



## THE POWER OF loose parts play

*“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.”*

SIMON NICHOLSON, ARCHITECT

In 1972, architect and artist Simon Nicholson developed the Theory of Loose Parts; the idea that loose parts, materials which can be moved around, designed and redesigned, and tinkered with; create infinitely more opportunities for creative engagement than static materials and environments.

Loose parts are open-ended materials such as boxes, crates, sheets, pipes, log rounds, buckets, blocks and rocks that children can adapt, move, design and transform in many different ways. They can be moved, combined, redesigned, lined up, taken apart and put back together in multiple ways. The more flexibility a material or space has, the more opportunities these variables have for children's creative experimentation!

Loose parts can be natural or synthetic and might be considered 'junk' to some people. They are often inexpensive and can be found

in nature, in a home recycling bin, or in charity or craft stores. While the list is endless, examples of loose parts include:

- Natural resources – rocks, sticks, seedpods, shells and leaves
- Materials – ribbon, fabric, cushions, chalk, pom-poms
- Objects – boxes, blocks, buckets, balls, hula-hoop, washing basket, trays, milk crates, PVC pipe

The natural world provides a diverse variety of loose parts that display patterns and sequences that can't be manufactured. Everything in nature has a different and unique texture, smell, temperature, taste, weight and design. Their play possibilities and affordances are endless. Their uniqueness encourages children to problem solve, and to be creative in how they use these items.

### Benefits of loose parts as an everyday resource

The benefits for loose parts play are endless and an important part of children's development.

Loose parts are:

- Portable – this is appealing to children and allows them to have ownership over their play experience
- Open-ended – they are inherently flexible and can be used in endless ways
- Sensory – perfect for children to learn about textures, weights, patterns, shapes and what happens when you bang, rub, crush them together
- Encourages imagination and creativity – children can determine what purpose they will have and how they will be used
- Developmentally appropriate – children will use them in ways that suit their developmental level
- Develops skills and competency – encouraging problem-solving, co-operation, decision-making, fine and gross motor skills, independence, vocabulary, physical, art, maths and science
- Increases the variety and level of play experiences – social, constructive, symbolic, dramatic, exploratory
- Cost effective, easy to source and fun to collect.



# TEACHING AND LEARNING with loose parts

*“When children interact with loose parts, they enter a world of ‘what if’ that promotes the type of thinking that leads to problem solving and theoretical reasoning. Loose parts enhance children’s ability to think imaginatively and see solutions, and they bring a sense of adventure and excitement to children’s play”*

DALY AND BELOGLOVSKY, 2015

Sustained and focused learning is often observed as children engage in loose parts play and the agency of the child is clear. Although the learning is often self-directed, educators play a vital role in facilitating these experiences and in often knowing when to; watch, wait, support, give more time or offer encouragement to a learner.

The provision of (seemingly) random resources provides opportunities for children to discover, create, improvise and imagine. Low cost, everyday materials are powerful tools for learning; they provide an environment full of possibility which empowers children to guide their own learning.

Children will often engage in sustained and focused play when playing with loose parts; thus illustrating ‘how play enables children to simply enjoy being’ (Early Years Learning Framework p. 17). Loose parts are also an incredibly inclusive resource with children able to engage in multiple ways and high expectations of children are evident when the environment promotes inclusion and participation.

## Setting up for loose parts play

It’s simple and inexpensive to set up a loose parts play area in your family day care setting!

- 1 Display a list of possible resources and invite families to join the hunt for the perfect loose part. This is a great way to start a loose parts collection - and conversation. Remember to set aside an area for daily deliveries!
- 2 Establish agreements with children about playing and managing the loose parts. This includes routines around the packing up (or not) of loose parts within the setting.
- 3 Think about using natural materials to border your loose parts play space. A designated area for loose parts play, can be a good way to begin and keep the loose parts space ‘contained.’
- 4 Make your loose parts ‘useful’ - tree logs, rocks or stumps look great and double as seating for children at play.
- 5 Ensure that the loose parts collection can be easily accessed and transported by children of all ages. Provide loose parts that can be repurposed as vessels for moving items from one place to another - wooden crates, buckets, baskets or even wheelbarrows!

*Tip: when gathering materials or objects be sure to avoid anything broken, sharp or that may have nails in them (ie wooden crates/pallets).*

### FURTHER RESOURCES

[Loose parts info sheet](#), Nature Play SA

[Natural things \(loose parts\) guide](#), NRM Education

[Loose Parts Play Toolkit \(Scotland\)](#), Juliet Robertson



# 20 things to do with loose parts in a family daycare setting

## LEARNING OUTCOME 1:

CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF IDENTITY

- 1 Use boxes to create short tunnels and peek a boo play opportunity for infants on the move
- 2 Enjoy a nature walk and take a collecting basket. When you return, make an artistic interpretation of your journey with your nature collection
- 3 Sculpt your self-portrait with mud clay, then decorate with natural finds
- 4 Create sensory baskets for babies with natural and upcycled materials including; wooden items, metal cooking items, shells, measuring cups, whisks, balls and keys

## LEARNING OUTCOME 2:

CHILDREN ARE CONNECTED WITH, AND CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR WORLD

- 5 Decorate the branches of a seasonal or event tree with your finds
- 6 Collect dry leaves and use these as a sensory loose part during barefoot play
- 7 Build a snail hangout or bug hotel
- 8 Stack stones in a sunny spot in your garden for lizards to lounge upon

## LEARNING OUTCOME 3:

CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF WELLBEING

- 9 Dig yourself a mud pit, pop in a few loose parts and go mud dipping for treasure
- 10 Transport a wheelbarrow full of loose parts from one station to another

- 11 Practice your pincer grip with small parts, then try a different finger combination

- 12 Create a beautiful mandala with flowers, leaves and stones

## LEARNING OUTCOME 4:

CHILDREN ARE CONFIDENT AND INVOLVED LEARNERS

- 13 Introduce loose parts into tummy time with materials that provide a sensory wonderland; scarves and ribbons, homemade sensory bottles, log rounds, large shells and reflective materials

- 14 Create themed heuristic play boxes based on colour, texture or shape such as wood, metal or silver

- 15 Explore volume with pots and pans full of water and loose parts that sink

- 16 Practice positional language and ordinal numbers with any collection of loose parts

## LEARNING OUTCOME 5:

CHILDREN ARE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS

- 17 Put your senses to the test with a loose parts sensory bag, can you guess what natural parts you are holding without peeking?

- 18 Provide lots of boxes and containers for heuristic play; that is playing with and exploring the properties of objects.

- 19 Compile a story sack of parts, try it out at circle time.

- 20 Design and decorate a fairy garden or goblin's grotto.

# INVESTIGATING PROBLEM SOLVING with loose parts in nature

Loose Parts play encourages children to make, create, problem solve and hypothesize. Loose parts have no instructions, no predetermined rules – the perfect accessory for play in the family day care setting! When children are playing with loose parts, sustained and focused learning is often observed, and the agency of the child is clear.

1.2 Children develop their emerging autonomy, interdependence, resilience and sense of agency.

1.4 Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect.

2.1 Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation.

3.2 Children take increasing responsibility for their own health and physical wellbeing.

4.3 Children transfer and adapt what they have learned from one context to another.

5.1 Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes.

5.3 Children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media.