

Open-Ended Materials Belong Outside Too!

BY POLLY NEILL



Just as with indoor play, the more flexible and open ended the materials on the playground, the more opportunities for children to express their creativity and imagination.

The Green Valley Preschool staff is thrilled with the new playground that was built over the summer. There is a tricycle path that goes around the edge of the playground; a “tree house” built around the base of one of the big trees, and a large sand area partially surrounded by a grass-covered berm. Throughout the playground are sound-making fixtures such as a large marimba, a steel thunder drum, bells, wind chimes, and more. There are a couple of places to swing, and a slide is built into one of the hills. It is also beautifully landscaped with shrubs, flowers, and new sod!

The preschool children were excited when they arrived at school, knowing that their new playground was ready — their teachers and parents had been talking about it a lot. At outside time, the children headed out the door, expecting to see a space that resembled the construction site they’d occasionally had glimpses of over the previous month. Instead, they saw the completed playground. They ran around the new space, checking out the musical instruments, trying out the slide, and looking around the tree house. Several of the children turned to the teachers, and one child summed up their feelings by saying “This is cool, but where do we play?” Another said, “What happened to the dirt pile and the big shovels?” “Where did the bulldozer go?” The teachers began to explain, but then another child said, “What about the blue cloth that covered the piles of dirt and sand, and what did you do with all the black plastic pots?” “Yeah, and what did you do with the long pieces of black tubes, the ones with ridges?” The administrators and some of the other adults looked at each other as if to say, “What are these ungrateful children talking about? Don’t they appreciate this model play space we built for them?” However, the teachers understood, and one spoke up: “The children are referring to materials they recall seeing on the playground construction site. They prefer play spaces that allow them to be creative rather than those where all the play opportunities have been designed by adults. Such spaces are rich in materials that they can move around, that allow them to manipulate their environment — just as they would during work time inside.”

Photo on this page provided by Tiny Trees Preschool and Liz Boyle, photographer.

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What the teacher said in the scenario above describes the “theory of loose parts” (Nicholson, 1972, p. 5), which was first proposed in 1971 by the British architect Simon Nicholson and which is receiving renewed attention from early childhood professionals, child play experts, and playground designers. Think of loose parts as occupying the same vital role that open-ended materials play inside the classroom. In this article, we’ll explore what loose parts are and why they are important to children’s play and learning.

WHAT ARE LOOSE PARTS?

Loose parts are materials with no specific set of directions, and they can be used alone or together with other materials. They can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, taken apart, and put back together in multiple ways. The child, rather than a manufacturer or other adult, determines how the materials are used. Unlike with loose parts, children “quickly tire of things with a sole purpose. Once they’ve mastered the key function of an object — pushing the button to make a figure pop up or climbing a ladder, for example — they are ready to move on. The intrigue and the challenge are gone” (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2015, para. 7). In fact, children are excluded from play by these moving, flashing toys. When children have access to loose parts, it frees their creativity and imagination to change the world around them in infinite ways. It simply boils down to the fact that the more flexible their environment, the greater the level of creativity and inventiveness they express.

In his groundbreaking article “How NOT to Cheat Children — The Theory of Loose Parts,” Nicholson writes

Have you ever noticed that if you leave old junk lying around, kids will almost inevitably play with it? Whether it be old cardboard boxes, wooden pallets, pieces of wood, old tyres [sic], bits of rope or string, kids will use their imagination and ingenuity to make something. This may make your garden look like a junkyard sometimes, but the experience for the kids is invaluable and it will keep them occupied for hours. Don’t try and direct the kids in their play, just let them get on with it (Nicholson as cited in Hargreaves, 2012).

Loose parts can be natural or manufactured; and from there, the only limitation is safety, the environment you live in, and the children’s imaginations.

BEST TOYS OF ALL TIME

Before we offer you a sample list of loose parts, let me introduce you to “GeekDad,” who writes a column by the same name for Wired.com. Typically, GeekDad (whose real name is Jonathan H. Liu) reviews books, toys, gadgets, software, and board games — items that are often quite pricey. However, in one column, GeekDad diverted from the usual and instead wrote a column called “The 5 Best Toys of All Time.”

