

# Any Which Way . . .

## Loose Parts Play in the Library

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**M**any ready-made toys for children come with directions, instruction sheets, or strict rules for usage. While that may be fine in some cases, many believe children can benefit from good old play with a variety of random, unconnected items. After all, some of our earliest ancestors learned many skills from just rocks, sticks, and leaves.

Enter loose parts—a collection of natural or man-made materials that can be used to extend children's ideas and foster imaginative play. These parts can be moved, arranged, designed, taken apart, or anything else a child can think up.

The Theory of Loose Parts was created by British scholar and architect Simon Nicholson in 1971; he believed that loose parts are important to creativity and higher order thinking and that using loose parts at a young age helped with critical thinking and creativity later in life.<sup>1</sup> The theory of loose parts lends itself well to the Reggio Emilia philosophy and are often used together in daycares. Both ideas focus on open-ended play that supports imagination and creativity as well as allowing children to play with no limitations or expected outcomes. Thus, both beliefs are child-centered and focus on the creative process children use to figure out and understand the world around them.<sup>2</sup>

Loose parts—which can be made of natural or synthetic materials—encourage kids to play and explore with materials with no specific set of directions. They are ideal because they can be moved all over the space available, creating endless possibilities for creative play, both solo or collaboratively.

A piece of plastic food, for example, is just a piece of plastic food, but a slice of wood can be a piece of bread, furniture for



These sisters love using all the random loose parts to create their own inventive play.

dolls, a building, or anything else a child can imagine. This theory and practice allow children the freedom to explore materials and use them in any way they want and anywhere they want within the environment they are playing in.

With these types of materials or parts, children are better able to explore and improve multiple skills, including problem solving, engineering, creativity, concentration, hand-eye coordination, fine and gross motor development, language and vocabulary building, mathematical and scientific thinking, literacy, and social/emotional development.<sup>3</sup>

### Tools of the Trade

Before compiling your collection, consider your physical space and the age of your potential audience. Our collection is designed for children ages 2 to 6 but is appropriate for babies and toddlers or older children with slight modifications.

Before adding any items, I made sure they would all pass a choke tube test. A choke tube test can be bought, or you can use an empty toilet paper or paper towel tube as a guide.



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More specifically, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, a test cylinder is 2.25 inches long by 1.25 inches wide.<sup>4</sup> In order to be safe for children under the age of three items should not fit through any of the tubes. If for instance you buy a small bag of gems and it can be passed through a toilet paper tube it is not considered safe for children under the age of three and is a choking hazard.

I considered seven types of loose parts for our collection.<sup>5</sup>

- Nature Based
- Wood Reuse (such as sticks, wood cookies, or wooden toys)
- Plastic
- Metal Objects
- Ceramic/Glass
- Fabric/Ribbon
- Packaging

Before purchasing items, look at what your library/system may already have from past programs. I put in a request to our Friends group for a total of \$770; I spent \$160 for books and \$540 for parts and storage containers. I purchased all new items from online resources. Many of my purchases were made on Etsy, Amazon, Walmart, and Dollar Tree. If you can use recycled objects, thrift stores and garage sales are also an inexpensive resource.

To get ideas, I joined Facebook groups dedicated to loose parts, used Pinterest for ideas, and consulted *Loose Parts: Inspiring Play in Young Children* by Lisa Daly and Miriam Beloglovsky, as well as the blogs Fairy Dust Teaching and Fantastic Fun and Learning.

Some of my favorite loose parts items include wooden clothespins, Magna-Tiles, muffin tins, pipe cleaners, rattan balls, metal scoops, plastic shower rings, teacup tree, metal paper towel holder, wood slices, small tree branches, tongs, and small wood bowls. I also purchased three large totes to pack all the loose parts and books into for easy transporting and storage.

Our system has one large set that can travel between our branches. I encourage other librarians to get out just a few things if they want to focus the play or to get out everything and let the children select what they play with. The books that were bought for the kit stay with the kit. They are not able to be checked out, but they are put out for the program and I encourage parents and caregivers to read with the children if that fits into what the child is choosing to explore.

## Don't Forget the Books!

Once I had all my loose parts kits assembled, I compiled a list of books that help promote such play. Here is a selected list.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Block City*. Illus. by Daniel Kirk. Simon & Schuster, 2005. 32p.

Saltzberg, Barney. *Beautiful Oops!* Illus. by the author. Workman, 2010. 28p.

Spires, Ashley. *The Most Magnificent Thing*. Illus. by the author. Kids Can Press, 2014. 32p.

Heder, Thyra. *Fraidyzoo*. Illus. by the author. Abrams, 2013. 48p.

