

Have you ever heard of the theory of loose parts?

I hadn't until recently. It sounds like something you would find in an Engineering text book, not literature about play. It seems that I have been living this theory at preschool without knowing it. Let me tell you more. I promise it is more interesting than engineering.

The Theory of Loose Parts

The theory of loose parts has begun to influence **child-play experts** and **playscape designers** in a big way. It was first proposed back in the 1970's by architect Simon Nicholson, who believed that it is the loose parts in our environment that **empower our creativity**.

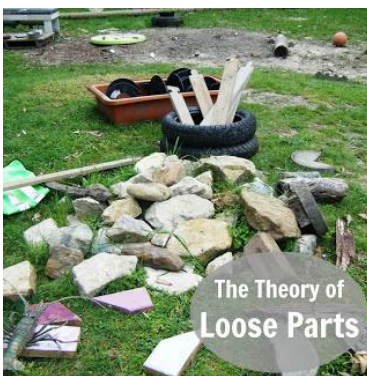
What are Loose Parts?

In a preschool, loose parts are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways.

They are materials with no specific set of directions that can be used alone or combined with other materials. Loose parts can be natural or synthetic. In a preschool outdoor environment we can provide an array of loose parts for use in play:

- stones, stumps, sand, gravel, fabric, twigs, wood, pallets, balls, buckets, baskets, crates, boxes, logs, rope, tyres, shells and seedpods.

Why Loose Parts?



There are many reasons why play spaces should include a multitude of loose parts, including:

- Loose parts can be used anyway children choose.
 - Loose parts can be adapted and manipulated in many ways.
 - Loose parts encourage creativity and imagination.
 - Loose parts develop more skill and competence than most modern plastic toys
 - Loose parts can be used in many different ways
- Loose parts can be used in combination with other materials to support imagination
 - Loose parts encourage open ended learning.
 - Children choose loose parts over fancy toys.

Loose Parts in Action



In these images from Places for Play: The Exhibition "small stones have been gathered and are used for play. Little bits of dry wood, branches and twigs are there for making things. The solid frame for the sand pit consists of tree trunks



in

all shapes and sizes, that are inviting for balancing and mini-climbing."

Teacher Tom is in the process of encouraging the creation of little worlds at his preschool by strewing the space with a vast array of inviting materials such as moss and lichen, logs, wood and broken pottery:

At preschool, Charlie dragged a chair into the sandpit and upended it to provide a handy base for a drum kit:



This box moved all over the playground for days in different incarnations (boat; bus; girls' base; boys' base; place to eat morning tea) before becoming a nifty slide:

Children don't always use equipment the way the adult world expects them to. The plastic slide becomes a component of an elaborate ball run in the sandpit: and my personal favorite, a water slide:

What loose parts do you have in your playspace?



loose parts = imagination + creativity

Kids really get to know the environment if they can dig it, beat it, swat it, lift it, push it, join it, combine different things with it. This is what adults call creative activity...a process of imagination and environment working together.

- Robin Moore

Our children never stop creating and constructing using loose parts: tyres, milk crates, wooden boards, logs, rope, sheets...anything they can get their hands on.

When we step back and give them the time and freedom to move things around, this is what happens:



Nifty ball shooters



Balance boards



Their own cubby houses



Bridges and dams



Their own play equipment

Often, children would rather play with cheaply available materials that they can use and adapt as they please, rather than expensive pieces of play equipment. Children don't always use equipment the way the adult world expects them to.



Sometimes only they know what they are creating

Source: Let the Children Play <http://www.letthechildrenplay.net/2010/06/loose-parts-imagination-creativity.html>