



Loose Parts

for playful parents, grandparents, carers, big sisters, wee brothers,
wee sisters, big brothers, aunts and uncles

*"The creation of something new is
not accomplished by the intellect but
by the play instinct"*
- Carl Jung



Loose Parts

What are loose parts?

- Loose parts are **materials** that when given to our children they can become anything they wish from **creating** and **making** a robot to constructing their own den.
- Loose parts can be **used freely** to create, explore textures and develop curiosity and imagination.
- These materials suggested have **no directions** and **no instructions**. Children can make their own decision about how to use the loose parts.
- Loose parts can provide great **sensory play** experiences.



"Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand."

Albert Einstein

Fern Cotton was talking on the radio recently about the uproar and excitement in the house one morning when garden furniture was delivered and the children attacked the packing to free the boxes to make a train. We often see children opening presents and instantly starting to play with the wrapping or the box and packing rather than the contents. This is what we mean by loose parts; bits and pieces, scraps and empty cartons, pots and pans, pegs and boxes, twigs, pebbles, old sheets, leaves and lots more. They all help stimulate curiosity and enhance the imagination of babies, children and young people.

It is not surprising that research and studies have shown that loose parts play can contribute to the development of children's creativity, exploration, imagination, learning and most importantly fun. Studies have also shown that loose parts create richer environments for children's play. This is why having access to loose parts play is vital for family play in the home, in play settings and school.



Playday Fife

Children and young people will play with loose parts in different ways depending on their age, ability and stage of development. Babies and young children start by holding items and usually try to put them in their mouth. With babies and young children care must always be taken when using loose parts to ensure that the materials cannot be swallowed by the baby or a young child.

Playing with loose parts also helps young children discover more about their world by learning about natural and man-made materials with different textures, shapes, colours and other physical properties. Playing like this can also help with early counting and sorting, hand to eye coordination, grouping and matching and identifying patterns and designs.



There are many different ways in which loose parts in play can be used by children:

- **making**
- **building**
- **touching and feeling**
- **adapting and changing use**

Smaller items for example: dry pasta, clothes pegs, corks, natural items, small boxes can all be used by children to make and create what is in their imagination.



Playing outside with children opens up lots more possibilities for playing with larger items for example: tyres, planks, crates, guttering. These items can be moved about, combined, taken apart and built up again. This can also develop children's physical abilities as they lift, build and play.



"A 'loose parts' toy, is open-ended; children may use it in many ways and combine with other loose-parts through imagination and creativity. Nature, which excites all the senses, remains the richest source of loose parts."

Richard Louv



There are lots of natural environments where we can find loose parts - beaches, woods, parks and gardens. Many natural resources are free and easily accessible. From driftwood, large tree branches and smaller items like twigs, sticks, stones and shells.



Loose parts play can start at home and broaden out into the outdoors. It can also be used in a school and school playground or any play setting for all ages and stages of children's development. Studies in Scotland show that the introduction of movable and recycled materials in the school playgrounds can have a significant, positive long-term effect on activity levels in children. Cheap items like crates and buckets can often stimulate children to be more active and creative than more expensive fixed play equipment.

"By allowing learning to take place outdoors, and fun and games to occur indoors, the distinction between education and recreation began to disappear."

Simon Nicholson

Many loose parts can be found in and around the home. Another option is to visit a scrapstore you can find your nearest one at: www.scrapstoresuk.org

Also check out DIY stores bargain bins.

Many garages and farms will give you used tyres free of charge which once cleaned and all metal removed can be used for play. They could be painted and made, for example, into a sand pit, used for swings or in play.

Note: If children are using tyres to build with please ensure that these are balanced safely and remove any water which may have collected inside.



The Theory of Loose Parts

The theory of loose parts¹ was introduced by architect Simson Nicolson in the 1970s. He believed that loose parts in our environment would empower “the creativity - the playing around with the components and variables of the world in order to make experiments and discover new things and form new concepts.”

