



PLAYGROUND
IDEAS

LOOSE

Parts Manual



The DIY guide to creating a playground in a box

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This manual is a collaboration between




and



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Welcome

On the school playground, children build places to climb and hide. One boy uses a cardboard box to make a costume, and then walks over to show his friends. A group of girls made a hammock out of a sheet and take turns pushing each other. Under the shade of a tree, a pair of younger children are creating little houses from sticks and leaves. All around them, children are rolling tires and stacking logs, braiding grasses and dressing up.



What do the children in this scene have in common? These children aren't playing on playground equipment, or with fancy toys or gadgets. They are all playing with loose parts - simple, cheap, everyday materials, repurposed for play. "Loose parts" is a term that refers to any material that can be moved, carried, stacked, or altered*. Loose parts can include natural materials (like sticks, stones, water, leaves, and sand) or recycled materials (like cardboard boxes, ropes, fabric, lengths of pipe, or milk crates.) It can even include conceptual inspiration for play, such as stories and ideas, light and shadow.

*The theory of loose parts was first put forward by Simon Nicholson in the 1970s, and states that the creative potential of an environment is increased with the number and variety of flexible materials within it.

Play is children's first method of engaging with the world, and other people. Increasingly, studies on children's development are demonstrating that open-ended, self-directed play is vitally important for children's well-being and development. The great thing about loose parts is that they don't come with a set of directions or an implied "right way" to use them. Loose materials are only directed by a child's imagination. The playground becomes rich with possibilities for play, as children can decide to transform a cardboard box into a castle, a turtle's shell, and a lion's cage all in one afternoon.

This manual will guide you through a step-by-step process for you to create your unique loose parts play kit. Perhaps you are starting small and want to create a box of materials you can take out each day for your students to play with. Or maybe you have an existing playground and want to enrich the environment with loose parts. It doesn't matter how big or small your budget or plans are, inside you'll find the tips and guidelines to make it happen.

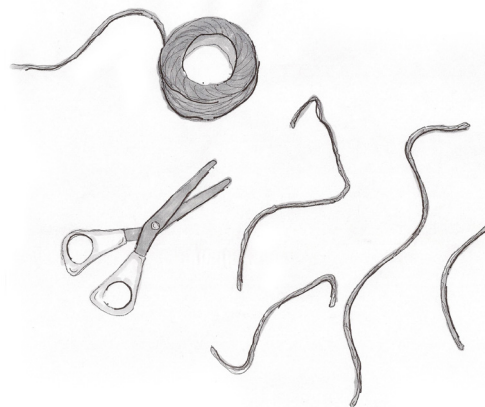
In this manual we'll:

1. Help you to consider the multiple benefits of loose parts play for children's well-being and development;
2. Assess and reevaluate the possibilities of your current environment;
3. Take a closer look at what makes an object an appropriate loose part for play;
Develop a system for storage and maintenance that works for your context;
4. Explore staffing techniques of play facilitation which can be applied in any setting; and
5. Answer common questions, and provide information and resources to help you gain support for your own loose parts playground

Let's get started!

Benefits of Loose Parts

Many organizations and communities struggle to provide safe and interesting places where children can play. For some, cost is prohibitive to building a playground. For others in flood zones or in displaced areas, setting up permanent structures can be near impossible. Loose parts play materials can be a great solution to overcoming these challenges. In addition, loose parts offer many benefits over traditional, fixed equipment spaces.



Fixed Equipment:

- + Can be very expensive to install
- + Have generally been designed for maintenance and surveillance
- + Tend to focus on gross motor play (running, jumping, spinning)
- + Have equipment intended to be used in specific ways
 - + Become boring over time
- + Are inflexible to children's ideas

Loose Parts:

- + Can be cheap or free to create
- + Are redesigned daily by the children
- + Require maintenance and storage
- + Accommodate all play types equally
- + Allow children to build, dismantle, bang together, repurpose and more, to make their ideas real in the world
- + Become more engaging over time, as children's skills increase
 - + Encourage peer play and social cohesion

The good news is, loose parts can be added to any existing site, whether it's an empty space or an existing playground!

Example: One school has a large flat field for children to play in. One corner stays muddy most of the year, making it difficult to run in. To reduce conflict at recess, adults had been leading organized games in the dry portion of the field. However, they noticed that some children did not enjoy these games so they introduced loose parts including long bamboo poles tied with thin strips of bicycle innertube, pieces of fabric, as well as saucepans, spoons and mixing bowls. Using the fabric, a group of children decided to play wedding and dressed up the brides before parading through a village of bamboo houses. At the mud kitchen, children made a feast for everyone to celebrate together after the 'ceremony'.



