Facilitating loose parts play

In this section you will find:
- the role of adults
- facilitating play – skills to put into practice
- observation
- play cues
- taster play sessions
- setting up loose parts play routines
- keeping the momentum going
- making simple changes to the play space to keep the play going
- using tools
- Tinkertown case study
- semi-permanent play structures
- using loose parts during formal teaching times.
The role of adults

Understanding adults have a crucial role in the successful introduction of loose parts. Sensitive support to children at play can enhance children’s experience, without undue interference. The Playwork Principles are a professional and ethical framework providing useful guidance.

Putting play at the centre goes beyond those who work at the frontline.

- Managers and head teachers create the overall framework for play.
- They should invest in time and support for staff working directly with children.
- Policies should point out that play should never be withdrawn as a punishment or sanction.
- Buildings and land managers should enable rather than restrict play.

- All adults who work with children also have the responsibility of being a role model. Children observe the behaviour, words and actions of adults in their lives.

# Tip: Refer back to the definition of play frequently. Doing so enhances reflective practice. If you need to figure out the appropriate thing to do in a given situation, referring back to the definition helps to keep the response play-focussed.


Playworkers and play rangers turn physical spaces into places of opportunity, imagination and belonging. For many children in many places, investing in hardware will never be enough. The best opportunities to play are shaped by people – the ‘software’ of play.”

(Beunderman, J. 2010 xviii–xix)
Facilitating play – skills to put into practice

On this page, you will find prompts to help you consider your own or team responses to children’s play.

Wait to be invited to play.
Are you sensitive and careful not to take over? Do you organise play activities only when children want you to?

Enable play to occur uninterrupted.
How do you protect children’s space and time for play? Do you think hard before you interrupt the flow of play?

Enable children to explore their own values.
Do you support play in a way that recognises that children explore and understand values through playing and sometimes make mistakes?

Leave children to develop skills at their own pace.
Do you support play in a way that recognises that children develop their own skills, abilities and judgement? Are you conscious of allowing children to play at their own pace and to learn through trial and error?

Leave the content and intent of play to the children.
Do you avoid directing and shaping the content of children’s play?

Let children decide why they play.
Do you respect that play is behaviour without goals or rewards? It is a process. Do you steer clear of offering prizes or inducements for play?

Enable children to decide what is appropriate behaviour, within safe limits.
Do you enable children to explore and develop boundaries? Have you discussed safe limits, what these are and how you judge? Do you steer clear of complex rules in favour of shared understanding and simple guidelines?

Only organise when children want support.
Do you avoid organising children’s play? Are you ready to help invent something to do or find resources when children need you to?

Thinking about our responses to children’s play

- STOP yourself before you respond to, or stop, children’s play.
- LOOK AND LISTEN to what is happening. What are the children doing?
- THINK – are the children managing any risks? What might be the impact of adult involvement on children’s play?
- ACT – now you can respond in a thoughtful way, rather than by reflex.
- REFLECT – was your action the correct one? What have you learned?

This page was adapted from Access to play for children in situations of crisis: Play: rights and practice (2017:25) www.ipaworld.org
Observation

Unobtrusive observation provides insights into children’s play and is an essential skill to practise and develop.

Observing children at play helps to:
• gain knowledge of children’s strengths and preferences
• understand how the environment is working for children – does it support their play and provide the potential for a wide range of experiences?
• understand how children are using the loose parts
• look out for things like play types which can give a richer understanding of what is happening during children’s play.

Some observation methods:
• noticing – for example, making mental notes
• photographic – for example, taking pictures as and when things happen
• timeline – for example, identifying a child or area and checking in every 10 minutes?
• frameworks – for example, checklists or looking for characteristics
• focussed – for example, looking at a specific area or child for a period of time
• written – for example, an account or detailed ‘story’.

Skilled practitioners observe all the time and one of the most important forms of observation is ‘noticing’. Noticing is about paying attention to the subtleties of what children are doing and saying. This informal and on-going approach is an essential part of tuning in to and supporting children’s learning.

Noticing is a key part of responsive planning, where responses to children are made ‘in the moment’ and successfully support and extend learning.