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Introducing the cast of characters, GeekDad begins with Dirt at number 5, acknowledging what many of us took a while to learn — that a pile of dirt really *is* more interesting to children than the outdoor toys over in the corner. He does point out that “studies have shown that kids who play with Dirt have stronger immune systems than those who don’t” (Liu, 2011). Cardboard Tube came in at number 4, according to GeekDad, followed by String, at number 3. GeekDad remarks that sometimes his children will accept scarves or a blanket as substitutes, but what they are really after is String! Unsurprisingly, coming in at number 2 is everyone’s favorite — Box! Like GeekDad’s other favorites, Box makes this list both because of its versatility and because it is available in so many shapes and sizes. Finally, at number 1 is Stick! Stick is truly a classic toy — in fact, I remember passing an entire summer involved in very active and complex stick-horse play. Like Box, Stick is valued for the nearly infinite forms that it can take. You can even use Stick to draw and write in Dirt, you can insert Stick into Cardboard Tube, you can tie or wrap String around it, and you can use Stick to drum on Box! It should also be added here that Box and Stick are revered members of the National Toy Hall of Fame.

Feature



Ball and Puddle. Two classics!

WHAT DO CHILDREN GAIN FROM PLAYING WITH LOOSE PARTS?

Let's look a little more closely at the benefits to be gained from playing with loose parts. Over many years, developmental theory has emphasized the importance of allowing young children to manipulate their environment, and loose parts encourage them to do exactly that — creating opportunities for creativity and problem solving. Playgrounds with fixed (stationary) equipment limit both the amount of children's movement and its degree of variability. Fixed equipment can even lead, indirectly, to unsafe behaviors. Prue Walsh, author of *Early Childhood Playgrounds: Planning an Outside Learning Environment*, claims that fixed equipment "often fails to sustain children's usage, leading to boredom, a breakdown in children's behavior, and therefore injury" (Walsh, 2016).

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Like the open-ended materials inside the classroom, loose parts are developmentally appropriate because children will play with them in ways that suit their developmental level. The presence of loose parts also promotes a wide variety of play: exploratory, constructive, and dramatic play, as well as games with rules.



Snow: If you've got it, use it!

Loose parts lend themselves to innovation and a sense of the unique that will encourage more symbolic (representational) play — a higher level of play.

Loose parts extend the learning environment outdoors, encouraging play that will touch on nearly all the key developmental indicators (KDIs) in the eight HighScope preschool content areas. We have already discussed problem solving and use of resources (Approaches to Learning) and cooperative play (Social and Emotional Development). But what about coordinating large muscles to move heavy materials or using eye-hand coordination to manipulate loose parts (Physical Development and Health); using vocabulary to describe actions (Language, Literacy, and Communication); combining loose parts to create new shapes (Mathematics); pretend play (Creative Arts); gaining knowledge about the natural and physical world (Science and Technology); and making decisions about which materials to use for a project (Social Studies)?

There is a class out on the playground right now — let's go out and see what is going on:

Darius and Theo are hammering a couple of the black walnuts they found in the grass. Theo's splits open, and the boys drop their hammers and look inside. Darius says, "You got worms!" Theo looks up and calls to everyone, "Hey, I've got the baby worms in here!" (KDI 51. Natural and physical world).



Rocks and Play Dough...

Maggie drags a chair into the sandbox and turns it upside down. Next she puts a couple of the big pots on each leg, grabs a couple of spoons, and starts banging on the pots. When Rosie asks her why she is making so much noise, Maggie says, "I'm the drummer in the band, like my Dad" (KDI 43. Pretend play).

Martino and Hunter each hold an end of a long plank and carry it over and place it across two milk crates (KDI 13. Cooperative play). "Let's see if we can balance on it," says Martino, as he places one foot and then the other foot carefully on the plank (KDI 16. Gross-motor skills).

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Children gather inside the house they made by hanging several cloths from the tree house. Theresa watches the children come and go and starts counting: "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 — oh wait, Yael is coming out. Now there's 5. Carola is going in — that's 6 again" (KDI 32. Counting).

As you can see, playing with loose parts makes a significant contribution to children's physical, social, and intellectual development. Adding loose parts to the outdoor play space also offers opportunities for parent and community involvement — families and local businesses can contribute safe materials that are no longer used and can be recycled for children's play.



...just add Board.

You can introduce loose parts into your playground area through a well-thought out, coordinated effort by the preschool administration, staff, and parents. Safety and risk are often among the first topics raised at meetings about bringing loose parts to a playground. There is a delicate balance between adults' need to restrain children in order to keep them safe and children's desire for the freedom to explore loose parts. In your planning meetings, most of all, emphasize how using open-ended materials outdoors gives children the opportunity to enrich their play in meaningful, positive, and exciting ways.

