

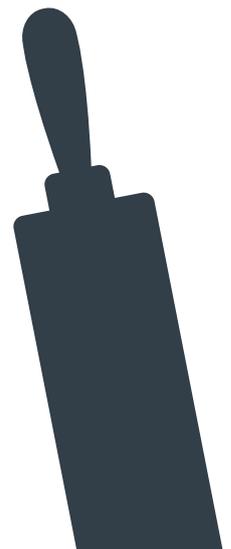


01

Loose parts play

In this section you will find:

- the theory of loose parts
- loose parts play – an embedded approach
- loose parts play – getting it right for every child
- storytelling with loose parts
- the benefits of loose parts play – a mind map
- play themes and loose parts play.





The theory of loose parts

Loose parts create richer environments for children, allowing them to do what they need to do, to follow their interests and go where their curiosity takes them.

Environments full of loose parts lend themselves to a blurring of distinctions between learning and playing, allowing children to experiment, enjoy and find things out for themselves.

The term ‘loose parts’ came into widespread use after the publication of Simon Nicholson’s article *The Theory of Loose Parts: How NOT to Cheat Children*. Nicholson proposed that there was no evidence to suggest that some of us are born creative and inventive and some of us not. Instead he recognised children’s need to make and build things, play with fluids, water, fire or living objects, and “all the things that satisfy one’s curiosity and give us the pleasure that results from discovery and invention.”

Nicholson described loose parts as ‘variables’ and provided examples such as *materials and shapes; smells and other physical phenomena, such as electricity, magnetism and gravity; media such as gases and fluids; sounds, music, motion; chemical interactions, cooking and fire; and other humans, and animals, plants, words, concepts and ideas. With all these things all children love to play, experiment, discover and invent and have fun.*

Nicholson captured the essence of these playful, very human phenomena, describing what he observed in children’s behaviour and dispositions in ways that are both philosophically profound and eminently applicable to the environments we endeavour to provide to children.

Nicholson extends the theory of loose parts into the realms of community interaction and involvement, behaviour planning and design, curriculum development and environmental education. The theory has perhaps had its greatest influence in the field of playwork and, not by coincidence, emerged at a time of great interest in adventure playgrounds.



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.”

(Nicholson, S. 1971:30–34)



More loose parts play pioneers

Abundant loose parts for children to play with are central to the adventure playground ethos. They go back to the famous ‘junk playgrounds’ (*skrammellegeplad* or *byggelegeplad*) first created by landscape architect C. Th. Sørensen in Emdrup, Denmark in 1943.

In the post-war years, children were often to be found in derelict and brownfield sites where the junk provided endless play opportunities. From these roots, adventure playgrounds developed in the mid-twentieth century.

Inspired by Scandinavian examples, a network of adventure playgrounds began to grow in the UK in the late 1950s and 60s with Lady Allen of Hurtwood credited for the critical role she played, as well as her insistence on play opportunities for disabled children (IPA, 2011).

More recently, initiatives across the UK have demonstrated the play value of scrap material in school playground environments and provided a catalyst for the expansion of loose parts into schools at playtimes.

Early childhood theorists and pioneers over several centuries have been staunch advocates of the benefits of young children playing outside, accessing mud, sand, water and spending frequent time in nature. The expansion of outdoor nurseries is continuing this tradition and is actively supported by Scottish Government.

There is a long-standing tradition of using household items for play, using tools for gardening and woodworking and having ‘tinkering’ tables where children can experiment. For the very youngest children, heuristic play pioneered by Elinor Goldschmied offers treasure baskets of simple objects such as wooden spoons and cotton reels for babies and young children to explore with their hands and mouths.

Many education approaches such as Steiner Waldorf or Montessori advocate the need for real experiences in order to acquire life skills. Playing with a variety of loose parts assists with these approaches.

Loose parts in children’s everyday environments

A list of possible loose parts is endless, as Nicholson’s theory illustrates. In a practical sense, the kinds of things that tend to make up loose parts provision include:

- natural resources such as straw, mud and pinecones
- building materials and tools such as planks, nails and hammers
- scrap materials such as old tyres and off-cuts of guttering
- naturally occurring and disappearing phenomena like water, ice, snow, shadows, cobwebs, dappled light and rainbows
- people and living things
- random found objects.

See page 22 for lists of tried and tested loose parts.