The children built a den using crates, tarpaulin sheets, pots and pans. They created a soup kitchen and invited everyone in. Soup was served in a pot filled with mud and sticks. Some of the children joined in this symbolic play. Deniz just frowned when he was offered the soup and turned away. The tarpaulin touched his head as it was fluttering in the wind, he smiled and started jumping up and down banging the tarpaulin with his hand. This highlighted the different stages of engaging in play, but children also playing happily alongside each other.”

(Julie Steele, Burnbrae Primary School, provision for children with complex needs, Bonnyrigg)
Play cues

Understanding and recognising play cues is another important skill that supports practice, especially inclusive practice. Adults can gain a better understanding of children’s play by looking out for play cues and responding appropriately.

A **play cue** can be verbal, a gesture or an action and invites others to join the play. A **response** to a play cue creates a **play frame**.

Children generally respond to each other’s play cues naturally but for adults, understanding and recognising play cues is a useful skill to ensure we respond appropriately to children’s play.

A **play cue** is a hint or an invitation to someone to join in and play. Children communicate these invitations to play in different ways, sometimes verbally but often through gestures, posture or expressions.

For example:

- tap on shoulder and run away laughing
- make a funny face at someone
- wink
- throw a ball to someone
- move closer to someone with things to play with
- allocate roles e.g. “you can be the dragon”
- make space in a group for someone else to join.

The introduction of loose parts play parts in the playground helped Ellie both in the classroom and out. She is a very active, creative little girl and is on the autistic spectrum. Play that requires following ‘rules’ or roles or complex communication can be difficult for children to find their place in. The loose parts give her something to do and engage with in the playground. This enables her to build friendships with other children, who were interested in playing with loose parts with her, when before she was often shadowed by or playing with an adult.

We feel more confident to step back and allow her to play independently as we can see she is engaged in play and less likely to run off. When she comes into the classroom after loose parts play, she is more settled. She loves to build and use her imagination in class.

The other children have a good understanding around her so if she sometimes plays in a way that is different or a little heavy-handed, they are able to accept this. It reflects the ethos of the school which nurtures a strong sense that everyone is valued and we treat each other fairly.”

(St Mary’s RC Primary School, Haddington)
The return

The **return** is a positive and equally playful response to a recognised cue, which can also act as a further cue – an indication to take the play further.

The **frame** can be:

- **physical** – a place or space, which could be as small as a cardboard box or as large as a playing field and which might be visibly indicated by mats, stones, rope, tyres, clothes, a hedge or fence, or a structure, platform, den, room or corridor.

- **narrative** – a new or a favourite storyline, a song or a piece of music, or a set of agreed rules. Any of these can give the reason for playing and hold the play together.

- **emotional** – when play is exploring a feeling such as fear, grief or triumph, so the props, the action, the place and the story can keep changing because it’s the experience of the feeling that holds it all together.

Carrying out observations specifically on play cues can really help adults to understand play better. For example, some children have difficulty recognising cues or responding to them in the way other children might and so inadvertently get left out of play or repeatedly upset other children because they have misread the cues. By understanding play cues, adults are more able to recognise these types of situation and support them sensitively.

The concept of the ‘play cycle’ containing ‘play cues’ and returns within a ‘play frame’ was developed by Gordon Sturrock and Perry Else (1998).

Further reading and viewing


- [www.playwales.org.uk](http://www.playwales.org.uk) and [www.playfulchildhoods.wales](http://www.playfulchildhoods.wales) are great sources of practical information on skills to support play.


- For more on play types [https://www.playscotland.org/playful-learning/play-types-toolkit-bringing-play-school-day/](https://www.playscotland.org/playful-learning/play-types-toolkit-bringing-play-school-day/)
Taster play sessions

Organising some introductory play sessions can help children, parents and staff understand what introducing loose parts is all about. Starting with a small group of children often works best. In a school, have a couple of classes or a mixed age group involved rather than the whole school.

You will need:
- a group of children
- a large enough selection of loose parts for the number of children playing
- a place to play
- a calm heart, a cool head and a willingness to give it a go.

Optional:
- Playworkers or play organisation to run or help you run the taster sessions.

