



**Cymru**  
National Day Nurseries Association

# Factsheet



## A Brief Introduction to 'Loose Parts Play'

Wales

# A Brief Introduction to 'Loose Parts Play'

You may have heard the term 'loose parts play' being used more frequently in recent years within the childcare sector, especially with the introduction of the new curriculum. However, the theory has been around for a lot longer. In fact, loose parts play theory was first introduced in the 1970s, by an architect named Simon Nicholson. This factsheet aims to provide you with an introduction to 'loose parts play', for further resources and support, please see the end of this factsheet.

## The theory of loose parts play

Nicholson proposed that having loose parts in a children's environment motivated creativity and innovation. He proposed that if we wanted to develop children in this way, we need to offer a variety of materials 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. Therefore, allowing children the independence to guide their own learning through a spark of imagination. Historically, children would have spent the majority of their time outdoors and would have engaged with this type of play more naturally with toys and found materials, free from adult interruption. Children today may not have the same opportunities to roam freely in fields, woods, along beaches and rivers, therefore equivalent play opportunities need to be offered to them.

Nicholson suggested that in any environment, the degree of creativity is directly proportional to the number of variables in it. For example, the woods have a wide variety of loose parts, large and small; trees, sticks, twigs, stones, leaves, logs, gravel etc. therefore children can often play for hours within that environment due to the variety of ways they can play with the parts. However, a child who plays with a swing is limited to swinging predominantly and will engage for a much shorter period of time. Children's toys often have a fixed outcome and limited flexibility, but with loose parts, an object can become anything the child wants it to be.

## Why use loose parts?

The main benefit of loose parts is that their use can be changed. For example; a stick may be used as a fishing rod one day, but the next it could be a walking stick, a sword, a saw, a magic wand, a pencil, a hammer...the list could go on. Introducing loose parts play to children provides them with endless possibilities to create and think about how the materials can be played with.

**'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, 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)**

We know that children engage more with their learning when they are able to develop ownership of the environment where they play. Giving children space and time for play, with the opportunity to leave their creations and return to them later can support the learning process as opposed to focusing on an end product.

Children can be encouraged to work on 'projects' either individually or with their friends. The projects that children create in Loose Parts Play are never permanent but are ever-changing and fluid in their evolution. This supports children in adapting the materials to be used as something else, supporting the process of designing, problem-solving, discussing, negotiating, building and communicating. These processes are far more important than the finished product in supporting creativity, innovation and collaboration in implementing ideas. The introduction of loose parts increases the possibilities for children to engage in this type of play even in 'artificial' environments, outside or in.

## What are loose parts?

The idea of what resources constitute 'loose parts' can sometimes lead to confusion. You may see many instances of loose parts being represented by natural or found materials only, but loose parts can be **any** collection of natural or man-made materials that can be used to expand upon children's play. You may also often see loose parts as small parts added to small world play, creative areas and playdough, but loose parts can also be large pieces added to construction areas, block play or role-play areas. Although anything can be a loose-parts resource, some items do lend themselves to creating more possibilities than others. The main aim for loose parts is their ability to be moved, arranged, designed, taken apart etc. As Nicholson suggested, there should be plenty of variables; things that children can physically change within their environment.

Whatever the resources you offer, children should be allowed, and encouraged, to engage with and move them around. You will find that children will come up with combinations that adults may not have even considered. If you provide plumbing pipes, jugs and access to water at some point, a child (usually without prompting) will try to see how they can move water from one area to another.

## Resources for loose parts play:

Getting started with loose parts play will not cost you a lot of money. You can often find great materials at home or around your community. It is good to involve the children, parents and families in the collection of the resources too. The list below is not finite and you can add many more resource ideas of your own. Happy collecting!