Example: Another school has a fixed climbing frame. Children there spoke many languages, and adults noticed that the children were not mixing together. They brought bedsheets and ropes, pulleys and buckets. Soon, the children had used the cloth to cover parts of the climbing frame and whisper together inside these tents. Others had used the ropes and pulleys to raise buckets full of sand to the top of the climbing frame, where other children poured it down the slide. In this complicated construction, any child who wanted to could find a role that they did not need a shared language to explain.



Why is **PLAY** so important?

Cognitive

Play dramatically increases brain development, helps children concentrate better in class, and reduces stress, which hinders learning.

Social

Children are able to practice skills of teamwork and solitude, and helps them to make new friends

Therapeutic

Play is an intuitive method for children to process trauma, and reconnect to the world

Intellectual

Play involves understanding that one thing can represent another, and the use of narratives, both of which are essential for literacy

Physical

By encouraging children to move, stretch, run and climb, play is essential for children's physical development

Emotional

Through play, children learn emotional self-regulation and resiliency, which is critical for success throughout life

Creative

By allowing children to translate their ideas into reality, play encourages a rich and flexible creativity

Economic

All of the above benefits combine, so that children with access to play are also more prepared for and able to thrive in school and work. This has direct financial economic benefits for the rest of their lives.

You can read more about the benefits of play through exploring the "Further Readings" list at the end of this manual, and in *The Case for Play*, available for free online at www.playgroundideas.org/caseforplay

Step 1 - Assess Your Environment

Will your space for loose parts play be in an open field? At an existing playground? Inside a classroom? On a veranda? The size and type of space available will help you decide what materials to gather and how to store and maintain them.

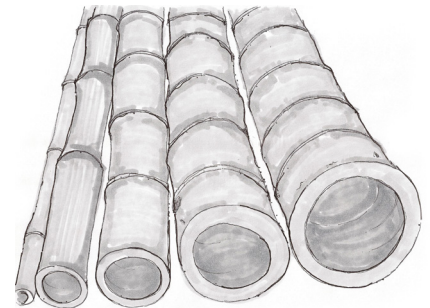
We encourage everyone to begin with a deep consideration of where they are starting from. Spend a little quiet time in the site where you work on your own. Feel its atmosphere, and think about what it offers for play currently. Remember what you have seen children do there. Think about what this place might become, then take a good look at what it is right now.



Check the space for anything unexpected. Is there broken glass, or equipment that has become old and might break? Decide, before children arrive, how big a space they can use and make sure it has all unexpected hazards removed. When children are playing, they may become very absorbed in their play and not notice something like broken glass. Sweep it away. For more about general playground safety please see our safety manual at <http://www.playgroundideas.org/build-a-playground/design-manuals>.

Step 2 - Gather Loose Parts

When gathering loose parts, it's useful to think in terms of both natural and recycled materials. Here are some suggestions:



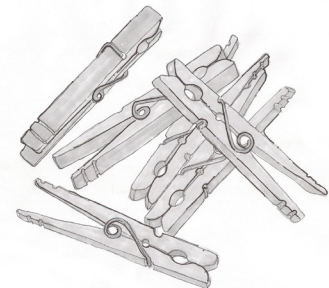
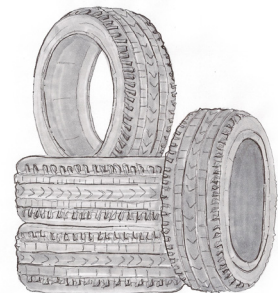
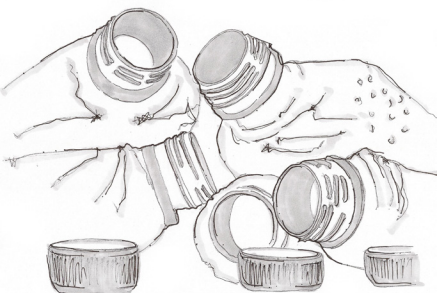
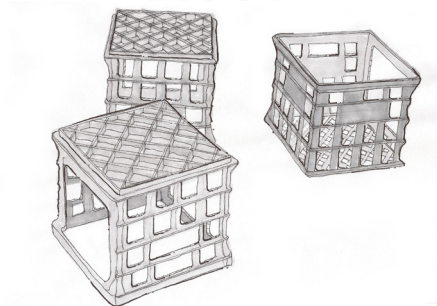
Natural materials:

- + Pebbles
- + Sand
- + Water
- + Branches or bushes
- + Large stones
- + Leaves
- + Bamboo
- + Seeds
- + Flowers
- + Sticks



Recycled materials:

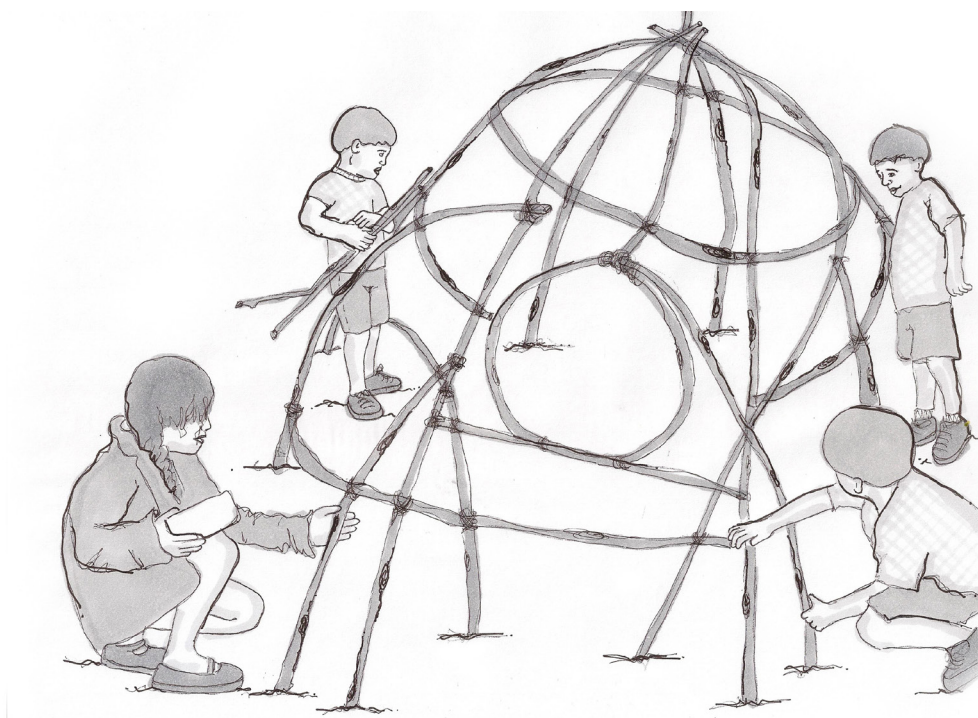
- + Soda/milk crates
- + Plastic bottles and caps
- + Cardboard tubes
- + Pieces of string
- + Clothespins
- + Tires
- + Wooden spoon
- + Mixing bowl
- + Saucepan or cooking pot



While we don't want to tell children how to play with these materials, it's often useful to think about what they offer in combination.

For example:

Pebbles	+	Cardboard tubes	=	A marble run or rain stick
Branches	+	Fabric & pegs	=	A little house or animal cave
Soil & water	+	Cooking pot	=	?



When you are looking around and wondering what makes a good loose part, ask yourself the following questions:

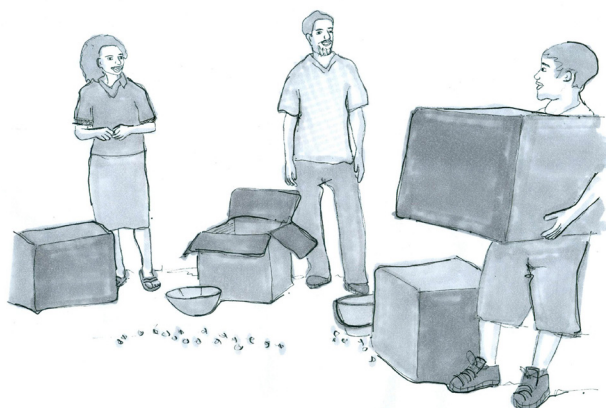
- + Is it flexible? Can it be used and reused in a different form without breaking or becoming hazardous?
- + Is it something you comfortably can give to children, to do whatever they want with? Even if that means using them up or destroying them?
- + Is it something that you can gather up afterwards relatively easily, or something you can leave out all the time?

If your setting will have limited or no supervision by adults, think very carefully about the materials you supply and whether they will be safe for children to use unsupervised. You can read more about safety and risk on page 20.

Where can these materials be found?

Once you start keeping an eye out for good loose parts, you'll start seeing them everywhere! Take another look at your setting, in the backs of cupboards, to see what can be repurposed. Then, get yourself ready and go out! Whether urban or rural, your local environment has lots to offer children for play.

Extend your reach through personal networks. Ask friends and community members for what they don't need anymore, and if there's anything they'd like to donate. Ask local businesses if they have leftover materials to donate. Perhaps a carpentry workshop has wood cutt-offs, a restaurant has empty bottles or pails, or a garage has old tires they can donate. It's amazing how many people want to help out a project that is both important and fun.



This is also a great way to strengthen relationships with the families of children you work with. Consider making a list of the kinds of materials you would like to receive and posting this where parents will see it.

Encouraging other adults to contribute loose parts helps to build community investment in your project - in all senses.



Budget

The materials we've recommended will vary in terms of cost depending upon your location. It's worth being clear that this approach can be taken without spending any money at all, particularly in terms of loose parts. At the same time, a small amount of investment will go a long way.