Preparing to facilitate the taster sessions

Work out in advance who will be part of the team facilitating the loose parts play and discuss your roles. See the pages on the adult role, observation, play cues and risk-benefit assessment to assist you with this.

You could talk through a few ‘what if’ scenarios as relevant to your setting.

For example:
- What do we do if two children want the same loose parts?
- What do we do if they ask us to make something for them?
- When would it be ok to ask them to stop doing something?
- When would it be ok to get involved in the play?

Facilitate a few sessions

It is common for the children to be excited about the range of resources initially and for the play to be quite energetic and the resources tested. Almost all children settle into deeper play, given sufficient time. It’s worth giving the taster sessions a bit of time before deciding what’s working and what’s not. You might also want to wait until things have settled in a bit before inviting in visitors such as parents or people you want to persuade of the benefits.

Raise awareness of the sessions

Ensure everyone knows what loose parts are and the purpose of their introduction. Letters, posters and newsletters can be used. Parents and carers should be informed and asked to ensure that their child has suitable clothing and footwear, if your organisation is unable to provide this.

Ensure adults see children playing

Seeing children playing with loose parts and how play is facilitated, often brings about that all-important ‘lightbulb’ moment when people start to understand all the benefits and the pleasure of loose parts. In schools, make sure all staff can be involved so that they can see what is happening and witness first-hand the benefits of free play with loose parts.
Have a debrief afterwards with children and adults

Discuss what worked well and what needs to be remembered when embarking on loose parts play. This is a good time for concerns to be raised and to think of ways to address them. This can be followed up with a further session to create an action plan.

Rough and tumble play was initially seen when the play pods were introduced but “all schools reported that this phase did not last and that at some point construction play ‘suddenly’ began.”

(Armitage, 2009: 26)

Moving on to regular sessions

Some starting points to consider for regular sessions. You could:

- Begin with a play session in one part of your outdoor space for a small mixed-age group once per week until adults and children are accustomed to the loose parts, and the routines around tidying up.
- Introduce loose parts gradually, starting with the older children, working down the school or setting and then integrating everyone. If the older children feel some ownership, it can lead to eagerness to support the younger children to use the items and play with them (although they shouldn’t take charge of younger children’s play).
- Introduce one or two types of resource at a time, for example begin with tyres and crates, then add in logs, then den-building resources.
- Employ a qualified playworker to work alongside staff to model good practice and help embed the routines.
Setting up loose parts play routines

Zoning your outdoor space
Without being too rigid, it can sometimes be helpful to identify an area within the grounds or play space for loose parts play. Doing so can protect space so that children can immerse themselves in loose parts play without coming into conflict with or being displaced by other interests such as football. Tidying up might also be quicker. In time, this can change as loose parts become part of the fabric of everyday play. In an early years outdoor space, a variety of loose parts need to be readily available within and across all the zones.

Mixed age play
Loose parts play lends itself to all ages playing together, with children accessing the loose parts when they wish to, rather than being restricted by a rota or suchlike. Children are naturally drawn to playing with children who are older or younger than they are. There are many developmental, learning and social benefits to mixed age play, including:
- children gaining motivation and new ideas from each other even when not playing directly together
- children having the chance to play in ways they wouldn’t be able to with only children their own age
- children helping each other because they can – maybe they need someone taller, stronger, thinner etc.
- older children getting the opportunity to show care and kindness to younger children.

Playing out in all weathers
Playing outside should be encouraged all year round. This allows children to further experiment and use the elements to their advantage. Think ahead about clothing, footwear and the management of wet gear. If your organisation does not have outdoor shelters, then consider opening a room indoors so there is a choice available for children who wish to remain inside.

Agreements about use of the loose parts
Children should be fully involved in setting up agreements and expectations about playing with and managing the loose parts. Complex or hard-and-fast rules may not help you as much as simple, understandable prompts to make managing loose parts easy.

Tidying up and gathering in
In most settings, gathering loose parts back in is part of the process that enables loose parts play to happen on an ongoing basis. It’s an ideal topic for children to get involved in and make decisions about.