“There is evidence that all children love to interact with variables, such as materials and shapes; smells and other physical phenomena, such as electricity, magnetism and gravity; media such as gases and fluids; sounds, music, motion; chemical interactions, cooking and fire; and other humans, and animals, plants, words, concepts and ideas. With all these things all children love to play, experiment, discover and invent and have fun. All these things have one thing in common, which are variables or ‘loose parts’. The theory of loose parts says, quite simply, the following 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

This theory has influenced play providers, architects and play space designers in a very positive way.

How can Loose Parts Play help?

Loose parts play supports cognitive development. Loose parts materials can be a catalyst that facilitates curiosity, imagination and creativity. Studies have shown that children and young people prefer to play with loose parts because it gives them more control over their own self-directed play in any setting and provides endless opportunities to use their own imaginations. A stick can become a wand or a light sabre, or if playing near water it can become a fishing rod!

A box can become a robot, a car, a house and even a space rocket! The possibilities are endless.

Sir Ken Robinson, an expert in learning and children’s education states, *“Imagination is the source of all human achievement”*.

Creativity and problem solving are among the basic skills that everyone needs; at school, in the home and in later life at work. To be able to ‘think outside the box’ and come up with innovative ways, we need to be able to use our imagination and see things in a different way.

Providing opportunities to develop children’s imaginations is essential for their continued learning and development. Reading a story for example, can also stimulate playful imaginations as children will develop their own ideas of what a character may look and sound like. These creations can then be extended into their play time as they might recreate their own ideas using loose parts to further expand on the story and maybe even perform like the characters they have heard about and imagined. Loose parts play can also help with concentration as children focus on creating and making.



It is amazing when children show you their 'creations' and tell you what it is they have made or are performing. It gives them, and us, a wonderful sense of accomplishment and pride, and greatly enhances their communication skills and self-confidence. The power of play and loose parts is limitless!

We have lots of ideas on how loose parts can be used on our Pinterest Boards visit these at:

<https://uk.pinterest.com/playscotland/>

Nature loose parts Acorns Bamboo Earth Feathers Leaves Mud Pinecones Pebbles Sand Shells Sticks Stones Tree stumps Twigs	Creative and messy play Beads Bottle tops Cardboard boxes Cotton wool Corks Glass stones Glue Googly eyes Glitter Greeting cards Paint and brushes Pipe cleaners Pompoms Sponges Wrapping paper Yoghurt pots
Metal Baking trays Bottle tops CDs Cooking utensils Muffin tins Spoons	Wood Building blocks Curtain rings Dolly pegs Drift wood Pastry brush Spoons Sticks
Household items Basin Basket Blankets Buckets Cardboard Clothes pegs Foam sponges Ice cube trays Lampshades Lego Magnets Potato masher Pillows Sheets Sieve Shoe polish tin Trays Vinyl records Washing up brush	Building materials Cable ties Guttering Gravel Hammer and nails Hose Milk crates Paint brush Planks of wood Sand Tarpaulin Tyres Washers

Sensory items	Cotton wool Hessian Netting Ribbon Silk Shoes laces Tin foil Velcro rollers Wool	...and there's more!	Chalk Plastic bottle and tops Hula hoop Wallpaper samples Straw bales
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You can add to the list too! Let us know at info@playscotland.org.

Loose parts can be used together to stimulate the senses, example:

Sound	Empty glass jar or plastic bottle with lid, add in: small stones / dried pasta / rice / buttons / pulses etc screw lid back on and you have a noise maker. You could make one for each item to see what different sounds each one makes.
Touch	Zip lock bag and add: hair gel / conditioner then add in small beads / glitter. Zip back up and play.
Smell	Draw string bags add in: fresh lavender / fresh herbs / fresh flowers.



Edinburgh Playday



Yarn bombing

XPLAY SCOTLAND

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Messy Play

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Messy Play Two

XPLAY
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More Messy Play

XPLAY
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Experimental Play

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Culture Play

1 The Theory of Loose Parts – Simon Nicholson

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