Jocelyn, Marthe. *Hannah's Collections*. Illus. by the author. Tundra, 2004. 32p.

Barnett, Mac. *Extra Yarn*. Illus. by Jon Klassen. Harper-Collins, 2012. 40p.

Portis, Antoinette. *Not a Stick*. Illus. by author. Harper-Collins, 2007. 32p.

Portis, Antoinette. *Not a Box*. Illus. by author. Harper-Collins, 2006. 32p.

Reynolds, Peter H. *The Dot*. Illus. by author. Candlewick, 2003. 32p.

Ehlert, Lois. *Leaf Man*. Illus. by author. HMH Books, 2005. 40p.

## Developing a Program

Once a collection is established, it requires little upkeep or preparation; simply put out the parts in an appealing way and let the children play free. There are no rules or guidelines, but you can control what you decide to offer. For example, if you want to focus on *The Three Little Pigs*, consider having out sticks, glass gems or rocks, Popsicle sticks, small animals, or other objects pertinent to the story.

The low-cost program also lends itself easily to solo or collaborative play and gives caregivers ideas of ways to interact with their children at home.

## Skills Developed

Playing with loose parts encourages symbolic play, storytelling, sequencing, and many other skills necessary for early

literacy. Both fine and gross motor development are needed to help strengthen the muscles used for writing as children grow and learn early writing skills. Smaller loose parts strengthen the tiny muscles in the hand, while larger objects encourage the development of larger muscles in the body.

Loose parts can also encourage awareness of letters; for example, different objects can be used to show the shapes and lines found in letters.

Symbolic play and storytelling also may come naturally to children playing with loose parts. Adults can ask open-ended questions about what they are doing or encourage them to act out a story they are already familiar with. The child who has read *The Three Little Pigs* can use various parts to act out the story or repeat their favorite parts, such as the wolf blowing the buildings down. Asking thought-provoking questions during play can expand a child's storytelling skills.<sup>6</sup>

## Programming with Loose Parts

Once a kit is assembled, setting up a program is simple and quick. I like to set up at least two separate spots in the room with tables for children who like to work on higher surfaces or want to play with a caregiver. I try to keep the rest of the area clear of all furniture, with a few chairs for adults, and I display books on a nearby table.

I will also set out parts that work well together, like shower curtain rings and paper towel holders, near each other to encourage kids to try them out on their own.

## References

1. Sally Haughey and Nicole Hill, *Loose Parts: A Start-Up Guide* (Fairy Dust Teaching 2017), <https://s3.amazonaws.com/fdt-course-materials/Blog+Posts/Loose+Parts+Start-Up+Guide.pdf>.
2. "Loose Parts Reggio Emilia style," *The Compass School* (blog), July 18, 2017, <https://thecompasschool.com/blog/loose-parts/>.
3. Jenni Caldwell, "Loose Parts," *Fairy Dust Teaching* (blog), October 5, 2016, <https://fairydustteaching.com/2016/10/loose-parts/>.
4. "Small Parts for Toys and Children's Products Business Guidance," United States Consumer Product Safety Commission, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.cpsc.gov/Business--Manufacturing/Business-Education/Business-Guidance/Small-Parts-for-Toys-and-Childrens-Products>.
5. Haughey and Hill, *Loose Parts: A Start-Up Guide*.
6. Michelle Lipp, "Loose Parts Play and Literacy," *Fantastic Fun and Learning* (blog), accessed July 14, 2020, <https://fantasticfunandlearning.com/loose-parts-play-and-literacy.html>.

Once the program starts, I take two approaches depending on my availability and goals for the programs. Sometimes I just check in on the children and their adult to let them know there are only two rules—DO be creative and play however you want and DON'T throw hard items or throw overhand (throwing items is a great way for children to explore what will happen to an object so I like to encourage softly throwing underhand when appropriate).

I encourage parents to let children be free to play, create, and discover on their own and not interfere unless the child needs a bit of help to get started. I also remind parents it's OK to just observe and not be an active participant.

Another approach to the loose parts programs is to teach parents how to do invitations. This involves limiting the toys available, asking open-ended questions about specific loose parts, and inquiring what children think would happen if you use one specific loose part with another one.

This type of program lends itself well to incorporating a craft. For example, you can put out loose parts that encourage children to explore circles and then have paper plates, coffee filters, circle stickers, and other circular items on the craft table.

Libraries may want to try offering a fairly low-cost, low-interaction loose parts program to encourage children to play and further Nicholson's belief that creativity was not for the gifted few, but that all children are born as creative beings, curious about the world and keen to experiment and discover new things. &