

# Loose Parts Play



How can loose parts be a part of play in my setting?

*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*

Children will naturally interact and explore the materials available in any setting. Typical loose parts available in homes, the outdoors, and classroom settings may include blocks, scarves, natural items, and manufactured items. Think of how a cardboard box and stick become many things and both are quite intriguing to a child. Children often find “scraps” or “junk” to create their own play. Interacting with loose parts encourages creativity, imagination, exploration, engineering, and artistic expressions.



What “things” can be loose parts?

*The most interesting and vital loose parts are those that we have around us everyday in the wilderness, countryside, and city.*

*–Simon Nicholson*

Really, anything a child can explore can be a loose part. Simon Nicholson refers to the term “variables,” so loose parts do not have to actually be “things”--it might be concepts, sound, light, etc. However, to get started, some basic loose parts might include the following items.

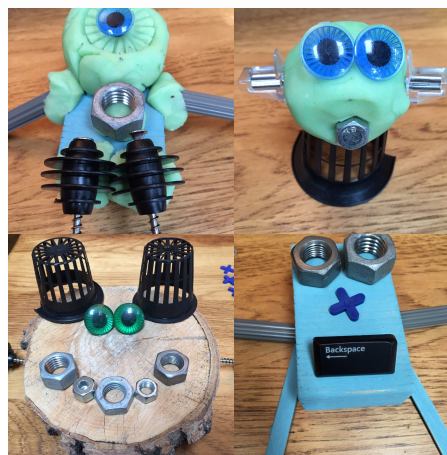
**Nature:** sticks, rocks, mud, leaves, snow, pinecones, seed pods, flowers, tree cookies, shells, bark, sand, water, soil

**Outdoor Play Spaces:** crates, tires, spools, wooden planks, buckets, ramps, pvc pipes, gutters, fabric pieces, kitchenware, scarves, balls, large spools

**Indoors:** recyclables (clean tin cans, plastic containers, cardboard, wood pieces, foam, cardboard tubes, lids, etc.), art supplies (popsicle sticks, feathers, buttons, straws, buttons, string, yarn, etc.), tools

*To me, it is the experimentation and process that makes “loose parts” rather than the actual stuff.*

*--Dr. Carla Gull*





## How do children play with loose parts?

*Children learn most readily and easily in a laboratory type environment where they can experiment, enjoy and find out things for themselves.* --Simon Nicholson

There really is no “wrong” way to play with loose parts. Allowing children to freely play with objects is a very pure form of this type of play, though other applications may include provocations, outdoor classrooms, nature art, etc. Nicholson mentions the following verbs as part of loose parts—as you can see, the actions are varied and include experimentation, building, inventing, and exploring. It may even include deconstruction (knocking over blocks, ripping cardboard) at times.

*VERBS: build, construct, play, experiment, invent, explore, discover, evaluate, modify, study, think, consider, measure, draw, model-making, calculate, destruct, slide, fold, hide, paint, bounce*

Consider the concept of ‘schemas’—children naturally use a variety of play schemas, which are repeated behaviors allowing them to explore and develop ideas. Common schemas include:

- Trajectory
- Rotation
- Enclosing
- Enveloping
- Transporting
- Connecting
- Positioning
- Orientation



Children often use loose parts in connection to these repeated behaviors. Dumping and pouring is a typical early childhood activity. Having loose parts available to scoop and pour facilitates this natural exploration tendency, as can be done for any of the schemas.



## Why do children prefer loose parts over toys?

When children can freely explore and create on their own, they are processing what they are learning. They can experiment, test their own hypotheses, and understand the properties of materials. Children are naturally drawn to this age-old principle of interacting with their environment through playful approaches.



## Safety Concerns

Be aware of choking/suffocation hazards for younger children. button batteries, small magnets, allergies, poisonous plants, sharp points and broken items.

Regularly check items available and supervise play to insure safety.



## Resources:

### What is a schema?

<https://bit.ly/2AbPQFt>

### Loose Parts: What does this mean?

<https://bit.ly/2SfYf1M>

### Nicholson’s Theory of Loose Parts

<https://bit.ly/2V1be9l>

