

Introduction to Loose Parts Play

What Are Loose Parts?

Loose parts are open-ended materials that children can move, manipulate, combine, redesign, line up, and take apart in endless ways. They can be natural (e.g., stones, leaves, pinecones, sticks) or manufactured (e.g. bottle tops, fabric pieces, cardboard tubes).

Why Loose Parts Matter?

Loose parts promote:

- Creativity and imagination
- Problem solving and critical thinking
- Collaboration and communication
- Fine and gross motor development
- Sustained shared thinking

Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002

Examples of Loose Parts

- **Natural:** shells, driftwood, pebbles, sticks, pinecones, leaves
- **Recycled:** fabric scraps, corks, buttons, cable reels, cardboard boxes, milk crates
- **Household:** pots, lids, tubes, baskets, spoons

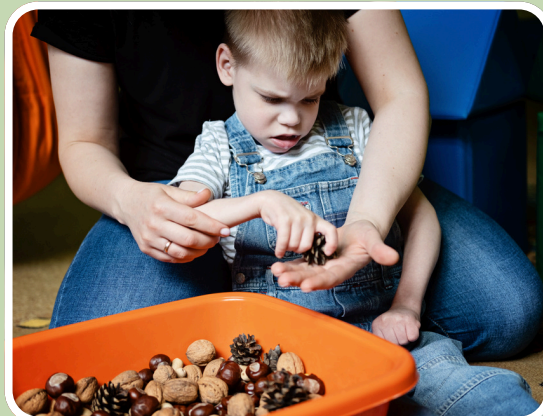


"When children play with loose parts, they are empowered to explore, invent, and create, supporting deeper levels of learning."

Nicholson, S. (1971) "How Not to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts"

Top Tips

1. Start small - Introduce a few materials and observe how children use them.
2. Follow the child's lead - Avoid prescribing what to make or do.
3. Model curiosity - Ask open-ended questions ("I wonder what will happen if...?").

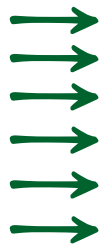


4. Ensure safety - Check for choking hazards, splinters, or sharp edges.
5. Observe and assess - Document children's learning linked to EYFS areas.
6. Rotate resources - Keep materials fresh to inspire new exploration.

Key Benefits

Area of Learning:

Communication & Language
Physical Development
Personal, Social & Emotional
Mathematics
Understanding the World
Expressive Arts & Design



How Loose Parts Support It:

Rich vocabulary, storytelling, negotiation
Manipulation, lifting, balancing
Teamwork, confidence, self-expression
Sorting, measuring, comparing
Exploring materials, natural phenomena
Inventing, constructing, role play

Adults act as:

- Observers – noticing themes and schemas in children's play
- Facilitators – supporting deeper thinking without taking control
- Encouragers – valuing creativity and problem-solving over 'finished products'

Theoretical and Evidence Base; Research and Framework Links

- **Nicholson** proposed that environments with more loose parts offer more opportunities for creativity and discovery. Nicholson, S. (1971). How Not to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts.
- **EYFS** stresses enabling environments and rich resources that encourage exploration and play. Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework (2024).
- **Piaget and Vygotsky** highlight the importance of hands-on, social play for cognitive and language development
- **Case studies** show that children engage longer and more purposefully with loose parts than with fixed toys. Daly, L. & Beloglovsky, M. (2015). Loose Parts: Inspiring Play in Young Children. Redleaf Press.
- **Ofsted (2021)** notes that well-planned play environments support curiosity, independence, and resilience. Ofsted (2021). Research Review Series: Early Years Education.