Often, settings agree that there will be a signal such as ringing a bell to let children know they need to wind up what they are doing and to start to tidy up. There are advantages to leaving loose parts out between play sessions so that children can return to things they have played with earlier. Children often gain inspiration from the other children’s half-made or abandoned creations and use them as a jumping off point for their play. There is also an argument that children benefit more from the immersion in play and so tidying up is less important than the play benefits.

Think about the practicalities and what’s reasonable in your setting.

See page 26 for more on storage, leaving things outside and tidying up.
As with all activities, interests wax and wane. Sometimes there is a flurry of den building over several weeks and this is replaced with another interest such creating obstacle courses and so on. Most children will happily initiate and generate ideas without any prompting.

However, items can be added to the core collection of loose parts to celebrate the seasons, cultural events or specific child-led interests. This can be a way of involving children in gathering additional resources from home and the local community.

Here are some examples:

- Develop themed collections based on colours, light, smell, textures, sounds, water, mud, sand, constructions, etc.
- Leave grassy areas unmown to grow dandelions, buttercups and daisies. These are plants with high play value that can withstand being picked.
- Save up donations of things like tin foil, aluminium and foil 'space' blankets for a 'metal week'.
- Bring in some hay bales – these are fantastic for construction play and defining spaces. Be prepared for hay to end up scattered around. It can be gathered and used as mulch or compost in due course.
- Have a ‘Challenge of the Week’ using children’s ideas which can be announced in assembly or at the start of the session, for example, I wonder who can build a robot and what would it do...
- Put a request out for real Christmas trees to be donated after the holidays so that they can be used for making dens or pretend forests.
- Keep the long plant stalks and other dead plant material after a winter garden clearance.
- Put a call out for leaves in autumn.

A calendar of play dates

- **Outdoor Classroom Day** – around 23rd May.  
  Freedom to play outside the classroom.
- **World Play Day** – 28th May.  
  Toy Libraries worldwide invite you to celebrate play.
- **Play on the Longest Day** – 21st June.  
  Keep the play going long into the evening. (Shortest day in the Southern hemisphere.)
- **International Mud Day** – 29th June.  
  Invite parents to join in!
- **UK Playday** – first Wednesday in August.  
  Perfect for summer holiday fun.
- **Universal Children’s Day** – 20th November.  
  Celebrate the right to play in the autumn.
- **Play on the Shortest Day** – 22nd December.  
  A perfect opportunity to play in the dark. (Longest day in the Southern Hemisphere.)
Making simple changes to the play space to keep the play going

The set-up of a space and how the resources are presented can affect how children perceive the play possibilities. With some groups of children, often those who are very young or who have additional needs, an invitation to play may be required. This needs to be undertaken sensitively to ensure children have freedom and autonomy over their play. It is not about directing play but opening the children’s minds to possibilities for creative explorations and investigations.

Whilst a session is in full swing, subtle changes to the environment can support how children play. For example, the addition of guttering to a fence, with a water source nearby, may invite water to be poured.

Take a three-dimensional view of any space and make the most of its affordance for all types of play. This means reviewing the environment to ensure a range of:

**Levels**
- Go below ground level, e.g. by digging a hole or jumping in a puddle.
- Work at ground level: perhaps sit-upons or pieces of fabric can help.
- Work at waist height – at a table or on a wall.
- Experiencing height, including stretching or stepping up to reach, e.g. to pour water down through a water wall.

- Objects hanging down – from a rope line, tree branches or constructions such as mobiles which involve building downwards, or a bottle of water that is hung on a string to create a pendulum.

**Surfaces**
- Mix horizontal and vertical, e.g. water in a bucket on the ground next to a water wall.
- Work on either side of a vertical palette or above or below a surface, e.g. under as well as on top of a bench or picnic table.
- Include slopes or inclines and think about how the angle can be changed, e.g. a water slide on the flat surface, to one on a gentle hill, or moving guttering up and down some steps.
- Change the surface: grass to tarmac or have different materials available.
Ways to transport objects, materials and self

- Bring in a variety of containers: big containers are especially useful for children to get into. They can also provide a clear place for materials to be transported to and deposited.
- Add wheels: bring along wheelbarrows, trolleys, suitcases and pulley systems.
- Have materials around which can be transported or moved: leaves, water, soil, etc.
- Provide space to run and move about.

