Thrive Childcare and Education

Loose Parts

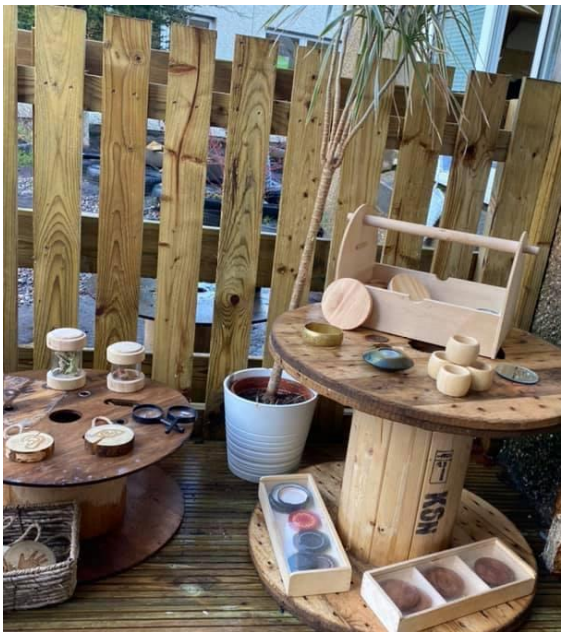
A practitioners guide to how loose parts can be used to support teaching and learning in nursery settings

Loose Parts

The theory

The term 'Loose Parts' sounds like something you would find in an engineering text book and not something connected to play! The term was first introduced in the 1970s by architect Simon Nicholson who suggested that it is the loose parts in our environment that fuel our imaginations and empower our creativity. Nicholson believed that all children are born creative beings, curious about the world and keen to explore experiment and discover. Therefore an environment which is rich in open ended resources and real materials invokes this creativity and helps to develop the creative geniuses of the future!

To a small degree as practitioners we have all been part of the loose parts band wagon, collecting enough paper towel rolls and various cardboard boxes to fill the Grand Canyon without actually being aware of the theory and understanding behind why this is important to children's play and learning. Traditionally, all of the loose parts that were collected were fundamentally used for an artistic purpose, for example junk modelling. However we now talk about loose parts in regards to creative play that encourages brain development, scientific experimenting, mathematical thought, risk taking, and trial and error learning.



Why loose parts?

Loose parts can….

- Be used anyway in which children choose.
- Be adapted and manipulated in many different ways.
- Encourage creativity and imagination.
- Help to develop skills such as problem solving more than most modern plastic toys.
- Be used in many different ways; the possibilities within play are endless!
- Be used in combination with other materials to support imagination, think adding to areas such as construction and small world.
- Encourage open ended learning.

So what do loose parts look like?

Loose parts are random open ended resources that can be used for anything, with loose parts there is no specific set of directions of how these resources have to be organised and used. Loose parts can be either natural or synthetic and can be used both within the inside and outside learning environment.

Examples of loose parts:

- Sticks
- Wood
- Pebbles
- Conkers
- Cones
- Shells
- Gravel
- Boxes
- Logs
- Tyres
- Bottle tops
- Blocks
- Cardboard tubes
- Keys
- Decorative spoons
- Wooden pegs
- Curtain hoops
- Glass nuggets
- Corks
- Crates
- Wooden picture frames
- Lolly sticks
- Pipes
- Cable reels
- Large buttons
- Material……

The list is endless!!

As a practitioner it is important to develop a 'loose part mind set' observing everything in our environments as a play opportunity. Start to view all resources in regards to its loose part potential, always think before throwing something away could this object be collected and recycled at the setting.

Explaining the purpose and philosophy to parents who may look in wonder at the pile of what appears to be 'rubbish' in their child's educational setting can be a challenge. However it is vital to convey the magic of loose parts to parents, this not only embeds parents as partners but is a good opportunity to ask parents to add to your loose part collection.

How to promote loose part play

- Have loose parts on offer in your setting all of the time, so the children get used to what's available and can pull them in to their play when they get an idea
- Add in new materials from time to time, to spark fresh thinking and to create engaging invitations to play.
- Make sure the children have lots of time and free play to investigate, explore, daydream and make use of the loose parts.
- Have other children and adults available to help problem-solve, add in alternates to the play and to admire creations and inventions.

Gathering your resources…

Both the beauty and magic of loose parts is that they are often easy to collect and are usually free, start by making an initial list of loose parts resources that can be sourced quickly. Send out this list to parents/carers to ask if they can help with collecting these items and talk to the children about the list showing them visual representations of the resources. Children often enjoy bringing in objects that they have found such as pine cones and shells, this can then be linked to the children's learning, and the possibilities are endless, think recycling!

Local businesses are another great source for loose parts, hard ware stores often have cut offs of pipes etc and things that have been slightly damaged that can no longer be sold.

Examples of how loose parts can add to the learning environment

Construction

Small World

Home corner

Malleable

Outside

Transient Art

Engaging children in transient art using loose parts is an amazing way to promote learning across the curriculum, transient art can support all areas of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths; See Bertram's STEM guidance for more information on STEM).

