

Activities and Games



Staff Workshop Teacher Handout: The "Whys" Have It! Why to Include Loose Parts on the Playground

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Loose parts are easily moved materials that may be used by children while playing. They may be "found" materials, such as sticks, leaves, or rocks, or they may be provided materials, like boxes, parachutes, or tricycles. Playgrounds in educational settings must have loose parts in order to be complete. Why loose parts? There are several reasons.

Reasons to Include Loose Parts on Playgrounds

1. Loose parts encourage children to manipulate their environment. Developmental theory emphasizes the need for the child to manipulate his environment, to experiment, and to interact with materials in order to learn (Piaget, 1963). Environments rich in loose parts allow extensive manipulation of the environment and much experimentation. Manipulation of materials through play is important in problem solving (Sylva, 1977) and creativity (Dansky, 1980). Stationary equipment restricts the ways children can manipulate the environment, thereby restricting opportunities for creativity and problem solving. A reliance on fixed equipment in the playground sends a subtle but powerful message to the child: "What you have to offer in creating this environment does not count." Such a message runs counter to the goal of helping children learn to make choices.

2. Children choose playground equipment based on the amount of movement the equipment affords and the amount of variability it provides (Strickland, 1979). This is consistent with current theories of arousal seeking as a motivator of play (Elks, 1973, 1970) and is a valid reason to include loose parts on the playground. Nicholson (1971) pointed to this in his theory of loose parts: "In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and the possibility of discovery are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it" (p. 30). Loose parts present many variables for the child to experience as she chooses the way to organize or use the loose-parts materials; she may choose to build a tall or short structure, to place it here or there, to mix in other materials, or to use the material as something other than its apparent use. The mental transformation of an L-shaped stick to a gun (though we might discourage it, usually unsuccessfully, on the basis of its violent theme) indicates a child's involvement in dramatic play. Other writers have pointed to the popularity of loose parts among children at play (Moore, 1974; Allen, 1968). Because children prefer loose parts to fixed equipment, designers should respect these preferences.

3. Loose parts provide children with age-appropriate materials because each age group uses the materials in different ways peculiar to and appropriate for that group. Children use construction materials in different ways as they get older. For example, three-year-olds may build large corral-like enclosures with large hollow blocks, while four-year-olds using the same blocks may build towers.

4. Loose parts inject novelty into the play environment, which is important in maintaining cognitively high levels of play, such as symbolic play (Dodge and Frost, 1986; Griffing, 1983). When children have exhausted the possibilities of one arrangement of loose parts, they rearrange the materials for some new game or purpose. This maintains interest and gives children the ability to create the individually appropriate level of arousal and interest. Fixed equipment by its nature will become less novel more quickly than loose parts. Novelty can be increased by rotating a wide variety of materials.

5. Loose parts promote a wide variety of play behaviors. They encourage exercise play as children lift, move, and stack materials. They encourage dramatic play as children build houses or use cups and sand to play tea party. They encourage construction play as children plan and create a new structure. Loose parts are involved in many games with rules, such as Follow-the-Leader, Obstacle Course, and various ball games. Loose parts provide opportunities for varied levels of social play. Toddlers sit together and play with sand toys in examples of parallel play, while preschoolers create models of farms or cities and engage in cooperative dramatic play with those same sand toys. Large blocks or boxes that may be too heavy or cumbersome for one child to move encourage cooperative effort.

Functions and Types of Loose Parts

Loose parts serve a variety of functions. They extend the indoor learning environment to the outdoors. Math skills are practiced and math concepts are inculcated as children manipulate small unit blocks, large blocks made of foam or cardboard, or large commercially made plastic interlocking blocks. Many ball games involve counting, sequencing, and one-to-one correspondence. Buckets, measuring cups, sand, water, sundials, and measuring tapes may be used to reinforce mathematical principles.

Physical science concepts are learned as children experiment with stacking materials. Boards and small cars and balls for experimentation with inclines, real tools and soft lumber, wind chimes, windmills, and color wheels all give opportunity for learning about physical science. Ample facilities for water play outdoors are crucial for learning about volume and the properties of fluids. Water tables, water troughs, buckets, cups, buckets with holes in varying places and sizes, clear plastic tubes, waterwheel toys, brushes, straws, and sponges are some possibilities for this area.

Loose parts should be provided to encourage dramatic play in the outdoor environment. Prop boxes for theme-specific dramatic play can be prepared using materials especially suited to the rigors and weathering of outdoor use. Dress-up clothes used in the outdoor environment will need to be cleaned more often or made from the most expendable of materials. Almost anything that is used indoors can be adapted and replicated for the outdoor environment. Since tricycles and other wheeled vehicles are typically used outdoors, children can dramatize a number of transportation themes suited to the playground and supported by loose parts. Lengths of garden hose and a few firemen's hats, large boxes painted white with a red cross plus nurses' hats and doctors' paraphernalia, and scaled-down traffic signs can encourage specific themes of play in conjunction with wheeled vehicles. Cooking utensils available near the sandbox, and combined with a nearby playhouse, all form a recipe for rich domestic theme play.

Loose-parts play makes a vital contribution to children's development. It can be provided with a careful, reasonable effort by administrators, teachers, and families. To accept excuses denies children opportunities to

play in meaningful, productive, and exciting ways.

Adapted from "The Why's Have It! Why and Why Not to Include Loose Parts on the Playground," published in *A Right to Play: Proceedings of the American Association for the Child's Right to Play*, Denton, Texas, 1992; SECA: Little Rock, Arkansas, 1993.

References: Dansky J.L. "Make-believe: A Mediator of the Relationship Between Play and Associative Fluency, *Child Development*; Ellis, M.J. *Why People Play* (Prentice Hall); Griffing, P. "Encouraging Dramatic Play in Early Childhood," *Young Children*; Moore, R.C. "Anarchy Zone: Kids' Needs and School Yards," *School Review*; Nicholson, S. "How Not to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts," *Landscape Architecture*; Piaget, J. *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood* (Norton); Piaget, J. *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (Norton); Sylva, K. "Play and Learning" in Harvey, D., and Tizard, B., *Biology of Play* (Heinemann).