When spending from a limited budget, prioritize a sturdy storage system. Though keep in mind you can start with something as simple as a cardboard box. We'll talk about different types of storage systems in the next section. Then build a collection of tools and materials which can be used for a variety of purposes. Over time you'll get better at spotting great materials for free and in knowing how to invest the funding that you have. This means that the greatest investment is really in your staff's understanding and experience of play.

Global Games

Play is a universal part of humanity. Some games have been played traditionally by people all around the world, often with nothing more than a handful of pebbles or length of string.



Snail (Bosnia), Little Plane (Mexico), Chapel (Hungary), Hopscotch (US, UK): Players begin by drawing a series of boxes on the ground, in a row with arms or curled in a spiral. Players throw a pebble and jump on one leg through the boxes, often singing a rhyme and picking up their pebble as they return down the same path.

Gris/grille (Somalia), Jacks (US/UK), Gongghi (Korea): This game is played with pebbles and either a shallow hole in the earth or a chalk circle. Its goal is to throw one pebble in the air and gather more quickly, before it hits the ground.

Queen, Beautiful Queen (Italy), Grandmother's Footsteps (UK), Red Light Green Light (US): In this game, one person stands at the front with their back turned, and everyone else lined up at a distance. In some versions, the person at the front calls out the name of an animal and number of steps that the other children can take towards them, while pretending to be that animal. In other versions, the one at the front looks away while the other children try to 'steal' steps forwards, before they are seen.

Fah (Somalia), Tapatan (Philippines), Noughts and Crosses (UK), Tic Tac Toe (US), Achi (Ghana): Two players have counters or pebbles, and draw a grid. The grid may be many different sizes, but players either place or move pieces across the board. Some versions of this game can be played alone.

Step 3 - Storage & Maintenance

There are as many ways to store and make use of loose parts as there are settings! We encourage everyone to find ways that make sense in your context. To give you some ideas, here are some models that others have found effective in their own schools and organizations:

Playground in a box:

One teacher fills a box with small loose parts such as pieces of tissue paper, rubber bands, paper clips, dried beans, marbles and clothespins. Every day she brings the box out for the students in her class to play with. Over time, the students bring their own materials to add to it.



Classroom cupboard:

In another school, an old stationary cupboard is stocked with straws, cups, tape, and folded up cardboard boxes.

The teacher brings the materials out for indoor 'choice time' within the school day or recess when it is raining. The children use bedsheets to turn their school desks into tents, and blow balls of tape across the floor with straws. Many of these materials come from the teacher's and parents' homes.



Outdoor playground:

In a large school with mixed ages, adults bought a shipping container and filled it with tires, milk crates, sturdy buckets and spoons, as well as a couple pieces of heavy rope and cable reels. These materials are chosen to last, and make best use of the large and flat playground. Children often stack the milk crates or tires for climbing. At the end of recess, children quickly gather the materials back into the shipping container, which is then locked.



Shared porch space:

A group of nursery teachers who share a porch wanted a selection of loose parts that would survive getting wet during monsoon season. They gathered cups and spoons, pots from the kitchen and sponges. Children practice pouring rain water into cups, float sponges as 'boats'. Materials are stored in open milk crates, to let them drain when not in use.



When you're first reading about loose parts, or dreaming big about the possibilities of play in the lives of children you work with, it's easy to get excited - and we want you to get excited! At the same time, it's best to start small and grow slowly, as you and the children learn more about play with loose parts together. Begin with materials that you feel comfortable and confident with, then observe what children do with what you've provided. Reflect on what you saw, and if possible discuss this with colleagues or friends.

Let that guide you.

Maintaining the materials

However you store materials, set up a regular schedule for maintenance. Go through them piece by piece to see what is popular and what is ignored. Does anything need replacing? What forms of play are children particularly interested in, and what could you supply to support that? If children are building houses with cardboard, what could you provide to let them expand or decorate these further?



Sometimes children will ask for specific materials, and by all means supply those if you can. If not, don't worry too much. Bringing a range of materials helps create all sorts of ideas!

Take a look too, at anything that has lost its value for play. Are there materials that have been all used up, or which the children clearly don't use? Are there items that are broken? Feel free to remove anything that doesn't seem to be working and replace it with something else. Supporting play, like play itself, is a constantly unfolding process.

Cleaning up

Are children responsible for cleaning up the materials after they have played with them? This is a question which every setting needs to answer for themselves. Here are some opinions for you to consider.

Yes, children need to gather up what they have taken out.

In one school, there are very few teachers and they don't have time to clean up after recess. The space is shared with another project and nothing can be left out. If children here do not take responsibility for the loose parts playground then the program cannot continue.

No, children's focus at a playground should be on play

At another school, recess is short and many children use the same playground in waves. If children took the materials out and put them away, there would be very little time to actually play with them! One or two teaching assistants stay out after recess to put the materials away.

