

Taking It Outside: Loose Parts Play Outdoors



You may have started to explore the world of loose parts in your child's play inside the home but what about outside? Can loose parts be included as children play outdoors? It most certainly can and is definitely encouraged. There is a need for children to spend time engaging in unstructured, child led play.

The great outdoors allows children the space to explore, create, freely express themselves and be physically active. Often when we imagine children playing outdoors, we envision them playing on playground structures, playing with a specific toy or playing a specific game but having loose parts in outdoor play environments boost the level of engagement in their play when compared to the stationary structures or materials with set purpose. Including loose parts into outdoor play enriches the play environment.

What materials can be included?

The definition for loose parts remains the same outside as if it was inside, they need to be open ended materials that are movable, manipulative, transformable and can be used freely with no set of directions. Objects that offer opportunities for different actions or use. The stick becomes the candle on a mud cake, then transforms into a spoon that stirs a magic potion or is used to measure a worm crawling on the ground or help build a nest to hold pine cone eggs. The ability to give whatever role a child's wishes onto that object enhances their imagination. The wonderful thing about being outdoors in nature is that a lot of materials that can be considered loose parts are already a part of such environments.

Check out this resource:

Not A Stick by Antoinette Portis. It highlights other ways the stick, an object from nature, transforms through the power of imagination.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NX5ujt2h3xo>

EYET EarlyON Child and Family Centres

Materials such as mud, sand, sticks, twigs, leaves, flowers are usually found in outdoor spaces and therefore can be collected and included by the children into their play. The large, open spaces that outdoor environments usually provide can allow for incorporation of larger loose parts materials such as logs, tires, wooden planks or milk crates. Children can take those larger materials to build things such as forts, ramps or bridges.

Here are some more examples of loose parts that can be included in outdoor play

- Tires
- Tree stumps
- Buckets
- Water
- Wooden reels
- Grass
- Tarp
- Hay
- Pipes /tubes
- Tree Cookies
- Rope
- Stones / Pebbles
- Plastic Bottles / Containers
- Seeds
- Kitchen Utensils
- Seashells

Supervision is recommended when playing with these materials and may require frequent checks to make sure they are in good and safe conditions for use. For example, making sure the wooden planks are free of splinters.

Check out this resource:

Here is a 2- minute video about using loose parts in your backyard

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1J3AhaOPPCg>

Where in the outdoors can this play occur?

Loose parts play can happen in many places in the outdoors where there is free space. In your backyard, on the front lawn or at the side of the house. You can store the materials in buckets or baskets, keeping the materials that are okay to survive various weather conditions outside or store them inside and bring them out when your child is ready to play.

For those who may live in an apartment or condo, or don't have access to a backyard, loose parts play outdoors is still possible. You can, with your child, create a portable box or bin with a collection of loose parts, that can be brought with you to the park, playground, beach or open field. As mentioned above, many loose parts are found out in nature so children may often find some wherever they are playing.

Why include loose parts outdoors?

Just like loose parts play indoors, playing with loose parts outdoors has many benefits. As children manipulate and figure out how to use the materials in various ways, it promotes problem solving skills. It can foster physical development as children use big body muscles to lift and carry larger loose part materials to build varying structures. Active body movements may increase as they use the materials to jump, crawl and balance as they create obstacle courses, bridges or forts.

Children explore various types of play as they use loose parts. They engage in constructive play as they use the materials to build. They encourage dramatic play as they pretend to have a picnic with the leaves and stones becoming the food and the piece of fabric is spread out as the blanket. It fosters social play and language development as they interact with others, sharing their ideas and creating scenarios together. Being outdoors and engaging in loose parts play encourages a sense of wonder, curiosity and gives children a space to be creative.

Sources

- Children, Outdoor Play, Loose Parts. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328579135_Children_Outdoor_Play_and_Loose_Parts
- Let Children Play: Scoping Review of The Implementation and Use of Loose Parts for Promoting Physical Activity Participation. <http://www.aimspress.com/fileOther/PDF/aimsph/publichealth-03-00781.pdf>
- The “Whys” have it”! Why To Include Loose Parts On The Playground https://www.seedsofpartnership.org/hqele/pdf/Loose_Parts_on_the_Playground.pdf