



STRONGER PRACTICE INSIGHTS

LOOSE PARTS PLAY

ABOUT

Looking to spark creativity and deepen learning through loose parts play? This resource brings together materials from Stronger Practice Hubs across the country, as well as links to research and online resources—curated to support early years educators with planning, reflection, and professional dialogue.



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HOW YOU MIGHT USE THIS PUBLICATION



**READ + USE LIVE LINKS
TO EXPLORE CONTENT**



**WATCH, REFLECT AND
DISCUSS VIDEO LINKS
ALONE AND/OR WITH
COLLEAGUES**



**SHARE ELECTRONICALLY
WITH COLLEAGUES AND
PLAN TIME FOR
PROFESSIONAL
DIALOGUE**



**PRINT A COPY AND
THEN USE THIS QR CODE
TO ACCESS THE ONLINE
RESOURCE**



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WHAT IS LOOSE PARTS PLAY?

Loose parts play is a wonderfully open-ended approach to childhood learning and creativity. It's all about giving children access to a variety of materials—natural or manmade—that they can move, combine, redesign, and experiment with in countless ways. There's no "right" way to use them, which is exactly the point. Educators use them to spark creativity, deepen learning, and support holistic development

THE THEORY BEHIND IT

The concept was popularized by architect Simon Nicholson in the 1970s. He believed that the richness of an environment—its "variables"—directly affects creativity. Inspired by this, Nicholson championed loose parts in early education, seeing them as essential tools for nurturing future designers, builders, and thinkers through open-ended, hands-on play

Simon Nicholson's 1971 article "How Not to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts" is a passionate and provocative call to rethink how we design environments for children—and for creativity more broadly.



"Children need space-forming materials in order that they may invent, construct, evaluate and modify their own environments."

Nicholson, Simon. "How NOT to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts." *Landscape Architecture*, vol. 62, no. 1, 1971, pp. 30–34. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44663886>. Accessed 27 July 2025.

CONTENT FROM HUBS NATIONWIDE

- 1 [The Evidence – Loose Parts Play](#)
- 2 [Essential loose parts blogs by Ben Kingston-Hughes](#)
- 3 [A case study into how loose parts play led to having the confidence to speak](#)
- 4 [Loose Parts Community of Practice webinar](#)
- 5 [Thinking with materials](#)
- 6 [Loose Parts Play: A Toolkit](#)
- 7 [Explore the evidence](#)
- 8 [Find a scrapstore near you](#)

With thanks to:





1 THE EVIDENCE - LOOSE PARTS PLAY

How does loose part play support children's learning?
Read the summary and watch a video [5 minute read]



[Explore this resource](#)

NB: Instagram account needed to watch video [3 minute watch]





2 ESSENTIAL LOOSE PARTS BLOG

Ben Kingston-Hugh shares why loose parts play is so special, links to neuroscience and why he believes children need opportunities to explore and create within their play [10minute read]. Plus a bonus blog of 12 key messages about loose part play [3minute read].



[Explore the blog](#)

[12 commandments of Loose Part Play_blog](#)





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A CASE STUDY INTO HOW LOOSE PARTS PLAY LED TO HAVING THE CONFIDENCE TO SPEAK

Marion Walker has been a childminder for 16 years. She works with her husband at Soar Childcare in Bishops Stortford. [10 minute read]



[Download](#) the case study here





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LOOSE PARTS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

A 45 minute webinar for childminders facilitated by Kim Barnettson. There are lots of ideas that are relevant for all early years educators. It includes a link to a padlet with ideas about resources [45 minute watch]



[Watch here](#)



5

THINKING WITH MATERIALS

In this article Debi Keyte–Hartland: Associate Consultant with Early Education, prompts us to think more deeply about the potential of the materials we use with children and see them as ‘activators of learning’.

This article is an adaptation from “Intelligent materials: agency and aesthetics” first published in Early Education Journal No 89 Winter 2019



[3 minute read here](#)



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LOOSE PARTS PLAY A TOOLKIT

by Theresa Casey and Juliet Robinson



WHAT DOES THE EDUCATION ENDOWMENT FOUNDATION EARLY YEARS HUB EVIDENCE TELL US?

Communication and Language

Use loose parts play to teach and model vocabulary.

Using purposeful language in meaningful contexts helps children:

- Understand vocabulary by hearing words in relevant situations (receptive language)
- Use words in their own speech and interactions (expressive language)

It's all about modelling and reinforcing language where it naturally fits, so children can grasp both what words mean and how to use them. There is strong evidence that this can have a positive impact on children's oral language development.

