

Loose Parts

A Start Up Guide

By Sally Haughey

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What are *Loose Parts?*

> *"As long as materials can be moved, redesigned, put together, and taken apart in a variety of ways, they are classified as loose parts."*
>
> SIMON NICHOLSON, 1971
> FOUNDER OF THE IDEA OF LOOSE PARTS



Loose parts is a term created by the architect Simon Nicholson. He looked at environments and how they formed connections. He believed that loose parts were an important component of creativity and higher-order thinking. Here's a link to his original article - **click here!**

Loose parts are any collection of natural or manmade objects that can be used to extend and further ideas in children's play. They are open-ended materials that can be moved, combined, taken apart, redesigned, lined up, and more! There is no pre-determined use or function.

Loose parts are open to a child's interpretation and creative thinking! A loose part can become anything!

Loose parts can be thought of as the way for children of all ages to unlock the cognitive and creative mindset that allows them to build, deconstruct, persist, create, and work together to unleash the power of creativity that we all contain.

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What are *the benefits?*

> *"The wider the range of possibilities we offer children, the more intense will be their motivations and the richer their experiences."*
>
> LORIS MALAGUZZI

Loose parts allow children to do the thinking.

Loose parts offer children infinite play opportunities influencing them in ever-changing ways. The immense benefits of offering loose parts exploration are critical to the development of the next generation. Loose parts allow children to do the thinking instead of the manufactured toy that has set directions. This is beneficial because it reaches such a deep cognitive level of thinking, problem-solving, and persisting.

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Loose parts opens the enormous possibilities for children to truly become the critical thinkers they’re destined to be.

The beautiful piece about loose parts is no matter the age, children can explore with the same materials and use them in different ways suitable for their age development. Loose parts also promote a wide variety of play behaviors, including social play, dramatic play, constructive play, symbolic play, and even games with rules, when children make up their own games with the materials.

Math and science areas are learned as children experiment with sand, water, buckets, and stacking materials along with truly any open ended material. Loose parts open the enormous possibilities for children to truly become the critical thinkers they’re destined to be.

"If you believe the child to be inquisitive and creative, competent and capable, intelligent and whole, then you will create environments which reflect this."

LORIS MALAGUZZI

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The 7 Types of *Loose Parts*

> *"Creativity is for the gifted few: the rest of us are compelled to live in environments constructed by the gifted few, listen to the gifted few's music, use gifted few's inventions and art, and read the poems, fantasies and plays by the gifted few.This is what our education and culture conditions us to believe, and this is a culturally induced and perpetuated lie."*
>
> SIMON NICHOLSON, 1972
> THE THEORY OF LOOSE PARTS

After understanding the vast need for loose parts, many people ask, "Where do I begin?"

You begin by looking around at your current collection of materials and sorting them by textures. All these types of textures provide rich opportunities for children as all of them can be infused within every area of the classroom.

These types of loose parts are all recyclable and easy to obtain materials that make this even more powerful for teachers, parents, and children.

The seven types of loose parts are:

1. Nature Based
2. Wood Reuse
3. Plastic
4. Metal
5. Ceramic/Glass
6. Fabric/Ribbon
7. Packaging



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01 Nature Based Loose Parts

- Sticks
- Rocks
- Dried Flowers
- Leaves
- Seeds
- Sand
- Dirt
- Pinecones
- Wood cookies
- Wood chips
- Moss
- Shells
- Acorns
- Pods
- Logs
- Sticks
- Peach Pits
- Feathers
- Squash
- Sweet Gum Balls
- Anise Stars
- Cinnamon Sticks
- Nutmeg