When you're deciding, ask yourself: What is in the best interests of children's play? You can also reconsider this later on, and change accordingly.

Step 4 - Train Staff

You are already working to improve children's opportunities for play, simply by creating an enriched environment for them to explore. As staff, you may wonder to what extent you should involve yourself in their play. Below are some principles to guide you. These are taken from an professional approach to supporting children's play, known as playwork. If you'd like to learn more, take a look at the resources list at the end of this manual.

Keep a light touch

When making changes in the environment, or circulating during play, practice working as subtly as possible. If you see that a material may be needed soon, you can provide it 'invisibly'. For example, if a child is building and you can see that soon they'll be out of tape, you can leave a roll of tape nearby. It will be there when they are ready.



Waiting to be invited

It is easy for many adults to walk straight into children's play and ask them questions about what they're doing or why. In some educational settings, this is encouraged. However, we prefer not to interrupt children who are playing happily and instead wait to be invited. Of course, this is not the case if there is an immediate serious danger.

Respond to cues

An invitation, or 'play cue', can take many different forms! We read and respond to cues all the time, though we may not usually call them such. A child might look over their shoulder at us, squeal and giggle and run away. It is an easy guess that they want us to chase them. When we respond to a child's cues, we are saying 'yes' to something that comes from deep inside them, something which is very important to them in the moment.

Challenging behavior

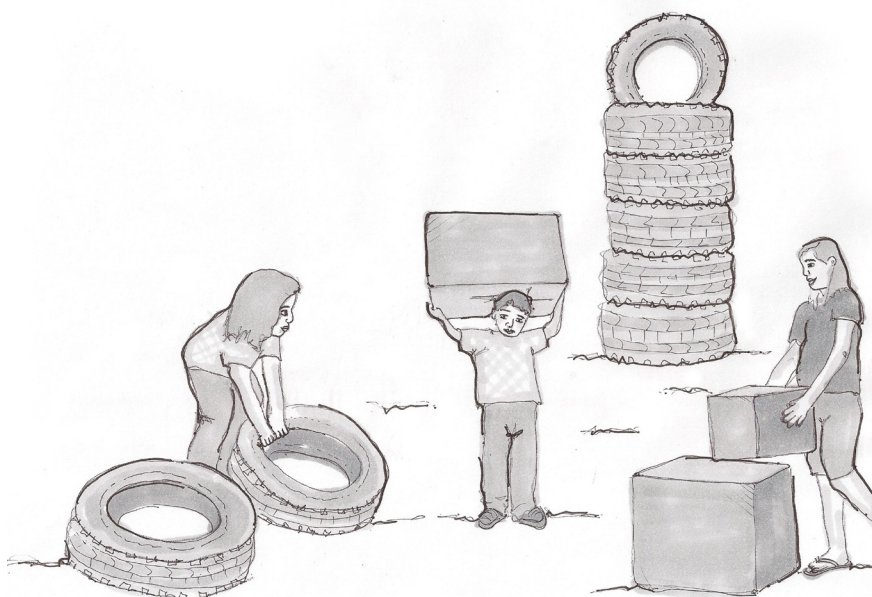
Sometimes, children will push their way into other's games aggressively, or seek our attention in ways we find difficult to manage. Asking ourselves what experiences they are seeking can suggest some ways we might help or subtly redirect them. For example, if a child is throwing rocks too close to other children, we quietly challenge them to hit a tree - one that is *coincidentally* in the opposite direction.

Rough and tumble or play fighting is very important for children, and a great way to learn social and physical boundaries. However, those without much experience might find that they need practice in how to keep this wrestling playful. In a mixed age setting, they are better able to find partners who can match or exceed their strength, but in the absence of peers we can offer to play with them, being careful to let them stay in charge of the game.

We want to be clear that no one should provide opportunities or responses which they are uncomfortable with - but that, through reflection, we may see ways to expand our skills and practice.

Observe, remember, reflect

We were all children once. It's good to spend time remembering how it felt to be a child, what we loved and feared when we were small. We can use all this information, alongside our professional training, to help us improve environments for children's play and be more understanding of what we see them do. All these different pieces of information are brought together through reflective practice, which we do both alone and within our teams. Reflection works best when we are patient, honest and brave with ourselves and our colleagues.



An important note about settings without supervision

If your setting will include loose parts but limited or no supervision by adults, think very carefully about the materials you supply. What might be considered appropriate depends greatly upon the children you work with, and their previous experiences.

Commonly, settings with very young children do not set out any containers of water which could be a drowning hazard. In areas where children have limited experience of play with loose parts, thin ropes may present strangulation risks. Children who are not usually allowed to fight with sticks will struggle at first to know how hard is 'too hard' and so play fights might turn real at first. If you feel uncomfortable with the possibilities offered by a loose part, provide something else instead. However, if you are working with children who are often free to play with all sorts of loose parts, or who have experience using hand tools and navigating the landscape unattended, these concerns may seem absurd.

