

Resourcing effective outdoor play and learning with loose parts





Loose Parts: an introduction

Simon Nicholson published the *Theory of Loose Parts* in 1972. As an architect, his interest was in design theory and how it was possible to optimise engagement and creativity through the organisation of the environment. The theory also built upon the notion of the discovery method of education.

Nicholson wrote, *“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.”*

A major benefit of providing loose parts play is that learning areas are integrated. Children learn most easily when allowed to find out things for themselves by experimenting and loose parts enable a process of researching, thinking, designing, constructing and modifying.

Why use loose parts?

Loose parts provide an interesting and creative play environment for children of all ages. As they are open-ended, multi-purpose and multisensory, loose parts can be combined in endless ways with no specific direction to facilitate unstructured, child-led play and real-world learning.

Loose parts:

- challenge children
- give children some control of their environment through choice
- encourage children to make decisions independently
- create infinitely more scope for creative engagement than static materials
- are motivating and provide authentic tasks for hands-on problem solving
- encourage children to be resourceful
- are flexible in a range of play opportunities
- support children in creating playful games and imaginations
- strongly link to David Sobel’s Outdoor Play Motifs

Loose parts support holistic development for a variety of reasons. There is a strong kinaesthetic and physical aspect as children move objects around in their play. The opportunity to engage with loose parts may assist children who find outside times socially demanding and sharing the resources available supports emotional self-regulation. General behavior improves through the development of social skills such as teamwork, negotiation and collaboration.





What are loose parts?

Loose parts are any natural or man-made materials (consider recycled materials for a sustainable perspective) which are open-ended and versatile. Often the most interesting resources are the ones which don't have a specific purpose as they inspire creativity. Ideas and play are stimulated by providing variety in terms of size, texture, shape and colour.

Loose parts can be **natural materials** such as

- Stones and rocks
- Shells
- Feathers
- Logs, sticks, twigs
- Tree cookies and stumps
- Pinecones
- Gumnuts
- Leaves
- Beans/seeds
- Gravel
- Hay bales

Loose parts can be **manufactured materials** such as

- Fabric (lengths or smaller pieces) including old sheets or scarves
- Ropes and twine
- Wool and ribbon
- Rubber bands
- Large pegs and clips
- Corks
- Car tyres, bike tyres, go-cart tyres
- Buttons
- Cotton spools
- Glass gems
- Jar lids and bottle caps
- Old CDs, golf tees or napkin rings
- Old household items including tools
- Random and unusual found objects
- Costume jewellery
- Plastic detergent scoops
- Interesting packaging
- Old trays
- Old picture frames
- Cardboard boxes and cylinders
- Cardboard, newspaper, wrapping paper
- Plumbing supplies (PVC tubes and pipes, joiners, elbows...)
- Wooden, slabs, blocks and offcuts
- Pallets
- Wooden spools
- Crates
- Containers for collecting and transporting materials

Natural loose parts are freely available and include sand, water, mud and clay. Even rain can be viewed positively as a temporary loose part rather than a barrier to being outside.



Where do I find loose parts?

Many loose parts are budget friendly as they are inexpensive or even free if found or recycled (storage may be the most expensive aspect!). Perhaps the children can practise their persuasive writing skills and participate in an authentic letter-writing activity to a real audience? Bonus points for handwritten letters with hand-drawn pictures!

You can source loose parts from:

- Families (ask for donations)
- Going on a nature walk
- Charity shops
- Your own recycling bin
- Recycling centres
- Garage sales
- The side of the road during bulk waste pickups
- Local businesses such as tree loppers, florists or hardware shops
- REmida - an organisation centrally located in West Perth which is open to the public for collecting clean material, discards and offcuts donated from over 75 industry and business suppliers.

How do I present loose parts?

Loose parts can either be freely available or brought out for specific play experiences or provocations.



How do I store loose parts?

- 1 Tip 1** Find storage solutions which enhance the children's ownership and independence during set up and pack away routines by being accessible.
- 2 Tip 2** Model expectations of these procedures so that children can be part of the process of maintaining order and presenting resources in an orderly manner.
- 3 Tip 3** Consider investing in crates or trolleys if items need to be moved any distance.
- 4 Tip 4** Limit the amount of smaller loose parts (there is potential for a lot of mess!) and present them in segmented plastic or containers (lids are good) or smaller baskets (treasure baskets!).
- 5 Tip 5** Attach laminated photos of the contents on the front of the container to help with sorting.
- 6 Tip 6** Keep the loose parts fresh and stimulating by changing around what is on offer but be sure to keep favourite materials readily available!



What is the educator's role in loose parts play?³

Loose parts play should be child-led so embrace that and provide some uninterrupted free time for children to explore the loose parts. Stand back and observe what happens!

- Provide time and space for children's own thinking
- Only ask questions if they are to provoke thought
- Speak less
- Model a sense of wonder and connections to nature
- Trust the children to make decisions
- Resist intervening to solve problems
- Withhold judgment on the right or wrong way to do things
- Document meaningful observations in writing, photos or videos as reflective practice
- Supervise children with age-appropriate proximity
- Assess risk against benefits (risks are potential dangers that are easily recognised and managed by children, e.g. playing with sticks)
- Remove hazards (hazards are potential dangers that are hard for children to recognise and should always be removed, e.g. sharp edges)

Loose parts provide real-world learning for the scientists, engineers, builders, inventors, artists, explorers and investigators of tomorrow.

(See the resource from Webinar 2 about David Sobel's seven Play Motifs for further information about the ways children may utilise loose parts in their play)¹¹



^{3,11}Click on reference number for further information. All references are available at <https://www.natureplaywa.org.au/webinar-references>