



Loose Parts that help to create a rich play environment

- mud
- grass
- palettes
- chalk
- walls
- crates
- baskets
- straws
- string
- tyres
- logs
- ropes
- pine cones
- straw bales
- sand
- paper
- seed pods
- shells
- water
- mown grass
- blankets
- flowers
- leaves
- stumps
- rocks
- cushions
- twigs
- stones
- play props
- play clothes
- wood
- gravel
- fabric
- sticks
- junk (not just for junk modelling)
- balls
- buckets
- blocks
- boxes
- Play scrap from the Scrapstore
- hoops
- people
- cups
- spades



Using Loose Parts for Play

What are Loose Parts?

- ◆ ‘Loose parts’ are items and materials that children and young people can move, adapt, control, change and manipulate within their play. They provide a high level of creativity and choice, as there are endless possibilities for how they can be used. When a child is playing with sand, it can become anything they want it to be, whereas many bought toys lack such flexibility. Studies show that children and young people prefer to play with loose parts such as water, sticks, sand, ropes and boxes than traditional toys and play equipment, because they can use their imagination, and have greater control in their play. In the saying “Children prefer to play with the box than the present inside”, the box is an example of a loose part, and loose parts have a very high play value for children.
- ◆ Simon Nicholson came up with the ‘Theory of loose parts’ in 1971. He said that in any environment, the degree of creativity and inventiveness is directly proportional to the number of variables in it. Nicholson suggested that a beach is a good example of a loose parts environments, with plenty of moveable and adaptable materials, such as sand, water, rocks and shells. Loose parts are the reason that most children are absorbed in play for hours on a beach.

Where Can I Get Loose Parts?

- ◆ In nature—e.g. pine cones, shells, twigs, grass, stones, straw bales
- ◆ At home—e.g. cushions, blankets, junk, buckets, play clothes
- ◆ Buy some—e.g. sand, logs, paper, hoops, old tyres, ropes
- ◆ From a Scrapstore—there are many Scrapstores, which sell waste from companies as play items. It is extremely reasonably priced. ORINOCO is the Oxfordshire Scrapstore, and is situated in Headington. Look at their website for opening times (www.oxorinoco.org) or call them on 01865 761113. There are also scrapstores in Milton Keynes, Aylesbury, High Wycombe and all around the UK.

How Do I Use Loose Parts?

Children are drawn to new, interesting and novel items—and have a natural drive and ability to decide what to do with them in their play. Leave a pile of loose parts, let the young people know they can use them, and keep adult intervention to a minimum. Loose parts are springboards for play, and are an essential element of a rich, child-centred play environment.

A great 10-minute video about the value and use of loose parts for play is on the OPA website www.oxonplay.org.uk under ‘About Play – Loose Parts’.