things – but rather than building it by themselves, we're asking them to build as a team.

So, they might have different roles in that team. And by doing that, by splitting up the LEGO building into the roles, children have the opportunity to practice things like turn-taking, shared attention, talking to each other about the model, problem-solving. A bit comes off or it breaks: 'Ah what should we do about it guys?'

Loren: And I guess some conflict resolution as well?

Gina: Exactly. Yes, for sure. The roles are engineer, who has the instructions and shows the other kids and tells them where the bit goes. Then there's the parts supplier, who finds the right bits that are needed for a step, and the builder puts it together. Although if you've got pairs of children, you can squash those roles

together. So, some kids need to be working in pairs rather than threes, just to have a step-by-step approach.

But, yeah, there are often arguments about who gets to be the builder first, who gets to be the supplier. It's very much about supporting the young people to figure out those solutions by themselves. The adult running the group should be trained and a professional – we train teachers and psychologists, speech and language therapists, all sorts of health and education professionals – but their role is not to tell the children what to do and solve their problems for them. It's very much about stepping back and guiding and facilitating so that the young people really have a sense of that they're in charge. And they get to choose what models to make. They get to decide who does which job and when they should swap over. So, it's quite a kind of dynamic, naturalistic setting where they can practice social opportunities and social interactions in a safe, supported environment.

Loren: Fantastic. And it sounds like a lot of fun as well. What does the research tell us so far about the benefits of Learning-through-Play in this context with children on the autism spectrum?

Gina: My PhD, for example, has been published, and that showed that children working with LEGO bricks in this way improved in their social communication skills. They improved in their behaviour. And for me, the most important thing is that the children loved it, and they gave it 10 out of 10 for how much they liked to come and kept wanting to come back.

Loren: I know you've received a lot of anecdotal feedback from teachers and specialists and parents. What are they telling us?

Gina: From the professionals and the parents, they say that it's really wonderful to have a group or a club that the young people don't feel stressed about going to. I think often for children on the autism spectrum they can get very anxious working within groups. But when the LEGO bricks are there, it gives them a real clear focus, something they enjoy, something that's not scary, that they know they can succeed at and that they can be good at, which makes the social interactions a bit less stressful and much easier. So, they've said it's a low anxiety approach, and that friendships have blossomed through the club. So, kids may be building LEGO together, they start chatting, they start talking to each other, and then they organise to meet up at the weekend or something like that and build LEGO bricks at home. And then they start doing other things together. So it's like a kind of starting point for a sort of broader friendship, which is fantastic.

Loren: That's really great that people could take the experience outside the classroom setting and into their private lives. So really nice to hear. And I know that you and the team at Play Included believe the Brick-by-Brick program has the potential to not just help children on the autism spectrum but potentially

other children with other social or developmental needs. Can you speak a little bit to that?

Gina: Yeah, I think that's one of the things that's been really noticeable over the years that we've been delivering training – is that this methodology started with autism in mind. Professionals, particularly teachers, may be using it at school have noticed, 'Hey, wow, this child needs support with social communication or needs help with friendships.' They're not on the autism spectrum, but there might be lots of other reasons why a child might need that support. Maybe they have ADHD or anxiety, or they've just had a difficult time, so they need a bit of extra nurturing and support with social interactions. So, I think we're trying to be inclusive. We want to be accepting of all children with all sorts of challenges and difficulties and try to use the Brick-by-Brick program with a wider range of children.

Chapter 3: How colleagues across LEGO entities helped develop activities (12:30)

Julie: Together, the LEGO Foundation and Play Included have developed a series of LEGO play-based activities for families and autistic children aged 5-18. Colleagues across LEGO entities, who have a connection to autism and are passionate about supporting the initiative, have helped develop the activities by testing them with their families. Senior Marketing Manager Ula Bieganska tested them with her six-year-old daughter, Olivia, who was diagnosed with autism when she was two-and-a-half.

So, Ula, why did you choose to take part?

Ula: When I heard about the initiative, the feeling I had was like, 'finally', right? Finally, we are getting into that area as the LEGO Group and LEGO Foundation. Because, actually, LEGO bricks from my experience with different therapies have been used for a really long time already to stimulate children's learning and communication skills, especially for those kids that struggle with expressing themselves and with connecting to their peers or to their parents.

And that has been something that has always been on my mind as a mum of a wonderful girl that is on the spectrum. She's six years old right now, and she's not really verbal. So, she is using single words to communicate. And for a parent of a child on the spectrum, that, of course, creates a lot of challenges on how to engage in play with your own child.

Julie: And what was your experience with testing these LEGO play-based activities with your daughter? What aspects of the play activities did you and your daughter enjoy most?

Ula: I think it was the dancing with the bricks. With autism, one very important thing is that kids on the spectrum very often have difficulty with coordinating different senses, and inserting input from different levels is really important for them.

If you have an activity that actually can combine multiple senses, this is something that helps them to learn faster and to stimulate different parts of brain development. So that's why, especially things related – in my daughter's case – things related to music and movement help her to learn.

We learn vocabulary when she sits on the swing. And that movement of putting her into motion helps her actually to activate the brain and to pick up new words or the music, especially in the rhythmical input from nursery rhymes or from very simple music songs help a lot, again, to focus and to learn.

And that's why those activities from the developers of LEGO Foundation that were actually related a bit more towards activating different senses were the most helpful in my case. So that was quite a lot of fun, actually, to see that you can move with LEGO bricks – that it's not about sitting on the floor and stacking them together.

Julie: Yeah, it's not just about building, but apparently, you can also dance with the bricks. That's very cool.