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EXAMPLES OF LOOSE PARTS

Now that GeekDad has helped us to establish the top 5 loose parts, here are some more ideas to get you started:

Natural

- Stones (heavy enough for children to use in construction projects, but too heavy to throw)
- Stumps
- Logs
- Large branches
- Small twigs
- Sand
- Gravel
- Water
- Leaves
- Pebbles
- Sunflowers
- Seeds

Manufactured

- Recycled car and bicycle tires (avoid steel-belted radials)
- Pallets
- Wooden or plastic crates (milk crates are favorites)
- Buckets, tubs, laundry baskets
- Plastic garden pots
- Boxes
- Gutters
- Drain tile
- PVC pipe
- Wood (two-by-fours, four-by-fours, and planks of different lengths)
- Rope
- Chain
- Cardboard rolls and tubes of all sizes
- Large- and medium-sized wooden reels
- Plastic bottles
- Landscape netting
- Ice cream tubs
- Fabric (light-weight)
- Tarps or drop cloths
- Hoops (Hula and others)
- Weather-proof cushions
- Bricks
- Outdoor tools
- Mesh (canvas or metal, with different sized openings)
- Chalk

Location/Season-dependent

(e.g., marine, rural, urban, rivers and creeks, forests, etc.)

- Seashells
- Kelp
- Seaweed
- Beach rocks
- Driftwood
- Hay bales
- Bunches of wild grasses
- Cornstalks
- Tractor tires
- Tractor seats
- Troughs
- Old street signs
- Traffic cones
- Construction debris (thoroughly sorted for safety)
- Hubcaps
- Car parts
- Cattails and other wetland reeds
- River and creek rocks
- Logs
- Spanish moss
- Seed pods, acorns, pine cones of all sizes
- Large ferns
- Palm fronds
- Recycled natural Christmas trees
- Pumpkins

The (Outside) Daily Routine: HighScope in an All-Outdoor Preschool
(continued from p. 6)

TAKING THE WHOLE DAILY ROUTINE OUTSIDE

In a typical classroom, most often time spent in nature is reserved for outside time or recess; however, outdoor classrooms like those at Tiny Trees Preschool don't have an inside. So, all of the elements of the daily routine are also outside. Here is how it works:

Greeting time: Each classroom has a circle of logs or special tarp to gather on. When it rains, we pop up a canopy or gather under one of the park's picnic shelters. We talk about what to expect for the day and any changes to the daily routine. Tip: Our message board gets affected by the rain. Grease pencils instead of whiteboard markers resist the rain and are more reliable in less-than-fair weather.

Small-group time: Yes, we do small-group time outside! On dry, warm days, children have access to paper, paints, glue, and more project materials for open-ended art possibilities. Pattern blocks, small toys, games, loose parts, and other manipulatives also become part of our small-group activities. Natural materials such as pine cones, rocks, dirt, and sand are paired with tools like magnet wands, containers, forceps, and magnifying glasses.

Our small-group activities take advantage of wide-open spaces and sometimes take us quite far afield. Children are provided with baskets for collecting and then invited to sort nature's treasures by size, shape, color, texture, and more. They search for letters and numbers on signs in the park and journal by the wetlands to capture their experience.

Retraining our thinking around the importance of nature provides us with an opportunity to see that many of our barriers have solutions.

Plan-do-review: Work time outdoors is full of so much potential! Beyond offering traditional preschool materials such as blocks, toy people, markers, cars, kitchen tools, and more, we also supply baskets of pine cones, rocks, and sticks. Children have the freedom to work on fairy-sized leaf homes or to engage in big body play like running, wrestling, climbing, jumping, and rolling.

Our interest areas also vary from traditional settings. Our house area features a stick fort with fabrics and mud for use with bowls and whisks. Instead of a sand table, we might have a mulch pit or sand box. Our building area not only includes blocks but also large sticks for forts and planks for building catapults and balance beams.

Large-group time: Children and adults come together for our movement and music just like inside. One of our favorite activities is "The Sleeping Bears," where children get to choose an animal to pretend to be. We decide where they sleep and what they do when they wake up. Many of the children's choices are inspired by animals we see in the park. Did you know that squirrels sleep in nests called *dreys*? Our preschoolers do.



Outdoor programs can offer the same structure as their more traditional counterparts — minus the walls. Photo provided by Tiny Trees Preschool and Liz Boyle, photographer.

Outside time: What does outside time look like when you're already outside? We call it "Explore Time" or "Hike Time," which is essentially a time for us to explore a different part of the park each day. This includes hiking to the nearby pond to observe ducks and explore "sink and float," or going to the park's community garden to dig, grow, and harvest. The opportunities for play during this time involve a lot of big body movements and time to connect with what's happening in the community within and surrounding the park.

Our days at outdoor preschool, framed by a high-quality curriculum like HighScope, create a unique opportunity for children to develop confidence, skills, and joy in learning and in life. Educators can honor children by increasing their time outdoors, even by the smallest bit. 🌱

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