Holes

- Holes are useful for posting stuff through, poking tubes through, adding guttering, and playing games. This includes cardboard or wooden frames, bore pipes and a variety of hoses.
- Creating or poking holes into containers so that water or dry sand leaks out. Holey fabric provides a different way of hiding and looking out. Drill holes into wood.

Partitions and flaps

- Create entrances and exits – pieces of material hung up, etc.
- Build dams and places that stop the movement of water, sand or other materials.
- Make partitions: dens can have rooms, vertical palettes create partitions children can peek and communicate through, and so on.

Are loose parts toys?

The BS EN 71 Directive defines a toy as ‘any product designed or intended, whether or not exclusively, for use in play by children under 14 years of age.’ There are some exceptions to this, such as Christmas novelties. With loose parts, confusion may arise because the materials are not manufactured as toys. For instance, a bread crate is designed and manufactured to be used as a bread crate. It was never designed to be used as a toy, therefore, the Toy Safety Standard BS EN 71 does not apply. There are lots of resources and products that are used in schools and homes which are not toys – paper, pencils, wooden spoons, cardboard boxes are not toys – yet we give them to children to use on a daily basis. Children need to experience using such products and resources. It is necessary to learn how to live in a world which is ungovernable by safety standards for every facet of our lives.

Loose parts play in the P1 classroom.

When we first introduced loose parts in the classroom the children still gravitated to familiar items such as commercial construction toys. We tried removing them and the children began to use the loose parts more. We have large items like carpet tubes and small items like cones, corks, twigs, strings of beads, play dough lids. Play is integrated into the day, linking to maths, literacy, health and wellbeing and so on. Now they use both traditional play items and loose parts together. For example, when the children discovered that a marble could roll through the spiral of a shell, they included the shell in their marble run.”

(Emma McManus, St Marys, RC Primary School, Haddington)

Links and further reading

- Sand and Water Tables http://tomsensori.blogspot.co.uk – the advice above is adapted from Tom Bedard’s Design Elements which can be found on his website. His work is based on an indoor early childhood context.
Using tools

The use of tools is a natural progression within loose parts play. Tool use increases the range of play possibilities and allows children to develop skills that support independence, creativity and confidence. Tools can be used for:

- textile work
- woodwork, metal work and construction
- bushcraft
- cooking – inside in a traditional kitchen, over a tea light or on a camping stove or campfire
- gardening
- bicycle repairs, tinkering and so on.

You need to consider the competency of the adults to facilitate the play and the developmental ability and interests of the children and teenagers. Tools should be thoughtfully introduced, managed, stored and looked after and should include risk-benefit assessment of procedures and processes.

The Care Inspectorate supports taking a positive approach to risk in order to achieve the best outcomes for children... For example, we encourage services to use risk assessment to support children to enjoy potentially hazardous activities such as woodwork using real tools, exploring nature and playing in the mud and rain. We do not expect written risk assessments to be carried out for daily play activities.”

(The Care Inspectorate, 2016:18)

Useful links and further information

- Play Wales, Information Sheet, Creativity and tool use in play settings. www.playwales.org.uk/eng/publications/informationsheets
- Outdoor and Woodland Scotland (OWLS) have guidance on using fires and tools with groups https://www.owlscotland.org
- Forest School Association https://www.forestschoolassociation.org provides information about Forest School.
- Children in Permaculture http://childreninpermaculture.com encompasses a broad range of gardening and construction play possibilities based upon the principles of people care, earth care and fair shares.
Tinkertown case study

Tinkertown is The City of Play’s adventure playground-inspired, ‘make-space’ initiative. We provide huge quantities of unwanted pallets and scrap timber, as well as tools – toolbox saws, claw hammers, measuring tapes, nails, safety gloves and goggles and some safety instructions. Then we observe as swathes of children make, destroy, and play as they like.

The outcomes, actions, creations and experiences for each child are uniquely different; the pallet wood, scrap timber, and the forms and spaces created, fuel each child’s imagination, creativity and confidence.

