

# Loose Parts and Learning on the Playground

by Anne-Marie Spencer

## Examples of Loose Parts

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| n Pinecones                                    | n Stones         |
| n Sticks                                       | n Straw Bales    |
| n Nuts   | n Leaves         |
| n Small Ambulatory                             | n Boxes          |
| toys   | n Blocks         |
| n Tossings                                     | n Balls          |
| n Loose Fill                                   | n Sand and Water |
| playground Surfaces                            |                  |
| n Large Scale, Manufactured Modular components |                  |

Have you ever given a child a gift, and then watched as they put the gift aside and played with the box, wrapping, and ribbon? If so, you have witnessed the power of loose parts in play, and the imaginative empowerment they can yield. The idea of loose parts and their unique benefits has begun to influence play space designers, manufacturers, and facilitators in a big way, although the concept is not a new one.

Loose parts as play terminology was first proposed back in the 1970s by architect Simon Nicholson, who believed that it is the loose parts in our environment that empower creativity. Nicholson suggests the beach as a great example; with sand, pebbles, shells, and water, children can play imaginatively for hours along the shore. The concept of loose parts in play dates back even farther, to the 1930s when Danish landscape architect Christian Sorenson imagined a 'junk playground' where children could shape and create their environment, and to the 1940s when he observed that postwar children often preferred playing in dirt and lumber from post-war rubble, where they could design and build their own equipment.



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## What are Loose Parts?

Loose parts are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, put together, and taken apart in a number of ways in a play environment. They come with no specific set of directions, and their usage is determined by children, adaptable in a multitude of ways to support imagination, skill development, competence, and creativity in an open-ended way. Loose parts come in many forms, from natural materials like rocks, pine cones, pebbles, shells, and sand, to manufactured forms, such as rings, balls, manipulatives, or boxes. Some play equipment manufacturers are even creating entire configurable systems to encourage loose parts play on the playground.

## Why Loose Parts?

There is a growing interest in loose parts play as a means to stimulate and encourage imagination, cooperation, and interaction among children. These open-ended play experiences encourage problem solving and are child-centered, so children who involve themselves in using loose parts for play can experience exploration that occurs naturally, without adult intervention or direction. Besides exercising the creative mind, loose parts encourage learning: the principles of math, for example, as children interlock and count pieces and physical

science as they experiment with stacking, the use of inclines, or the principles of sand and water.

At a playground in Fort Payne, Alabama, we observed two girls playing a game of 'store' using pieces of the wood fiber surface as 'money' to purchase imaginary items. They switched roles, with the older girl often helping the younger count out her 'change' for more 'expensive' items. The game fostered cooperation, and developed imagination and negotiation skills as they invented fanciful items to sell and bartered the price. The older girl also helped the younger child improve counting skills in a fun way. The game continued for over 20 minutes.

Loose parts play can encourage many skills, including:

- n Creativity
- n Cooperation
- n Multisensory hands-on experiences
- n Planning, organizing, discussing, building, and designing of games and rules
- n Translation of abstract images in their minds to concrete examples
- n Moving, learning, and having fun together using the imagination
- n Promotion of communication and discussion
- n Individual learning styles and inclusive play

- Extension of learning and elaboration of current skills
- A sense of power, control, mastery, self-esteem, responsibility, and ownership where all children can feel successful

Some manufactured system options feature tactile, modular elements that encourage cooperative efforts between children and offer hands-on experiences that extend learning in exciting ways through multi-sensory experiences, forming 'sculptures,' creating narratives and games, or using pieces independently, to create a wide variety of changing play experiences. Systems like this have been utilized in several children's museums, including Chattanooga's Creative Discovery Museum. Several elementary schools and learning centers in Atlanta have also added these systems to encourage cooperation, and provide a fun, new way to encourage movement and learning. The pieces maintain high levels of play because when children exhaust the play possibilities with one configuration, they simply deconstruct, and then build something new to generate renewed interests and ideas.

Dr. Jayne Griffin, Creative Discovery Museum's Director of Education, says, "Play is such an important part of the development of children and this loose parts play experience fits perfectly with the hands-on nature of the Museum. Kids crawl around and through, climb up and down, balance on one or two feet, use upper body strength to move pieces, and perhaps best of all, with all of this physical activity they still get to imagine and problem solve."

In a contribution to the recent play research book, *Words on Play*, Dr. Nilda Cosco (2011) praises loose parts play saying,

"The most appropriate play spaces contain all necessary ingredients to guide

further exploration and discovery . . . play environments should not be considered as a mere collection of components, but sensory rich spaces that encourage and support children's need for stimulation."

Loose parts equipment and components also rate high with parents and educators of children with disabilities. The nature of loose parts play encourages children to work together cooperatively to create something, but can also be enjoyed individually if that is the child's preference. Play is generally at ground level, provides sensory opportunities, increases interaction among children of all abilities, and allows all children to join in or observe at a level they are comfortable with. Furthermore, loose parts provide age-appropriate materials, as children will play and use the materials in ways that are interesting to them. Young children may simply move the pieces around the environment, while older children may use pieces to build complex structures.

A group of four children recently observed at a seaside playground filled buckets with sand and water, and then brought them to the playground to 'bake a cake' on one of the play decks. When satisfied with the shape, they used nearby sticks for candles, and shells to decorate the edges of the 'cake.' When they were finished, they called other children on the playground to come celebrate, sliced the 'cake,' and paraded around the playground with their individual slices before discarding them in the sand. As demonstrated in this play event, loose parts play meets the needs of the whole child through opportunities for sensory, physical, social, language, and cognitive development.

## How to Incorporate Loose Parts

Child-friendly natural materials: Natural loose parts engage children through

interactions with objects such as cones, seedpods, small stones, and leaves. Natural elements provide for open-ended play that emphasizes unstructured creative exploration with diverse materials. The high level of complexity and variety that nature offers invites longer and more complex play. Plants, with a mix of color, texture, fragrance, and softness also encourage multi-sensory experiences and novelty with seasonal changes. Program guides, such as PlayCore's NatureGrounds, are available to facilities wanting to learn more about how to naturalize their existing play space and encourage interaction with natural loose parts.

Loose parts systems: Larger loose parts systems encourage interaction because the pieces require cooperation among children to build. Soft corners and a myriad of ways to join the pieces provide open-ended play experiences that are widely varied and inclusive of people of all abilities.

Readily available parts for play: Integrating blocks, balls, rings, cones, and other manufactured small parts into the play space allows children to incorporate creative games into their daily play, encourages imaginative play, brings learning and the classroom curriculum outdoors, and keeps the experience new and fresh.

Whether you incorporate a play system designed to encourage loose parts, or simply provide loose materials to augment the existing play experience, loose parts play is a valid and vital contribution to children's development. In stepping back and giving children the time and freedom to direct their own play and move things around, we can help facilitate play and learning in its highest, most pure form.

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