

Loose parts theory

For playwork settings

“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 [sic], 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.” Nicholson, S, "How Not To Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts", Landscape Architecture 1971.

Loose parts can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, taken apart and put back together in multiple ways. Used alone or combined with other materials. There is no set of specific directions for materials that are considered loose parts.

The child is the direction

Natural environments, such as woodlands and the beach, can provide a wealth of loose parts for children. You can also offer loose parts indoors, boxes are particularly useful if you have limited storage.



Below is a list of suggested items for loose play.

- Sand/water
- Pieces of wood/sticks
- Planks of wood
- Leaves
- Pine cones
- Acorns
- Rocks/pebbles
- Beads
- Balls/hoops
- Ropes/string/laces
- Plant pots
- Ground sheets
- Ribbon
- Pots/pans
- Feathers
- Milk cartons
- Tyres
- Pegs
- Candles
- Blankets
- Shells
- Seeds
- Wooden kitchen utensils
- Cardboard boxes
- Chalk
- Pieces of fabric/scarves
- Hoses/pipes/guttering
- CD cases/CDs
- Cardboard tubes
- Selection of brushes
- Blocks
- Buckets/funnels
- Foam
- Straws
- Plastic bottles
- Trays

Playwork Principles

The theory of loose parts links to the following Playwork Principle:

“Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.” Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, Cardiff 2005.

Early Years Foundation Stage

The theory of loose parts fits in with the Early Years Foundation Stage by:

Characteristics of Effective Learning

Positive Relationships: what adults could do

Play with children. All early years practitioners will need to understand the different ways in which children learn in order to provide effective support.

Enabling Environments: what adults could provide

Play is a key opportunity for children to think creatively and flexibly, solve problems and link ideas. Establish the enabling conditions for rich play: space, time, flexible resources, choice, control, warm and supportive relationships.

Characteristics of Effective Learning: Play and Exploration – engagement

- Finding out and exploring
- Playing with what they know
- Being willing to ‘have a go’

Children's play reflects their wide ranging and varied interests and preoccupations. In their play children learn at their highest level. Play with peers is important for children's development.

Characteristics of Effective Learning: Active learning – motivation

- Being involved and concentrating
- Keeping trying
- Enjoying achieving what they set out to do

Children learn best through physical and mental challenges. Active learning involves other people, objects, ideas and events that engage and involve children for sustained periods.

Characteristics of Effective Learning: Creating and thinking critically – thinking

- Having their own ideas
- Making links
- Choosing ways to do things

When children have opportunities to play with ideas in different situations and with a variety of resources, they discover connections and come to new and better understanding and ways of doing things. Adult support in this process enhances their ability to think critically and ask questions.

“Thinking about what we did as children with the bits and pieces lying around and looking at what children actually do when playing in the light of play types, loose parts and other play concepts, will help us create genuinely enriched play environments” Brown (2003) p. 109.

