

Loose Parts Play

'Have you ever noticed that if you leave old junk lying around, kids will almost inevitably play with it? Whether it be old cardboard boxes, wooden pallets, pieces of wood, old tires [sic], bits of rope or string, kids will use their imagination and ingenuity to make something. This may make your garden look like a junkyard sometimes, but the experience for the kids is invaluable and it will keep them occupied for hours. Don't try and direct the kids in their play just let them get on with it.'

How Not To Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts
(S Nicholson, Landscape Architecture 1971)

Loose Parts Play Theory was first mooted by an architect, Simon Nicholson, in the 1970s. He proposed that the loose parts in our environment empowered creativity and accordingly that, if we want children to be inventive and creative, they should be offered a variety of material which can be moved, carried, combined, stacked, lined up, redesigned, taken apart and put back together with no directions or specific way of playing with them.



Previous generations would have engaged in this type of play quite naturally. Toys were limited and children were able to wander and play within the environment comparatively free from adult restrictions and interruptions.

Children today spend a lot more time indoors and are not able to roam as freely in fields, woods and parks. Adults therefore need to provide equivalent play opportunities for young children of all ages.



Loose Parts Play provides opportunity for combining selection with a high level of creativity; there are endless possibilities for how the materials can be played with.

Many toys have a fixed outcome and limited flexibility but to a child playing with loose parts an object can become anything they want it to be. On the whole, children prefer to play with sand, water, stones, sticks and boxes.



Nicholson suggested that in any environment the degree of inventiveness is directly proportional to the number of variables in it – a beach was a good example of a loose parts play area and that this is one reason why children play for hours on a beach.



Older children like to work on projects with their friends and to collaborate in implementing ideas. Loose parts play is ideal for providing the opportunity for children to do just this and they should be given space and time for it, with the opportunity to leave their creations and return to them later.

The structures children create in Loose Parts Play are not permanent but are essentially fluid in their evolution: the process of designing, problem-solving, discussing, negotiating and building and talking is far more important than the finished product.



Risk Assessment

Resources should be stored so that children can easily reach them and should be available when children are initiating and leading their own play. There should be sufficient quantities to avoid conflict. The items should be in good condition and regularly checked for damage or weakness. Any splintered, cracked, damaged or dangerous items should be removed immediately. Some children may still put things into their mouths and so, if there is a child attending who is still at this stage of development, a specific risk assessment must be undertaken and adults should observe and be present during the play or the items removed for the time they attend.

Materials for Loose Parts Play:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stones, rocks• Tree stumps• Logs• Pebbles• Gravel• Twigs• Sticks• Washers• Planks of wood• Coconut shells• Corks• Ping pong balls• Pegs• Bulldog clips• Duct tape• Straws• Marbles• Decorative stones• Spoons• Curtain rings• Paperclips• key rings• chains• tape measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pallets• Balls• Buckets• Baskets• Crates• Boxes• Rope• Tyres• Shells• Seeds & seed pods• Pine cones• Old CDs or DCDs• Ribbon, string tape wool, lace• Metal tops from bottles & Jars• Cardboard cylinders• Raffia• Cable reels• Feathers• Pasta• Costume jewellery• Pots• containers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Glass beads• Cable ties• Guttering & drainpipes• Garden trugs• Tarpaulin• Nuts & bolts• Bark & moss• Leaves• Coins• Old bike wheels• Small slices of logs• Empty food cans (not sharp)• Netting• Garden canes• Dried peas, beans, rice• Wood off cuts• Torches• Cameras• Dice• Gourds• keys
---	---	---

The list above is not finite and you can add many more resource ideas of your own. Happy collecting!

Links to EYFS videos showing children involved in 'Loose Parts Play

Children build a vehicle; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkXMY7eWD-o>

Children play at being in a builder's yard;
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_mwqo7UMEA

Children create floor sculptures; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ib5YGs5BKqU>

Children plan a space ship; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uH4-lqm-t4Q>