- Baby food jars
- Balls
- Bangles, costume jewellery
- Bark & moss
- Baskets
- Containers
- Corks
- Crates
- Curtain rings
- Decorative stones
- Dice
- Keys
- Leaves
- Logs
- Magnets
- Marbles
- Marker caps

- Beads, pompoms, pipe cleaners and craft gems
- Bottle caps
- Bowls, containers, and baking tins
- Boxes
- Buckets
- Cable reels
- Cable ties
- Cans (make sure there are no sharp edges)
- Cardboard boxes, tubes and scraps in a variety of sizes
- Ceramic tiles
- Chains
- Clothes pegs
- Coconut shells
- Coins
- Pine cones
- Ping pong balls
- Plastic cups and lids
- Pods, acorns, chestnuts
- Pots
- Puzzle and game pieces
- Recycled spools and wheels from thread and ribbon
- Doilies and handkerchiefs
- Dowels
- Dried peas, beans, rice
- Duct tape
- Egg cartons
- Fabric remnants
- Feathers
- Fresh and dried flowers
- Funnels
- Garden canes
- Glass gems
- Golf tees
- Guttering & drainpipes
- Hair elastics and scrunchies
- Keyrings
- Ribbon, string tape wool, lace
- Rocks in a variety of sizes and textures
- Rope
- Rubber bands
- Sand
- Shells
- Silk scarves
- Spoons, forks, potato mashers,
- Metal tops from bottles & jars
- Napkin rings
- Netting
- Nuts and bolts
- Old bike wheels
- Old CDs or DVDs
- Old picture frames (glass/backs removed)
- Packaging products like bubble wrap, foam peanuts, wrapping paper scraps
- Paint sample cards
- Pallets
- Paper clips
- Pasta
- Pebbles
- Hand mixers, scoops
- Sticks, logs, tree slices
- Straws
- Tape measures
- Tarpaulin
- Tyres
- Washers
- Wire (make sure there are no sharp ends)
- Wood scraps.

## Risk assessment

When introducing loose parts into your setting, ensure you carefully consider your children beforehand and complete a specific risk assessment. Consider such things as; are there children likely to put things in their mouth? If yes, you may wish to carefully consider the size and shape of the resources, remove some items when these children are present or ensure an adult is available to observe their use. Do any children have specific allergies? If so, you would want to avoid these items.

Accessibility and quantity of resources are extremely important to ensure engagement, children should be able to easily reach resources and there should be sufficient quantities to avoid conflict. Resources need to be regularly checked by staff for damage and the items should be in good condition. Any splintered, cracked, damaged or dangerous items should be removed immediately. These steps should be included within your risk assessment.

## Preparing for loose parts play

There are a couple of steps you may wish to follow before jumping in with developing loose parts play in your setting:

1. Getting your staff involved is one of the most important initial steps. Support them to understand the concept of loose parts play and consider some professional learning for the setting staff as a whole to ensure they feel comfortable and confident with loose parts play in the setting and how to use it to enhance children's learning, including when to take an observers role
2. Complete an audit of what you already have. This could simply be a list of how you already use the resources above; are they confined to one area? Do you promote their movement? Or it could be a more in-depth audit of your environment, how it is engaged with? What impact does it have on the children's creativity
3. Design a list of what you would like to add to your environment. Try to think of what the children's interests are and how the resources could spark their imagination. E.g. You may have a group who are really interested in cars, so the introduction of wheel parts, cogs, mechanical-looking resources or big pieces could spark the creation of vehicles or role-playing garages. However, don't be disheartened if the play doesn't go in that direction, remember engagement is key, not the development of an end product, a predetermined outcome
4. Choose one area to focus on developing initially. Maybe you could introduce some cardboard tubes alongside your building blocks and toy cars. Maybe you'll place a tray of interesting beads and wire or pipe cleaners in your creative or playdough area
5. Remember there is no right or wrong way and things may not change overnight. Ensure you give children time and repeated opportunities to explore the same materials. Resist the urge to 'interfere' and direct their activities, but definitely encourage children by asking open-ended questions or sharing observations.

## Further information and support

- Open-Ended Play Ideas – NDNA Publication <https://bit.ly/3OdVvyR>
- Loose Parts Play – A toolkit by Theresa Casey and Juliet Robertson <https://bit.ly/2pMDRsH>
- Loose Parts Play – Webinar recording – Learning through landscapes <https://bit.ly/3OvR7uD>
- Children play at being in a builder’s yard – Video from Department for Education England <https://bit.ly/3OuG6d9>
- Children create floor sculptures – Video from Department for Education England <https://bit.ly/39GAbmq>

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National Day Nurseries Association

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