You know those children best, so think carefully about what could happen when you are not around. Take very few risks at the beginning, since children often respond to the novelty of loose parts by playing very hard for a while. Remember that you can always bring new, different materials later on.

Reflective questions to consider each day:

- What went well today?
- What could have gone better?
- When did I involve myself in play, and how did I make that decision?
- Was that intervention in the best interests of children's play? How do I know that?
- What might I do differently next time?



Maintaining self & staff

Working with children can be an exhausting job. Obviously, it is one that we love - but we want to encourage everyone to remember that you are also a resource for children's play, and that you need maintaining too!

Make sure that you find time to focus on your own needs. Making sure that you get enough sleep, eat proper meals, and have colleagues to talk with is personally and professionally important. Finding time for your own play is also essential, if you are going to support children in a healthy way.

Reflection is the key process by which we maintain our mental balance, as well as our relationships with colleagues and the children. This means that we spend time thinking carefully about what happened during the day, how we acted and why, and whether there were things we would do differently next time. Reflection allows us to process our experiences, and then move past them to try anew tomorrow.

Checklist:

- Looked at the space and what it currently offers
- Gathered materials that children can play with freely
- Figured out a storage system
- Talked with colleagues about how children can use these materials
- Decided who is responsible for tidying materials away, and what can be left out

Going Deeper

Risk benefit assessments

Every action includes some degree of risk, whether we're driving, eating somewhere new, or starting a new job. Some of these risks are frightening to think about, while we take others completely for granted. We regularly consider risks, weighing the likelihood of dangers against potential benefits.

Children want to take risks. They climb trees and balance in high places. They perform for audiences and introduce themselves hopefully to new friends. Taking risks is how we learn what we are capable of, what we can achieve and how to survive failure. Opportunities for risk in play are vitally important, if children are to be their most brave, confident, competent and resilient selves.



When we're selecting loose parts for play, we are also creating opportunities for children to create and experience new kinds of risk. Below are some terms which we've found useful in determining what sort of risks are possible and helpful to provide through play.

Risk: this is the actual chance of injury (whether physical, emotional or social). Risks may be high or low, depending on how likely that injury seems to be.

Hazards: these are potential sources for harm which offer no benefits to children's play, and which they may not notice and so do not consider.

For example, children may decide to risk climbing on a piece of old wooden equipment. If they are unaware that the wood is rotten, that is a hazard. We work to increase opportunities for risk-taking, by removing hazards. This creates an environment in which children are safe to take risks!

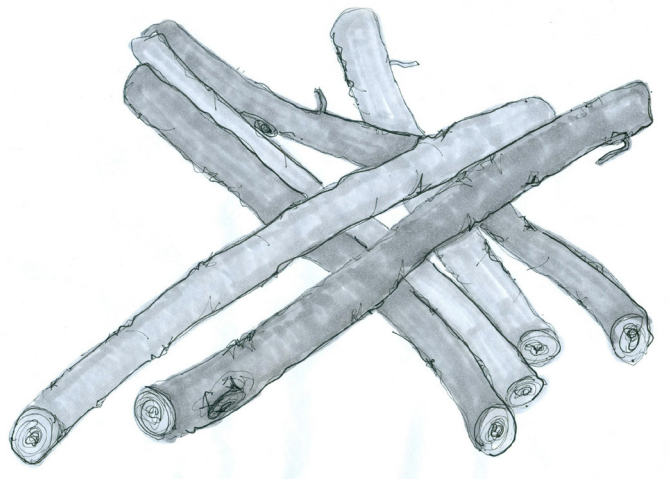


While we encourage opportunities for children to define and take their own risks, we do not want to suggest that adults be negligent or allow unacceptable hazards in their setting. Likewise, when adults in a setting are profoundly uncomfortable they communicate that to the children, even without knowing that they are doing so. Instead, start small and choose materials that everyone feels easy with. When observing how children take risks in your setting, try not to intervene unless serious injury seems likely. You might be surprised to see what children are capable of!

Questions and Concerns

Who gets to play?

Children are often separated by age in educational and care settings. However, playing in mixed age groups allow children to practice being leaders and nurturers, and more closely resembles a large family or village dynamic. A rich and varied setting, with children of all ages and abilities, helps to establish an environment in which all are equal in play, and where everyone can be good at something. Diversity benefits everyone.