One of the reasons for the fascination loose parts offer is that they aren’t prescriptive; they offer limitless possibilities. For example, a stick may become:

- a fishing rod near real or imaginary water
- a spurtle to stir ‘porridge’ in a mud kitchen
- a tool to nudge a football that is stuck in a tree
- something to throw, float, snap, ping, bend, hide, add to a pile, burn, tie to something else, split, catapult or discard.

Natural environments such as mature woodland or beaches provide boundless loose parts with more play possibilities than many artificial play spaces such as a tarmac school playground or a tidy urban park. However, these spaces can be enriched by the regular addition of plentiful loose parts.



Affordance theory

When children play in a space or play with an object, they experience it in a unique way. Rather than its intended purpose, they may view it in terms of its 'affordances'. American psychologist James J. Gibson (1979) suggested that environments and objects within them have values and meanings that are unique to the person perceiving them.

The 'affordances' of an object or space are all the things it has the potential to do or be. For example, a brick wall may be built to make a clear boundary between a pavement and a garden but for many children it would offer something to sit on, walk along, balance on, hide behind or jump off.

The concepts of variables and affordances come to life outside. The interplay between children and the loose parts, landscape, elements and seasons creates an ever-changing, growing, evolving play space, especially in natural environments that are loved and cared for. Furthermore, children experience a sense of freedom, space and autonomy that connects them to the land in an intimate way.

Adults' role in loose parts play environments

For adults, facilitating and supporting loose parts play requires a sensitive role that recognises children's play process and resists the urge to step in too soon or too frequently.

There is no doubt that the introduction of loose parts play can mean changes from familiar roles and routines. Helena McHugh, Principal Teacher St Marys RC Primary School, Haddington, advises:

“Introducing loose parts play into school playgrounds can be a learning curve, even when it is introduced gradually. On our first few sessions we were taken aback by how boisterous the play was, to the point of thinking it was going too far. We managed to step back and watch.”

We did have a talk with the children class by class to remind them of the agreements about loose parts and our school way of doing things. It's understandable that new things in the playground raise excitement but it did settle down. Don't panic. Take a minute to assess, don't be too hasty or jump in straight away to intervene.”

Smart Play Network is a national organisation supporting play services and play providers in Scotland through its membership network, training programmes and the delivery of play projects. Mar Sanchez, training manager, observes:

“Playing outdoors has positive physical and emotional outcomes for teachers as well as pupils. We have observed that free play helps teachers see their pupils in a different light and strengthens bonds between them.

Teachers acquire a 'playworker's frame of mind'. They learn to step back and intervene only when necessary, how to observe and act according to the pupils' behaviours and motivations and how to create challenging and engaging play spaces.”

See pages 33-39 for more on the adults' role in facilitating loose parts play.





Loose parts play – an embedded approach

In this Toolkit we recognise many links from Nicholson’s core ideas. Play is not something that happens in only one place or at set periods of time. It is a process.

Play encompasses children’s behaviour which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development – not only for individual children but also for the society in which they live.

The key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity. Play can happen indoors or outdoors, with or without the oversight of adults, in everyday spaces, in environments designed for play and in places chosen by children and young people (Scottish Government, 2013: 10).

Playing and learning in a children’s rights context

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) provides clear guidance that supports children’s playing and learning (CRC, 2013).

Article 23 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child relates to the rights of children with additional support needs, and the Committee recognises the value of inclusive play, both as a right and as a means of achieving children’s optimum development.

The right to play is expressed in article 31 of the Convention and articles 28 and 29 express children’s rights to education.

The Committee emphasises that the article 31 rights are of positive benefit to children’s educational development and rights. These encompass education directed to the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to the fullest potential.

The Committee highlights that inclusive education and inclusive play are mutually reinforcing and should be facilitated during the course of every day, not just in early childhood education and care but also in primary and secondary school.

Linking children’s article 31 rights to health, wellbeing, creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, participation and inclusion, the Committee recognises that:

“ Play is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development.” (2013:6)





Curriculum for Excellence

Play is a much-valued part of Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence, by teachers and practitioners as well as children. *Active Learning in the Early Years* (Scottish Executive, 2007) for example, recognises the need for children at the Early Level to have a curriculum that ensures sufficient time for children to play uninterrupted. Older children and teenagers also need downtime, to be themselves, socialise, and to be able to play for the sake of it.

The rationale for play can be embedded into a school or early years curriculum as part of the process for developing a play statement or policy.

See page 12 for the benefits of loose parts play mind map.

See page 10 for loose parts play – getting it right for every child.

EMBEDDING PLAY – WHERE DO WE WANT TO BE?

