

The Theory of Loose Parts



The theory of "loose parts" first proposed by architect Simon Nicholson in the 1970's has begun to influence child-play experts and the people who design playspaces for children in a big way. Nicholson believed that it is the 'loose parts' in our environment that will empower our creativity.

In a play, loose parts are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways. They are materials with no specific set of directions that can be used alone or combined with other materials. Loose parts can be natural or synthetic.

In a preschool outdoor environment we can provide an array of loose parts for use in play such as stones, stumps, sand, gravel, fabric, twigs, wood, pallets, balls, buckets, baskets, crates, boxes, logs, stones, flowers, rope, tyres, balls, shells and seedpods.

Having "loose parts" available in a playspace allows children to use these materials as they choose. Often you will find that children would rather play with materials that they can use and adapt as they please, rather than expensive pieces of play equipment.

Encouraging children to use resources as they choose can provide a wider range of opportunities than one that is purely adult led. Children playing with loose parts are using more creativity and imagination and developing more skill and competence than they would playing with most modern plastic toys.

It may take a very open mind on our part (there is often a lot of cleaning up involved as materials end up in places you would never expect them to be) but when children cross play materials and areas in creative ways, it is our responsibility to support and encourage their work and ideas.

Loose Parts should –

- Have no defined use and playworkers must support the children when they decide to change the shape or use of them.
- Be accessible physically and stored where they can be reached by children without having to ask the playworkers. The children should know that they can use them whenever and however they wish.
- Be regularly replenished changed and added to.

'Loose parts' theory is about remembering that the best play comes from things that allow children to play in many different ways and on many different levels. Environments that include 'loose parts' are infinitely more stimulating and engaging than static ones. The play environment needs to promote and support imaginative play through the provision of 'loose parts' in a way that doesn't direct play and play opportunities, but allows children to develop their own ideas and explore their world.