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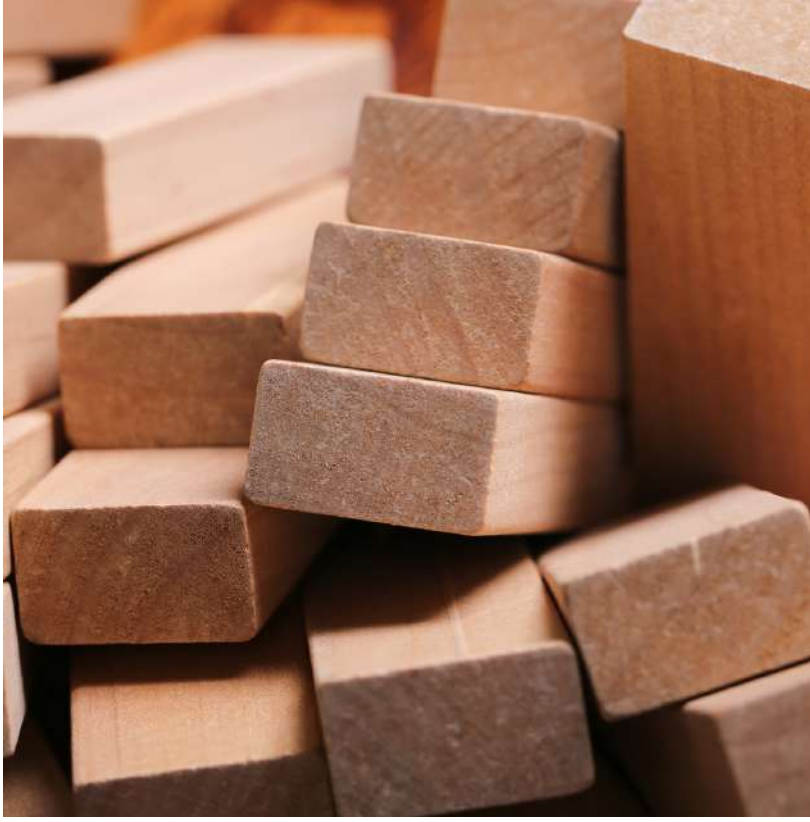












02 Wood Reuse Loose Parts

- Corks
- Clothespins
- Pegs
- Wooden Beads
- Golf Tees
- Chair Legs
- Dowels
- Wooden Blocks
- Hardwood floor scraps
- Candlesticks
- Napkin rings
- Wood scraps
- Wood pegs
- Scrabble pieces
- Spools
- Wood frames
- Rings
- Puzzle pieces
- Wood people
- Thread spools

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03 Plastic Loose Parts

- Milk Caps
- Bottles
- Gerber food containers
- PVC pipes
- Reels
- Empty spice containers
- Film canisters
- Curtain rings
- Hair rollers
- Straws
- CD cases
- Game pieces
- Beads
- Bubble Wrap
- Cones
- Lollipop sticks
- Buttons
- Funnels
- Maker Caps
- Plastic bead necklaces
- Golf balls
- Cups
- Hula hoops
- Bag clips

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04 Metal Loose Parts

- Nuts and bolts
- Washers
- Tin foil
- Old gadgets
- Bangles
- Curtain rings
- Muffin tins
- Potato mashers
- Gutters
- Magnets
- Keys
- Bottle tabs
- License Plates
- Spoons
- Forks and spoons
- Links
- Metal lids
- Thimbles
- Silver beads
- Soda can tabs
- Thread spools
- Door knobs
- Discs
- Hair clips
- Candle sticks
- Tubing
- Cans

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05 Glass & Ceramic Loose Parts

- Ceramic tiles
- Glass Beads
- Gems
- Marbles
- Prisms
- Slate
- Tiles
- Flower pots
- Granite scraps
- Cabinet door knobs
- Small mirror discs
- Sea glass
- Glass vase beads
- Drawer knobs
- Balls
- Tiny bottles

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06 Fabric, Fiber & Paper Loose Parts

- Chiffon
- Twine
- Ribbon
- Silk
- Wool
- Ribbon
- Scarves
- Flags
- Burlap
- Yarn
- Embroidery thread
- Felt pieces
- Doilies
- Lace
- String
- Rope
- Rubber bands

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07 Packaging Loose Parts

- Packing Peanuts
- Bubble Wrap
- Boxes
- Cardboard scraps
- Paper rolls
- Wrapping paper
- Painters tape
- Egg cartons
- Ribbon wheel
- Cereal boxes
- Paper scraps