The open nature of Tinkertown offers children the opportunity to explore and experience a different kind of play. It enables children to investigate their imagination and ideas, learn about risk (within a managed situation), build physical and social skills and produce a piece of work which is inhabitable, autonomous and of their own making.

On tools and children

When providing tools for a large number of children of a wide range of ages – particularly if young children are involved – we take the same attitude towards tools as we would with loose parts: we need to accept that they will be tested and abused, so we use budget tools that can be easily replaced without too much stress or expense.

Children are generally very responsible, careful and competent with tools. They are aware and appreciative of the responsibility they have been given. We have only ever experienced problems when adults ignore the rules and try to deny children that responsibility and autonomy. We have heard the repeated joke that children will thump each other over the head with a hammer or lose a limb to a saw. It doesn’t happen… and it would be incredibly difficult to saw your own arm off, right? If you nick yourself with the teeth of a saw, you are going to jump out of your skin, and you are not going to let it happen again!

However, supervision is necessary to:

- ensure that the safety equipment is being worn
- be on hand when asked for help
- intervene or help should tensions or frustrations arise – pallets are hard to cut.

The level of supervision or support for each child can generally be assessed pretty quickly dependent on their attitude, confidence and capability. Given the opportunity, most can quickly grow to work and create independently.

We are not flippant about safety: we believe that children are safer and better off having had this type of experience.”

(Grant Menzies co-founder and lead designer, The City of Play)

www.thecityofplay.co.uk
Semi-permanent play structures

Often children and adults want to make semi-permanent structures which provide children with opportunities to learn life skills such as planning, design and construction. The use of real tools and the time spent working alongside competent adults is a valuable and memorable experience for many children and young people.

Opportunities for children to build structures with real materials and tools go back to the original adventure playground concept of the 1940s and the ideas of the Danish landscape architect Carl Theodor Sørensen. Simon Nicholson in *How NOT To Cheat Children* (1971) pointed out that children enjoy playing a part in the design process including measuring, drawing, model-making, mathematics, construction, evaluation and destruction.

Practical considerations when creating play structures with children:
- Let the project be driven by the children’s needs and interests.
- Consult the landowner or manager beforehand and seek permission, if off-site.
- Find out whether there are any public liability, access, health and safety or engineering and structural matters which need to be addressed.
- Check there are no underground utilities such as water pipes which may be affected by your plans.
- Consider whether your organisation has the appropriate staffing, resources and competences to undertake the project. If not, find out who can assist in either a paid or voluntary capacity and ensure that safeguarding measures are in place.
- Risk assess the building or installation as well as the management and use of the structure once it has been made.
Using loose parts during formal teaching times

Since the publication of the first edition of this toolkit, there has been a growing interest in using loose parts within a formal curriculum context. This can happen in a range of ways as an approach to learning.

Possibilities for using loose parts during formal teaching times include:

- Organising taster sessions when introducing loose parts into playtimes. See page 38.
- The teacher observes the class playing and uses the opportunity to find out what useful skills children may wish to learn that would help them develop their play. For example, learning how to tie a range of knots and create lashings can be useful skills for den building.
- Having play sessions during class times. Afterwards, the children reflect on the learning that has happened and document it accordingly. This could be as simple as building up ideas around technology or developing a mind map about the maths that is happening.
- If a class has a shared responsibility for maintaining a loose parts collection, then skills such as how to sandpaper, file or fix items with duct tape become essential. They can test their skills in a class play session before putting them into wider use.
- The use of loose parts as a resource in a range of lessons, e.g. for team building activities, or to explore the properties of three-dimensional objects. Whilst this is not play, the loose parts are a real, relevant resource to children.

I was keen to explore the potential of our loose parts collection as a relevant context for exploring square numbers, properties and perimeters of 2D shapes and 3D objects. My aim was to increase engagement in and enjoyment of maths, leading to more a focused approach and better attitude and mindset in the classroom. The children enjoyed being outdoors and looked forward to the sessions. The children made connections between numeracy concepts and the loose parts, such as recognising 2D shapes and their properties and how they were represented within the collections of objects. Even during free play there were many opportunities for informal learning using maths knowledge, developing and extending maths vocabulary, and problem solving.”

(Simon McMahon, St Andrew’s Primary, Dundee)