VALUES

- Our school is a place where children have a right to play.
- All children are able to experience and enjoy the essential and special nature of being outdoors.
- We value the contribution of all staff to ensure children have this right.

TOTALITY OF THE CURRICULUM

- Play is a core part of our informal curriculum.
- We recognise the value of play for the sake of it.
- We take a sustainable, participative and enterprising approach to embedding play.

LEARNING AND TEACHING

- We support our staff to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding of play.
- We support our children to learn through play when appropriate for meeting their needs.

EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES

- We recognise and can evidence learning which happens through play (See the first appendix).
- We recognise the benefits of nature and natural environments for providing rich play experiences that develop children’s ecological identity.

Responsible

- We care for loose parts and the play environment.

Successful learners

- We are motivated, engaged and learn well through play.

Confident individuals

- We gain independence and confidence through our play experiences.

Effective contributors

- We are critical thinkers and problem-solvers who can transfer skills between formal learning and play.

ENTITLEMENTS

- Our children and teenagers have access to sufficient time and space to play. Outdoor breaks and lunchtimes take place in all weathers, all year round, where they access open-ended materials, structures and natural resources which encourage free play.

PERSONAL SUPPORT

- The benefits of play are recognised and used to provide targeted support where needed for individual children.
- As part of a holistic approach to *Getting it Right for Every Child*, loose parts play can support children and young people through each wellbeing indicator.

PRINCIPLES

- The curriculum design principles underpin our approach to play.
- Being outdoors allows children to experience choice, autonomy, risk and challenge.

EVALUATION AND MONITORING

- We monitor and evaluate the quality, range and provision of play and play environments to ensure play is a great experience for all involved.



Loose parts play – getting it right for every child

Getting it Right for Every Child is a national programme that aims to improve outcomes for all children and young people. As part of a holistic approach to *Getting it Right for Every Child*, loose parts can support children and young people through each wellbeing indicator.



Safe

Having opportunities to develop personal safety skills and understanding, make our own decisions, cope with challenges and learn skills for life.



Healthy

Having daily opportunities for outdoor loose parts play with access to nature, all year round in almost all weathers, in an ethos that supports our overall wellbeing.



Achieving

Being supported to experience challenging, risky and adventurous play that allows us a sense of achievement, success and exhilaration; having opportunities for creativity including using problem-solving strategies, higher order thinking, communication and imagination.



Nurtured

Having spaces that have meaning, feel safe and where we gain a sense of autonomy, belonging and place-attachment; having adults around who support our play process respectfully and sensitively; having access to suitable outdoor clothing and footwear to enable all-year outdoor loose parts play.



Active

Having freedom to fully engage in play, be physically active and use our bodies, muscles, stamina, dexterity and strength through playing with loose parts.



Respected

Having our right to play respected and supported; having opportunities to be actively involved in maintaining, evaluating and developing our loose parts play provision; feeling listened to however we communicate.



Responsible

Having opportunities to collaborate with others and having to take responsibility for others, for resources and the environment.



Included

Being able to play in the way and at the pace that we choose, following our own interests; being allowed to play alone, in a small group, with children of other ages or as part of the whole community; having help and support to play in the way we would like to.



Storytelling with loose parts

“ Loose parts are really good for bringing story time and books alive for our youngest children at The Yard. The Yard offers adventure play, fun and friendship for disabled children and their families in the east of Scotland. Being physically active within a story holds their interest – they are not just looking at pictures in a book but going on an adventurous journey.

We read ‘Not a Box’ and had great fun with cardboard boxes, imagining we were robots and cars. We’ve been on several bear hunts creating snowstorms with shredded paper, dark gloomy caves with fabric and forests of twigs and bamboo.

Using loose parts in play fascinates the children, opening up a door to their imagination. At The Yard, using loose parts to tell a story encourages interaction, social development and friendships to form.

Our favourite loose parts are:

- cardboard boxes
- different colours and textures of material
- containers for collecting treasure
- sensory plants like herbs and leaves
- old bits of carpet, astro turf or lino to change the texture of the surfaces in the play space.