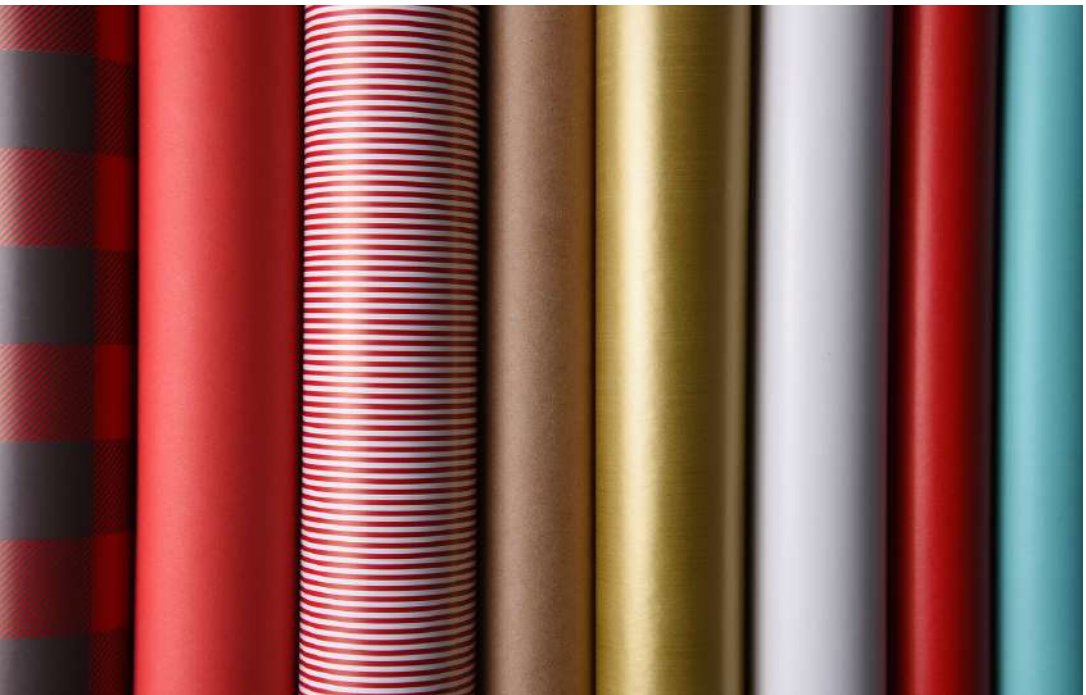
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6 Places to Find *Loose Parts*

> *“Nature is imperfectly perfect, filled with loose parts and possibilities, with mud and dust, nettles and sky, transcendent hands-on moments and skinned knees.”*
>
> RICHARD LOUV

After understanding what loose parts are, the benefits, the seven types, and seeing many examples of loose parts, you may be wondering, "What's next?" "Where do I begin?"

If you're already thinking, "I want to do more of this with my class or my own kids," then you're already beginning! The hardest part is changing our mindset of what we may be used to. In reality, the beauty of loose parts gets back to how most of us were raised with the infinite possibilities of nature or materials around us.

For starters, looking around in nature and your own house is where we all began. It's not about spending money on more things but having eyes for recyclable materials.

1. Thrift Stores
2. Garage Sales
3. Businesses
4. Families
5. Walks with Children
6. Recycled Home Goods



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Safety *Considerations:*

- When choosing loose parts for your classroom – it is important to consider what is age appropriate.
- There are loose parts that would not be safe for children under three years of age.
- Be aware of choking hazards and always keep a watchful eye.

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Final *Thoughts*

> *"Children learn most readily and easily in a laboratory-type environment where they can experiment, enjoy and find out things for themselves."*
>
> SIMON NICHOLSON, 1971
> FOUNDER OF THE IDEA OF LOOSE PARTS





In the traditional classroom materials, we see primarily plastic and bright colors. The visual processing system is the main system being used as we see the dominance of high-frequency colors. Traditional educational methods are visual and auditory heavy.

In a responsive play-based classroom, there is a diversity of materials with not only a visual feast but also a strong offering of the tactile. The tactile processing system interprets information through the touch receptors in the skin. Research has shown a strong connection between the emotional center of the brain and the tactile system.

Through touch, a child learns about the world... weight, size, temperature, and texture. It is here where young children begin to develop their sense of pleasure and pain. Consideringthis-what is a bright-colored plastic environment providing a child? It is the difference between a Happy Meal from McD and an organic meal rich in vegetables.

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3 Easy *Next Steps:*

Look at the checklists for each of the 7 types of loose parts.
Make a list of what you already have available.

Pick 3 to 5 loose parts you would like to add to your existing collection.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Send home a letter to families asking if they have any of those loose parts.

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Recommended *Resources:*

Beautiful Stuff: Learning with Found Materials
By Cathy Weisman Topaland LellaGandini

Loose Parts: Inspiring Play in Young Children
By Lisa Daly and Miriam Beloglovsky

Loose Parts 2: Inspiring Play with Infants and Toddlers
By Lisa Daly and Miriam Beloglovsky

The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation
By Carolyn Edwards and LellaGandini

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