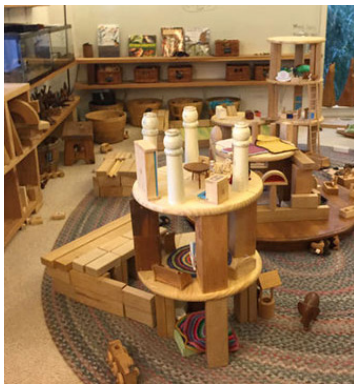
Loose parts: What does this mean?



Loose parts is a term coined by British architect Simon Nicholson, who carefully considered landscapes and environments that form connections. Nicholson believed that we are all creative and that "loose parts" in an environment will empower our creativity (Nicholson, 1971).

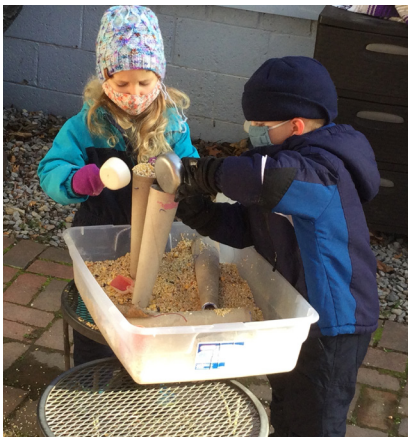
Many play experts and early childhood educators have adopted the term and theory of loose parts. Loose parts are materials that are moved, carried, redesigned, lined up, taken apart, and put back together in multiple ways. Loose parts are used alone or combined with other materials. There is no set of specific directions for materials considered loose parts. The child is the direction. "In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it (Nicholson, 1971, p. 30)." Adults can offer ample space, time, and the invitation to explore interesting materials (loose parts!) to foster a sense of curiosity, critical thinking, and joyful investigation!

How can I provide loose parts?

Loose parts are natural and synthetic materials that entice children of all abilities to explore and engage sustainably, as they are often free, recycled, repurposed, and inexpensive (Beloglovsky, 2022). Educators can find loose parts in nature, second-hand shops, garage sales, discount stores, and many businesses and families' recycled materials. Author Susan Stacey (2019, p. 21) refers to loose parts as "all the wonderful bits and pieces that we might use in our lives (and may then be discarded, even though they are fascinating to children), including natural materials, pieces of machinery, containers, and fasteners of many types." It is helpful to think of loose parts as something that will inspire children's imagination and creativity on their own terms and in their own unique way.

Understand the meaning of loose parts

Understanding the meaning of loose parts requires us to think about the possibilities of how children learn and consider the materials, environments, and ecosystems surrounding them. Imagination, creativity, curiosity, desire, autonomy, and need are the motivations of loose parts. For example, if a child picks up a rock and starts to play, it can become anything the child wants or needs: a baby animal, magic gold, or a tool to dig with it. Loose parts are "a catalyst for children's big ideas, and they provide much practice in 'making one thing stand for another,' otherwise known as representational or symbolic play" (Stacey, 2019, p. 21).



The adult role: Encourage open-ended learning

A term strongly connected to loose parts is open ended. Open-ended materials, environments, and experiences encourage problem-solving and are child centered. Children involve themselves in concrete experiences using loose parts, leading to natural explorations. Adults play important, intentional roles in preparing, guiding, observing, and documenting open-ended learning experiences. Environments full of loose parts lend themselves to a blurring of distinctions between learning and playing, allowing children to experiment, enjoy, and find out things for themselves (Casey & Robertson, 2019).

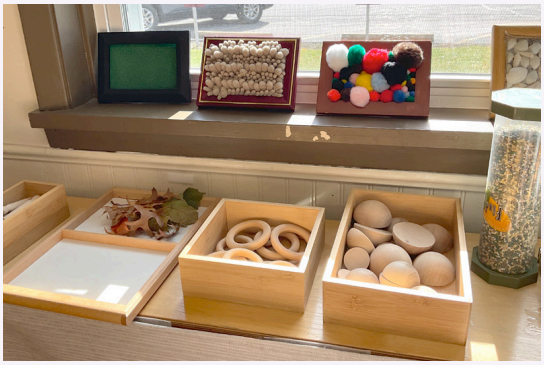
Loose parts are inclusive

Consider how loose parts can be adapted to increase participation and accessibility. Provide accommodations as needed, such as providing appropriate space to maneuver a walker or wheelchair for children to access loose parts. Reflect with other professionals about including and adapting loose parts for differing abilities and encourage appropriate challenges and pleasing experiences for all children.