Personal, social and emotional development

Encourage children to play together when using loose parts. They can share their ideas and thinking, listen to others and create together.

- The evidence says that opportunities for group activities and collaborative play can help develop relationship skills.



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Early Mathematics

Use loose parts play to facilitate mathematical language and teach problem solving skills

Loose parts offer so many opportunities to investigate shape, size, number, sort, compare and explore mathematical concepts.

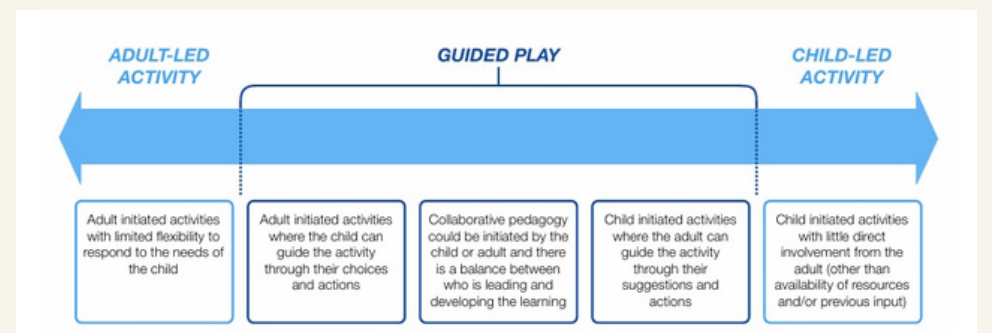
- Research indicates that children who have good mathematical language do better in maths.
- The evidence is strongest when the approach is embedded alongside other approaches. The advice to educators, therefore, is to find ways to facilitate mathematical language and problem-solving at the same time as other approaches and activities.

Our role in teaching and learning

One of the most rewarding complexities in early years teaching is supporting learning while following the child's lead in play.

The early years pedagogical continuum helps us to reflect the range of opportunities for quality interactions with individual and groups of children within activities and through the day.

Reflect on your role when children are playing with loose parts. Where does the magic happen?



Delve deeper to support your intentional practice

Caldwell, H.A.T., Spencer, R.A., Joshi, N. et al. **Impact of an outdoor loose parts play intervention on Nova Scotian preschoolers' physical literacy**: a mixed-methods randomized controlled trial. BMC Public Health 23, 1126 (2023).

- Found improved physical literacy, confidence, motivation and social development
- Educators also noted positive impacts in emotional wellbeing and engagement

Gibson, J.L., Cornell, M. & Gill, T. A **Systematic Review of Research into the Impact of Loose Parts Play on Children's Cognitive, Social and Emotional Development**. School Mental Health 9, 295–309 (2017).

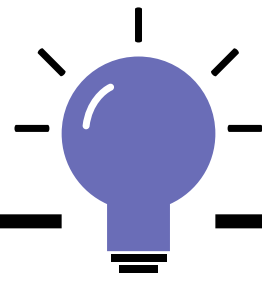
- Found links between loose part play and cooperative play, school satisfaction, and self-esteem
- There were mixed results for social and emotional outcomes
- There was limited evidence for cognitive gains
- It called for more longitudinal, quantitative, and diverse studies to strengthen the evidence base.

Cankaya O, Rohatyn–Martin N, Leach J, Taylor K, Bulut O. **Preschool Children's Loose Parts Play and the Relationship to Cognitive Development: A Review of the Literature**. *Journal of Intelligence*. 2023; 11(8):151.

Found that:

- Play drives cognitive development—children learn to plan, problem-solve, and think critically through meaningful play experiences.
- Loose parts spark imagination—open-ended materials encourage symbolic thinking, flexible strategies, and creative exploration.
- Adult involvement matters—responsive support can extend the length and complexity of children's play episodes.
- Equity and culture are key—all children should have access to diverse materials and play opportunities that reflect their backgrounds.
- Evidence-informed practice matters—use current research to create playful environments that foster lifelong learning.

SOME RESEARCH SPECIFICALLY AROUND LOOSE PARTS PLAY



Did you know?

reuseful

ReusefulUK has been set up by members of the scrapstore community to support the reuse of unwanted resources for the benefit of children and communities. Clean reusable scrap materials (which businesses find hard to recycle so would otherwise be landfilled) are made available for children to play with through a network of independent 'scrapstores' across the UK.

Find a scrapstore near you



REFLECT & DISCUSS

We hope that you found this publication
useful in enhancing your practice.

Please let us know how you have used it.
We would love to hear from you.

CONTACT
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