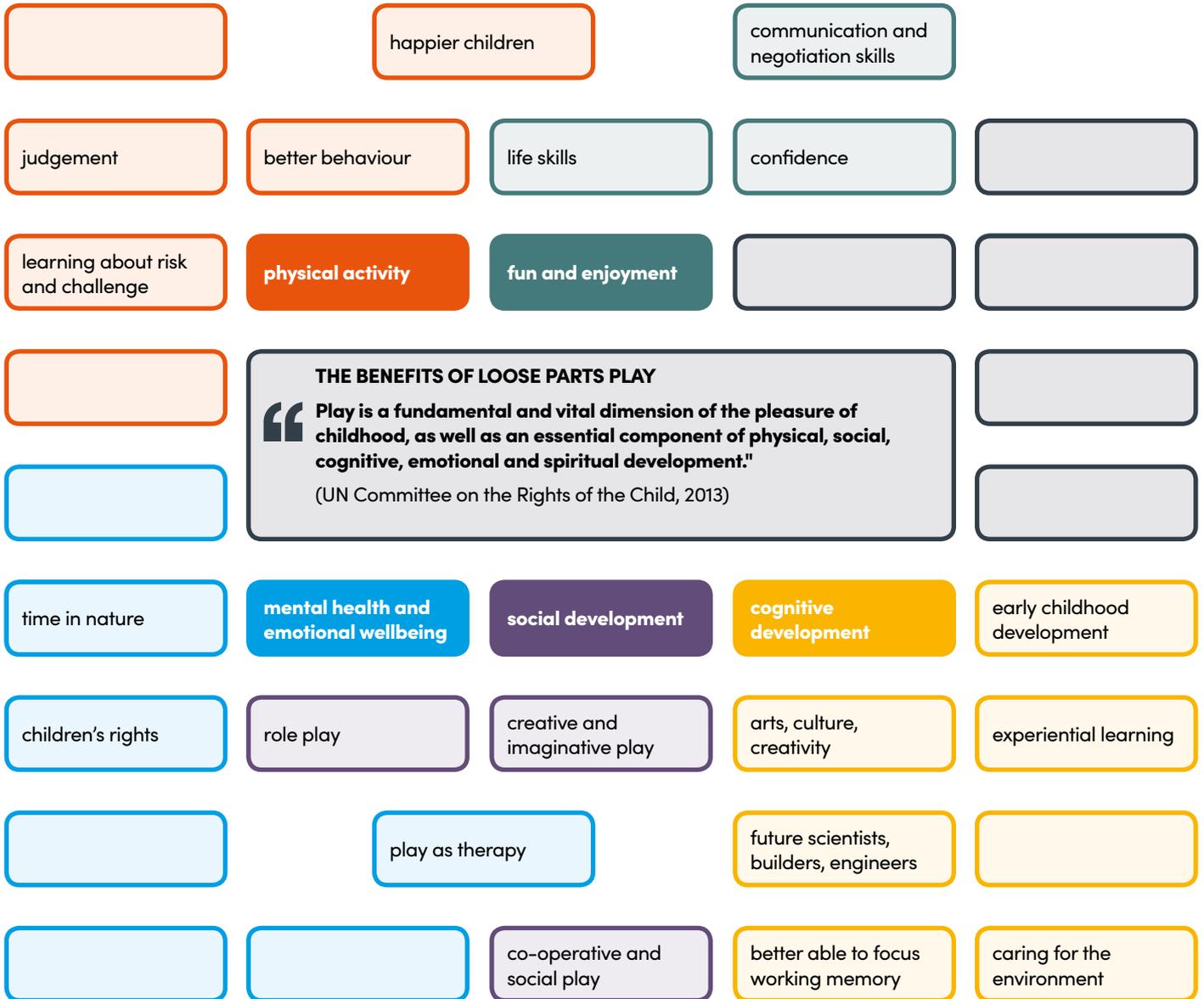
(Danielle Campbell, Early Years Play Team Leader, The Yard)

www.theyardscotland.org.uk





The benefits of loose parts play – a mind map



This Toolkit is full of examples of how children and the adults around them benefit from the introduction of loose parts play. Print or copy this page and add examples of the benefits you discover. You may need to stick this page onto a larger sheet of paper. You could add photos, quotes, observations and evidence from research.

- *Getting it Right for Play: The Power of Play: an evidence base.* Play Scotland, 2012
<http://www.playscotland.org/getting-right-play/getting-it-right-for-play>
- *Play Types Toolkit - Bringing more play into the school day.* Play Scotland, 2017
<https://www.playscotland.org/playful-learning/play-types-toolkit-bringing-play-school-day/>
- <https://www.childrenandnature.org>



Play themes and loose parts play

The concept of loose parts and their affordances can be interwoven with studies about how children play outside, particularly in natural environments. There appear to be patterns to children's play which emerge almost regardless of climate, culture, class, gender, developmental level or age. They link to how humans grow and their need for identity, attachment and a sense of connectedness to place and people. In our rapidly changing world, children need opportunities to develop this sense of belonging and being with nature.