Examples of loose parts

Outside environments

- water
- sand
- dirt
- sticks
- branches
- logs
- driftwood
- grasses
- straw
- moss
- leaves
- flowers
- herbs
- sensory plants
- pinecones
- pine needles
- seeds
- shells
- bark
- feathers
- boulders
- rocks
- pebbles
- stones
- balls
- hoops
- jump ropes
- buckets
- plastic cups, tubes, and caps
- containers of various sizes
- cardboard (boxes, tubes, cartons, etc.)
- string
- rope
- carpet remnants
- material
- fabric
- plastic shower curtains
- plastic gutters
- crates
- wood scraps
- metal cans, keys, and parts
- tools (hand trowels, shovels, brooms, etc.)



Indoor environments

- blocks
- building materials
- baskets
- bowls
- various manipulatives
- measuring devices
- pouring devices (cups, spoons, buckets, funnels)
- dramatic play props
- play cars, animals, and people
- fabric remnants
- scarves
- ribbon
- string
- floor samples, small rugs
- chalk
- sensory table and materials (water, sand, snow, natural items)
- recycled items (papers, tubes, ribbons, caps, cans, lids, keys, curtain, and napkin rings, wood scraps, wire, foam, cardboard)
- plastic gutters
- small plungers
- art materials (buttons, spools, string, tape, popsicle sticks, beads, straws, cotton balls, paints, brushes)

"Gears, twigs, leaves—little children love the world. That is why they are so good at learning about it. For it is love, not tricks and techniques of thought, that lies at the heart of all true learning" (John Holt, 2017, p. 15).

Children choose creative, loose parts over fancy toys

During a holiday gathering, two young children received holiday gifts and toys. The parents noticed that the children spent most of their time doing three things: eating, playing with their aunt's long necklace of large beads, pouring water from cup to cup, and floating carrots in the cups of water. Yes, the children played with the toys, but most joys came from eating, playing with the beads (and their aunt!), and experimenting with the water. From this gathering and children's exploration, adults can see the concrete ways of children's thinking and doing, or echoing famous psychologist Erik Erikson's theory that creativity begins "with the natural genius of childhood and their 'spirit of place'" (Louv, 2005, p. 85). The cleverness and connections to formal learning that unfold from loose parts motivate professionals to include them in early childhood environments.

Assure safe and healthy loose parts

Adult supervision and preparation are the best safety precautions. Before offering any loose parts, adults can plan for how they will safely incorporate, introduce, support, store, and manage loose parts. Adults must ensure that loose parts and materials are safe, non-toxic, and developmentally appropriate. Keep age, ability, and skill in mind. Be aware of choking risks for infants, young children, and children with unique developmental needs. Loose parts should be large enough to prevent choking hazards. Adults can use choke-test tubes to ensure items are safe for young children. Loose parts should not have sharp edges and should not break easily. Items that should not be accessible to children under 3 years of age include but are not limited to, button batteries, magnets, plastic bags, styrofoam objects, coins, balloons, latex gloves, and glitter. Challenging children's abilities (safe risk taking) differs from inappropriate dangers and hazards. Talk with your team and identify safe, appropriate loose parts play.

Loose parts: Respect for one another, environments, and ecosystems

When working with loose parts, do not disturb living things. The term ecosystem, along with the environment and loose parts, emphasizes that every person, object, living organism, space, and place is interconnected and affects one another. Including ecosystems—biological communities of interacting organisms and their physical environment—ensures that every community member is valued and supported. Embracing these terms supports the flourishing of humans, their environments, and the planet. Educators and programs can consider their shared values, attitudes, culture, place, climate, curriculum, pedagogy, sustainability, health, well-being, and overall relationships in respecting environments, ecosystems, and one another.

References

Beloglovsly, M. (2022). *Loose parts for Children with Diverse Abilities.* Red Leaf Press.

Casey, T., & Roberson, J. (2019). *Loose Parts Play: A Toolkit.* Inspiring Scotland. Retrieved from https://inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Loose-Parts-Play-Toolkit-2019-web.pdf

Louv, R. (2005). *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder.* Workman Publishing

Nicholson, S. (1971). How NOT to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts. *Landscape Architecture, 62(1), 30–34.* Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/44663886

Stacey, S. (2019). *Inquiry-Based Early Learning Environments: Creating, Supporting, and Collaboration.* Red Leaf Press

BETTER • KID • CARE

PennState Extension

extension.psu.edu/programs/betterkidcare

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

TIPS1107.indd