What is transient art?

Transient art is not permanent; it changes, develops and evolves. Transient art is also known as 'moveable art'. Transient art allows children to explore, discover and create their own work. Transient art naturally promotes curiosity, discovery and inquiry and can be used with all ages of children. For very young children a high level of supervision from an adult will be necessary due the nature of some of the small parts you. For very young children you can choose to use larger pieces and use this as an opportunity to focus on discovering the textures and properties of these items.

Transient art is about the process of creating and not the end product, although there are always some very interesting designs.

How to create transient art?

Transient art is such an easy activity to do with children at home; is a collection of materials that children can create a pictures and designs from. There is no permanent end product, although you can take photos which allows children to look back and reflect on what they have created. Children may spend a great deal of time moving objects and material and this is a great way to promote imagination – children and adults can create some wonderful storied from simple items such as twigs, leaves and buttons.

You can use old pictures frames with the glass taken out or make picture frames out of old cardboard or cereal boxes. You don't have to use a frame, this works on paper or place mats too.

Resources to collect from around the home and outside (all free or very low cost).

- Leaves, twigs and sticks, flowers, pine cones, accords (depending on the season)
- large feathers

- smooth pebbles, stones (these are also great for painting)
- small coloured gems, beads, buttons
- cotton reels
- wooden blocks
- pieces of string/wool
- pieces of pasta
- pieces of cut up material
- picture frames with the glass taken out, cardboard box frames, pieces of paper, place mats, trays, mirror to use as the creative space.

Here is an example of transient art in action with a group of 2 year olds: these children worked both individually and collaboratively whilst creating their 'Autumn Transient Art'.

Children have an innate curiosity about the world around them; if we set up collections of items in an attractive way for children to design this will inspire them to create.

Also we can use open ended questions to promote conversation, children's thinking skills and to encourage discovery and learning.

Examples of questions to use with your children:

I wonder what it feels like…?

I wonder what it smells like…?

I wonder where it came from…?

What will happen if…?

What can we do to solve this problem…?

What can we do/use next to create…?

Another example of transient art with children ages 3-5 years, we collected these resources from charity shops and visited one craft shop – a lot of these items can be collected at home. Children love looking inside glass jars, and we can use our own recycled glass jam and sauce jars to create the same effect, using real flowers and leaves for example.

You can rota different items each time you try transient art, and this will keep children interested, the conversations and things you will discover will surprise you, the learning is endless!

You will recognise if your child would like to end the activity or experience, and this will be a good time to take a photo and possibly add their name to their creations. This way you can look back over what you have created and talk about this in the future and even share with family members.

Links to learning:

Science – collecting items from outdoors and discovering nature, discovering the properties of natural objects, making hypotheses (theories and suggestions) about what things do, how things work or fit together. Manipulating and experimenting with creations.

Technology – using tools to craft and produce designs. Using digital tools to take photographs and record your creations.

Engineering - creating a plan to make a design, making designs, building creations.

Maths – exploring, sorting and experimenting with patterns, shapes, designing and re-designing.

Risk and supervision

As with any play opportunity and learning experience that we provide children with, there is always a risk involved. Loose parts are exactly that - 'loose parts' - and do not conform to toy safety standards, therefore one of the main worries surrounding the use of loose parts is the risk that this will lead to more accidents within play. However, children need to explore resources that are not designed as toys, this is fundamentally important for children's understanding of the world and how to be safe within it. Theorists such as Montessori and Steiner both advocated the need for real experiences in order for children to acquire life skills; playing with loose parts assists with these processes.

Children are often invited to use mark making resources such as pens and pencils in settings from a very young age; the way this is managed is through practitioner support and role modelling. The same rule applies to loose parts; when introducing any resource to the learning environment it is important to assess the resource as to how it must be managed and in particular which age group it is most suited to. This does not mean a blanket ban for all other age groups, if it was a smaller resource, for example pebbles, it is not to say that the younger children cannot enjoy the experience of exploring pebbles, it would just have to managed differently.

It is important to explain to older children how to use the resources safely, again this does not mean telling the children how to use and play with the resources, but highlighting certain risks that will aid children to learn about and manage their own risks independently within play.

Although injury prevention is a practitioner's key role in keeping children safe, the benefit of loose parts play is that children begin to assess their own risks and ask their own safety questions such as "what would happen if I put a plank of wood from here to there and walked across?"

If a child is stopped at this point and not allowed the opportunity to find out the answer this would result in the child being unaware of why their play has been stopped and perhaps lead to frustration or demotivation. However if the child is allowed to continue on with a supportive adult nearby, they continue their investigations and and enhance their problem solving skills as well as their enjoyment. For example; they may find out that the plank is too wobbly therefore needs securing before attempting to walk across.

This type of problem solving and critical thinking becomes the foundation of a life skill which they can then recall to support themselves and others to be safe within play in future.

"*In any environment, the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it.*" (Nicolson, 1970)