Ula: Yeah, exactly.

Julie: And, from your experience, what is the most important thing to get right when developing activities for children with autism?

Ula: I think the most important thing is to focus on what is the ultimate goal for us when trying to help those kids? To be independent, to some extent, at least, and to function in the social context. Most people don't realise how lonely it gets for people with such challenges. How difficult it can be for them to connect with their peers.

And later on, when they grow up as adults, how to function in society in at least some independent way. And play can be a wonderful way for kids to connect. Very often when I'm in the playground and my daughter, who is already six years old at this stage, kids play quite complicated games that she cannot follow and understand the rules.

So she will, for example, in the playground, see kids playing baseball and they have bats, and they have ball and she would approach them like without speaking too much, but because she finds it exciting that they play together. And she will try to catch a ball or try to take a bat. And she doesn't understand what's really happening on the field and what are the rules of the game. And for other kids, it's again difficult to understand why is this kind of awkward kid coming over and what does she want with us?

That's why the ultimate goal really, for me, on developing this type of play activities, is to think of how do we incorporate those kids and make them happier to function as someone who feels appreciated and valued as a part of the group or of society.

Julie: How big of an impact do you see these activities having for the way children with autism experience the world?

Ula: It's really great to see how connecting play can be for a child and how it gives them confidence in the way they move around the world. So, I have been really committed and trying to be very disciplined on the way that I engage with my daughter and try to set up that time.

And now, if it's 5:30, and that's our LEGO time, normally she's at my door, and she's knocking and saying 'LEGO Play!' Especially for kids on the spectrum, organising the world is really important. So, having a regular schedule thinking of, 'Okay, this is the time that I do this', that helps them to explain the world, that helps them to understand the world.

Since I started doing that on a very regular basis, it is something that you could see how much slowly, but surely, that creative confidence is built. The first time that we started stacking the bricks together, my daughter would just observe me. She wouldn't feel like she would be able to do that activity or to do any brick stacking. She would be very frustrated if it wouldn't work out. So, she would just seek aside and let me build, for example. But with time, when I would first help her out or put her hands together and slowly she would actually build up herself in that skill.

That level of satisfaction that she meant that you get from the fact that, you know, yes, 'Okay, Now just mommy was building, but right now it's also me. And look what I did!' And having that moment is really precious, especially for a child that struggles with this activity.

And building that confidence and building that connection and the feeling of achievement is really priceless.

And, most of all, the connection that is built through play with other people is not something that you can do with anything else. So, I think the play puts us all in that context of creating a long-term relationship with one another.

And that's something that is a really big challenge, as I mentioned, for children on the spectrum. It is irreplaceable time. You cannot make up for it with any type of formal therapy. It's something that you can only build over a long time – that regular relationship, for yourself with your child, but also for the friends and peers and colleagues and so on.

Julie: And what does it mean for you that the place where you work can actually provide these important tools for your daughter?

Ula: I work in marketing, and I have always been quite a believer of the fact that brands and companies, they should not just exist for profit. For me, brands should be a force for good. There's a lot of social causes that get a lot of media attention just because either the groups are quite large or they have enough influence, media power or income to actually talk about it.

Parents of kids with special needs – they are not a group that is particularly standing out just because we are very busy. We don't have time to really go and talk about it. Just because being a parent of a child who has special needs is not 24 hours. It's 36 hours a day job. It means attending a lot more to the schools with the individual development plans. It means a lot of health issues that kids have. So, it's a lot of doctor visits, so our schedule is packed. So having someone who sees the need of that group and tries to help, that's something that makes me really proud as a LEGO employee.

Every time I hear about some of the initiatives from the LEGO Foundation, I'm always really touched that there are some people who actually are looking into those different issues that people can have around the world, who can be a voice for those communities and try to help out.

Julie: We're so humbled to work with incredible partners, specialists and colleagues to bring Learning-through-Play to more children and help shape a brighter, more inclusive future.

Talking about how we're helping autistic children to build social communication skills, confidence and friendships with LEGO bricks were Michelle Ndebele, Gina Gomez de la Cuesta, and Ula Bieganska.

You've been listening to Our LEGO Stories, with me, Julie Foster.

Loren: And me, Loren I. Shuster.

Julie: This podcast is brought to you by the LEGO Group. Stay tuned for future episodes of Our LEGO Stories on our [website](#), [Apple Podcasts](#), [Spotify](#) or wherever you get your podcasts. And please rate and subscribe so we can welcome more listeners.

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About LEGO Foundation

[LEGO Foundation](#) aims to inspire and develop the builders of tomorrow; a mission that it shares with the LEGO Group. The LEGO Foundation is dedicated to building a future where learning through play empowers children to become creative, engaged, lifelong learners. Its work is about redefining play and reimagining learning. In collaboration with thought leaders, influencers,

educators and parents, the LEGO Foundation aims to equip, inspire and activate champions for play.

About Play Included™ C.I.C

Founded in 2018, [Play Included](#) is the leading resource in the Brick-by-Brick™ programme, a Learning-through-Play concept for young people who need support to develop social communication, such as young people on the autism spectrum.

We act as a Learning Centre, ensuring young people achieve the best outcomes through professional training, resources, partnerships and research. Our mission is to make sure every child has access to positive social experiences and has the chance to make friends through play.

Mentioned in the podcast episode:

- [Play Included](#)
- [Brick-by-Brick™ programme](#)

About the partnership with Play Included

- [The LEGO Foundation partners with social enterprise, Play Included™, to strengthen & scale LEGO® play based learning programme for neurodivergent children](#)

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