

THE THEORY OF LOOSE PARTS

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The theory of “loose parts” was first proposed by architect Simon Nicholson in 1971. Over the years, it has begun to influence child-play experts and the people who design play spaces for children in a big way. Nicholson believed that it is the 'loose parts' in our environment that will empower our creativity.

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 an outdoor environment we can provide an array of loose parts for use in play such as stones, stumps, sand, gravel, fabric, twigs, wood, pallets, balls, buckets, baskets, crates, boxes, logs, stones, flowers, rope, tyres, balls, shells and seedpods.

Having "loose parts" available in a play space allows children to use these materials as they choose. Once children awaken to the potential of loose parts you will find that children will play with these materials that they can use and adapt as they please at least as much or if not more than expensive pieces of play equipment.

Encouraging children to use resources as they choose can provide a wider range of opportunities than one that is purely adult led. Children playing with loose parts are using more creativity and imagination and developing more skill and competence than they would playing with most fixed toys.

For example, consider a child who collects a pile of conkers and begins to play. The conkers can become anything the child wants them to be. Maybe they will be used with the cooking props in the sandpit as ingredients, or with the trucks as a load of bricks. By contrast, a toy car is a “fixed” toy in that it will almost always be used simply as a car.

Being able to cart materials from one area to another allows kids to make connections and use their imaginations. Whilst careful zoning helps, the ability to transfer materials between play zones makes a difference.

As play providers, we need to ask:

- Can the materials or environment we offer be used in many ways?
- Can it be used in combination with other materials to support imagination and develop creativity?
- Are the materials freely accessible?
- Am I allowing children to make connections in the play environment?

When children play in a space or with an object they experience it in a unique way. They view it in terms of its 'affordances', rather than its common use. The 'affordances' of an object or space are all the things it has the potential to do or be. A table offers the child a jumping deck, if turned upside down a boat, and if on its side a protective wall that becomes part of a fort. These, and all the other 'affordances' of the world adults take for granted, are discovered and elaborated upon through play.

It may take a very open mind on our part (there is often a lot of cleaning up involved as materials end up in places you would never expect them to be) but when children cross play materials and areas in creative ways, it is our responsibility to support and encourage their work and ideas.

Jennifer Kable is a pre-school teacher in an Australian progressive school. Her blog, “Let the Children Play” <http://progressiveearlychildhoodeducation.blogspot.com/> is a great source of play ideas for children of all ages.

Reference: Nicholson, S., "How Not To Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts", Landscape Architecture, v62, p30-35, 1971.