



## LOOSE PARTS = CREATIVITY + DISCOVERY + IMAGINATION

How often have you watched a baby/toddler play endlessly with a box, wrapping paper or ribbon while the expensive toy inside the box stays untouched. Or that pile of dirt, mulch or junk in the backyard, become the object of hours of play for your child, day after day. Have you wondered why there's an odd collection of toys, trinkets, pots and pans from your kitchen cupboards sitting in your child's sandpit, or been fascinated how your child can amuse themselves endlessly with a pile of sticks in a corner of your yard?

These are example of children using loose parts as part of their play. These are materials that have no specific set of directions or purpose. They can take many forms, sticks, stones, logs, pebbles, shells etc. Children love them because they can be used by them in any way they determine – they can be moved, carried, combined, stacked, sorted, collected, taken apart, put back together.

Children are drawn to loose parts play because, unlike traditional toys that have limited flexibility and play options, loose parts allow children to use their creativity, to experiment and to choose how they are going to use an item in their play experience.

Children don't always use things the way adults expect them to and often it is only they who know what they are creating or doing. But these experiences are invaluable. When loose parts are part of children's play time, they are building their understanding of how materials work and what they can do with them.

For a child, a stick can be a writing implement, a horse to be ridden, a shovel, a laser, a sword, a guitar. A selection of rocks can be used as currency, they can be sorted, painted, stacked, hidden, rolled, lined up, measured, collected. As children experiment in this type of play, they are learning and making decisions all the time. What type of rocks and how should they be stacked to make the best tower; can they be used to build a ladder, a bridge or a cave; how many different ways they can be sorted – by weight, colour, size, shape; what happens if they are painted, then stamped, rolled, washed?

Children prefer to be creative than have everything designated for them. Loose parts unleash their creativity and imagination to turn ordinary objects into play props that have multiple uses and roles. So before you get into all sorts of trouble by removing the pinecone propped up against a tree that appears to have no purpose, check with your child. You will no doubt find that the ordinary pinecone has become a space rocket, ready for launch, or a house for fairies or a hiding place for their micro treasures.

The natural world provides a diverse variety of loose parts that display patterns and sequences that can't be manufactured. Everything in nature has a different and unique texture, smell, temperature, taste, weight and design. Their play possibilities are endless. Their uniqueness encourages children to problem solve, and to be creative in how they use these items. And in growing their understanding of where these things come from, how they can be collected sensitively, and how these items can be used, we are helping to grow their connection with the natural world. We want and need children to be connected to and understand the way nature works. Robin Moore tells us that 'kids really get to know the environment if they can dig it, beat it, swat it, lift it, push it, join it, combine different things with it....this is a process of imagination and environment working together'.



The benefits for loose parts play is endless and an important part of children's development. Loose parts are:

- Portable – this is appealing to children and allows them to have ownership over their play experience
- Open-ended – they are inherently flexible and can be used in endless ways
- Sensory – perfect for children to learn about textures, weights, patterns, shapes and what happens when you bang, rub, crush them together
- Encourages imagination and creativity – children can determine what purpose they will have and how they will be used
- Developmentally appropriate – children will use them in ways that suit their developmental level
- Develops skills and competency – encouraging problem-solving, co-operation, decision-making, fine and gross motor skills, independence, vocabulary, physical, art, maths and science
- Increases the variety and level of play experiences – social, constructive, symbolic, dramatic, exploratory
- Cost effective, easy to source and fun to collect

It's simple and inexpensive to set up a loose parts play area in your home. Providing a broad selection of materials that are readily accessible and regularly refreshed, will encourage children to incorporate natural parts whenever they have opportunity for free play. Giving your children permission to play with loose parts and then providing time and space for them to experiment, will ensure they get maximum benefit. You'll be amazed and inspired at their ingenuity and variety in play.

Here are some ideas of things you can include in your child's natural loose parts play collection:-

- Shells
- Bark
- Stones (*big enough to carry but not big enough to choke on*)
- Seedpods
- Feathers
- Cut tree rounds (*of all sizes*)
- Pinecones
- Sand
- Mud
- Water
- Vines
- Logs
- Tree stumps
- Leaves
- Twigs/branches
- Sticks
- Flowers

*\*\*Be mindful of choking hazards for small children*

The practicalities of loose parts mean they can often look messy and disorganized. If it is an issue for you and you would like to keep the loose parts space 'contained' think about using natural materials to border your loose parts play space. Tree logs, rocks or stumps look great and double as seating for children at play. Use wooden crates, baskets, even wheelbarrows to store items in that can be easily transported by your child.

PLAY IS THE BUSINESS OF CHILDREN SO CONSIDER INCORPORATING NATURAL LOOSE PARTS INTO YOUR PLAY AREA AT HOME. START SMALL WITH A FEW ITEMS LIKE DIFFERENT SHAPES AND SIZES OF WOODEN TREE ROUNDS AND STICKS AND LET YOUR CHILD CREATE, DISCOVER AND IMAGINE WHAT THEY CAN BECOME.