Jan White (2014: 235-244) considered the work of Appleton (1975), Sobel (2008) and Pelo (2013). Noticing similarities in their ideas, from different decades and from work with children and young people of various ages, she proposed that the themes could be merged to provide a framework of reference.

This framework, developed from White's original work, can help to:

- increase adults' understanding of how children play
- suggest ways to support children's attachment to nature and place
- suggest engaging environments for playing with loose parts.





PLAY THEME

LOOSE PARTS PLAY PROVISION POSSIBILITIES

ADVENTURE

Seeking out the unknown, stretching limits of possibility, taking calculated risks, anticipation, discovery and invention.

- exploring away from adult eyes (or perception of this)
- establishing a culture where adventure and uncertainty is supported
- creating spaces with many layers to discover
- providing time to listen to and hear children's experiences, should they wish to share.

ENCLOSURE, DENS AND SPECIAL PLACES

Creating space, shelter, security, hiding and secret places, refuge and territorial boundaries.

- resources for building dens
- props for developing play within a den or secret place
- scrap cardboard and writing materials for creating signs
- nooks, crannies, trees and bushes or undergrowth to hide in or be alone
- large cardboard boxes and pieces of material, both see-through and dark.

PROSPECT (HEIGHT)

Searching out high places, views and lookouts, surveying the landscape and mapping areas.

- being high up – top of a hill
- climbing trees, boulders and other objects
- balancing on features
- play on different levels
- spyholes, gaps and see-through spaces, including windows and doorways.

PATHS AND JOURNEYS

The need for exploration, mapping out an area in many ways, finding short cuts and secret routes, tunnels, knowing the local area, making one's mark in the landscape.

- map making and using opportunities – both real and through digital devices
- trail making with natural resources and props such as ropes or chalk
- freedom to explore and get to know a local area
- finding your way.

HUNTER-GATHERER ACTIVITIES

Searching, finding and collecting, stashing and hoarding, treasure hunts, traditional games like hide 'n' seek, foraging, bush craft skills, fire, tool use.

- time to invent and play games
- collecting and using natural materials
- containers such as pockets, bags, baskets and buckets
- using real tools to create, make and take apart different objects
- experiencing fire-making
- bush craft type activities: whittling, fishing, foraging.



PLAY THEME

LOOSE PARTS PLAY PROVISION POSSIBILITIES

ANIMAL ALLIES

Projecting self onto other living things, feelings for, and empathy with, plants and animals of all kinds, developing personal connections to wildlife through direct experience and fantasy, the significance of names.

- ensuring time and space to discover wildlife on children's terms
- creating places to hide and watch wildlife, creating habitat piles, bird feeding stations and nesting boxes, etc.
- simple props for dressing up and being animals.

IMAGINATIVE NARRATIVES (STORIES, IMAGINATION AND FANTASY)

Making sense of the world through fantasy play, small world play and creating stories and accounts of experiences that connect and deepen friendships and relationships between each other and the places they play in, creating memories and reaffirming order and meaning.

- constructing and deconstructing miniature worlds outside or in
- dressing up inside and out with open-ended props such as quick dry materials and simple, open accessories, marking or painting face and body
- making and creating fantasy characters
- listening to the stories children tell and recording them where appropriate
- ensuring ample undisturbed time for play to spark and emerge.

MAKING RITUALS

Deliberate, ceremonial, meaningful actions often with metaphysical or transformational intent, invented by and participated in by individuals or groups; honouring or celebrating events, places, features through art, music, dance and role play; giving and receiving gifts.

- attending to, honouring and supporting the development of the simple but significant rituals of children
- providing space, time, freedom and space for children to dance, make music and explore art inside and out
- celebrating play
- re-visiting places regularly and frequently such as local greenspace.

Sit back and watch loose parts play in action

- East Lothian Play Association <http://elpa.org.uk/loose-parts-play/>
- Scrapstore Playpod® <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqi1KyJJeKg>
- Learning through Landscapes http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pot8EhKUdI&list=FLpswP_hu8apF1Sw1P15cRtA&index=3&feature=plpp_video
- Playtime Revolution – a series of twelve videos that are part of a training package offered by Learning through Landscapes <https://youtu.be/u3yvHysI5Gc>