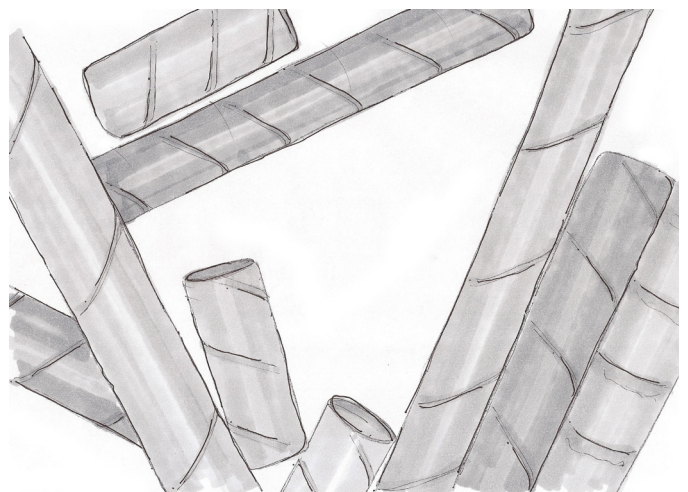
“If adults are not in control, don’t the children become chaotic or very noisy?”

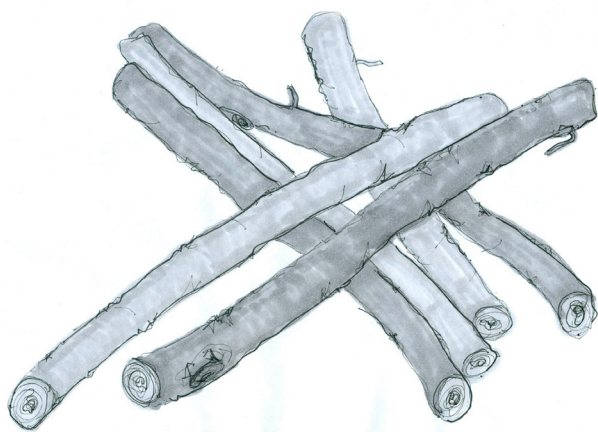
When groups of children are free to play together, yes, there can be a lot of noise. There can be a lot of activity, as games are created and abandoned. However, while it may appear chaotic to some adults, children have a clear structure which they create themselves. Without rules, games do not work. A clear understanding of one another’s roles and responsibilities is essential if children are going to play together. As they manage these complex tasks, children at play are not ‘uncontrolled’ at all, but instead are learning self-control. These are skills which one cannot be taught, and which will last a lifetime.

How long can they play for?

In countries around the world, recess time is being reduced in schools. Sometimes this an attempt to create more time for classroom instruction. However, without time to play children will quickly grow irritable and disobedient in the classroom, and with less time to play children will be more impatient with their peers and experience more conflict!

When time is extremely limited, children play particularly hard and are less inclined to compromise.





How many can play?

We are often asked how many children should be able to play at the same time. There is no right number. We have seen how loose parts can help improve the experience of one child playing alone, and we helped organize a pop-up adventure playground at an event attended by 15,000 people! At events of all sizes, children are able to manage themselves accordingly.

“Doesn’t it look very messy?”

It can! Playing with loose parts suits a child’s aesthetic, rather than an adult’s. As well as the loose parts themselves, dirt and water and paint have a tendency to go everywhere. It’s important to emphasize the freedom and joy children experience in these places, and say “yes, it might be messy, but aren’t they having a wonderful time?”

If other adults are concerned about the appearance of your loose parts playground, try to find a corner where it is tucked out of sight or think of ways to screen it from public view. Sometimes this can be beneficial for the children too, who often prefer to play with a little bit of privacy.

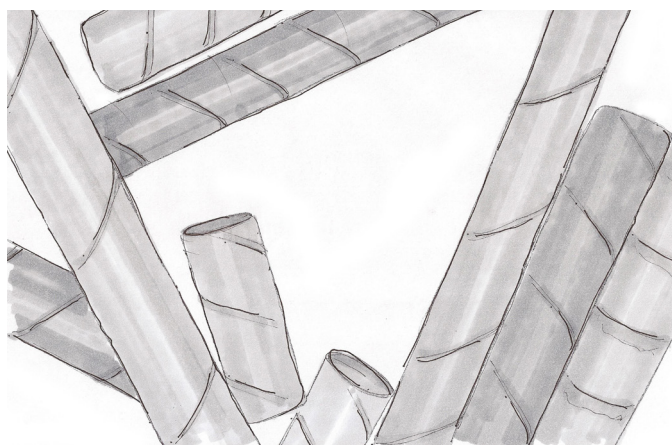
“Won’t finding and keeping loose parts take a long time? We have other things to do!”

While loose parts playgrounds don’t take much money, they do require an on-going investment of time and effort. You can choose materials that take your specific circumstances into account. For example, if you don’t have much time to clean up then choose large recycled materials which are quick to tidy up (such as tires and sheets) and small natural materials (such as pebbles and acorns) which can be shaken from containers and left outside.

“What if they hurt themselves, or each other?”

When you start bringing loose parts to an environment, children who have been play deprived may struggle with skills of negotiation or self-regulation. You can select loose parts to let them get the practice they need. For example, if you are uncomfortable with the idea of play fighting then don’t provide sticks!

Think about the quantity of materials you bring, as bringing only one of something can encourage unhelpful competition.



“Do the children get dirty?”

They can! Hands may become black from rolling tires, and clothes may get covered in dirt from digging. We understand that it's important and often difficult to keep children's clothes clean. In some cases, encouraging parents to send their children in old clothes is very helpful. In other settings, old shirts can be supplied by the setting and buttoned over what children are wearing when they arrive.



“If we use these loose parts, will other adults think we have not invested in our children? That we are giving them only rubbish?”

Seeing children playing in dirt, or building little houses out of scrap materials, may feel uncomfortable. They may be troubled by memories less happy than the ones children are creating currently. We want to acknowledge that playing with ordinary materials may be difficult for some adults to recognize as important and valuable. Even if the loose parts are junk, the experiences children are having here are gold!

If people complain at these free, scrap materials being provided for play, it's important to be clear that you're developing staff and setting in line with current best practice, and invested in providing the very best opportunities for children.

Curriculum integration

In this document, we have looked at a number of philosophies and techniques which are central to playwork approaches. However, we appreciate that you will have a different title and other responsibilities such as the children's education or physical health. Play is our first priority, but it may not be your only one - however, supporting play can help children to have much better experiences at school, in health clinics and more!

If you are working within a school setting, there are many ways to take materials and ideas from these recess suggestions and incorporate them into the classroom. Being clear about the benefits of loose parts play for children's educational achievement may help you win support from parents, administrators and grant funders.



Studies comparing children's understanding of specific phenomena show that being able to 'play with ideas' helps them make it their own. For example, a section on the flow of water may allow time for children to experiment with weights, measures, floats and funnels. In an art class, children may be given a subject to depict, but be allowed to use any materials or techniques they like. When children are free to experiment, they are more able to become innovative problem-solvers, and to develop flexible thinking. Consider the difference, in your own experience, between being shown how to do something and the thrill of figuring it out for yourself.

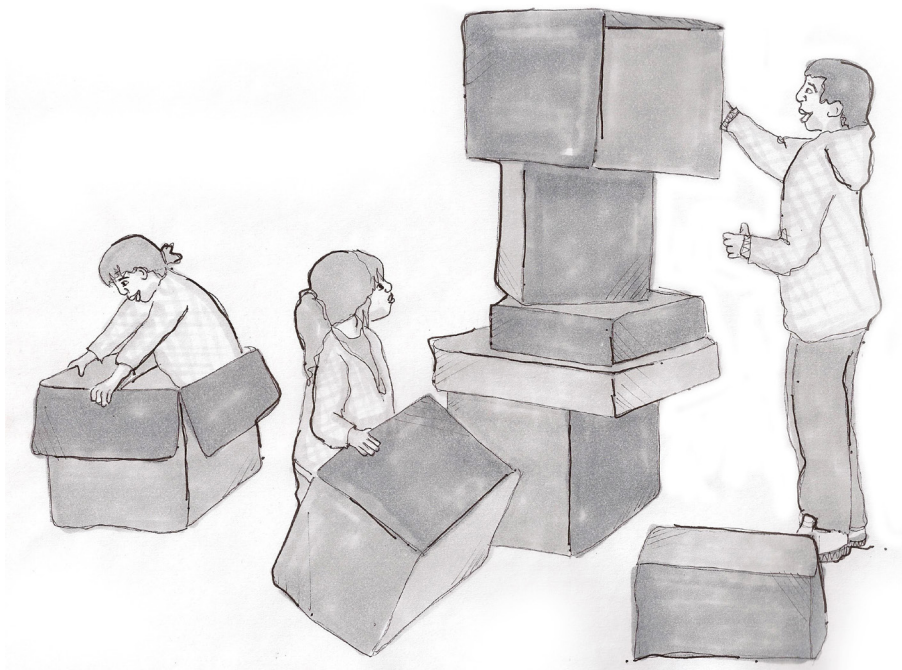
When including loose parts in the classroom, you are able to decide how 'free' to let the children be with them. There is a spectrum of approaches, with adult-directed at one end and child-directed (or self-directed) at the other. You can decide where on that spectrum each activity will fall - though, we would always encourage your finding ways to move farther towards self-direction whenever possible!

Thank You

If you can't already tell, we are passionate about play. Our hope with this manual is to encourage your enthusiasm for play too, and to help provide simple and immediate ways that you can support more opportunities for children in your setting. If you're interested in learning more about our work, or the theoretical and practical aspects of playwork behind this manual, get in touch!

Advocating and providing for children's play is a process and one which may be lifelong. It's also a way to reach a thriving international community of people who share your values, but work in a huge range of settings! We can connect with one another, share stories and learn more, every day, from one another and most of all from the children in our care.

- Morgan & Suzanna, Pop-Up Adventure Play



Further Reading & Resources

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