



50 LEARNING-INSPIRED THINGS TO DO WITH LOOSE PARTS FOR EARLY YEARS

“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

Natural loose parts are collections found in nature which, when introduced to children’s play, are open-ended with no defined purpose or predetermined rules. Their scope is limited only by a child’s imagination.

Loose parts are often sourced at little to no cost and can be found in schoolyards, backyards, roadsides and on walks around the local neighbourhood. Families can be invited to contribute found items from their local area like large gumnuts, bark, seedpods or pinecones. Sustained and focused learning is often observed as children engage in loose parts play and the agency of the child is clear. Although the learning is often self-directed, educators play a vital role in facilitating these experiences and in often knowing when to; watch, wait, support, give more time or offer encouragement to a learner.

TIPS

- Consider the storage and management of loose parts as you establish your collections. For example consider labelled storage containers (second hand baskets are great) and keep them single stacked on shelves for ease of use and tidy up
- Have ongoing conversations with parents about the learning outcomes
- Consider planting plants that can provide you with a close and reliable source of loose parts (ie seed pods, leaves and flowers)
- Start small and role model your expectations

LEARNING OUTCOME 1: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF IDENTITY

- 1 Gather a beautiful collection of pods, seeds and flowers to use in your play kitchen
- 2 Go on a scavenger hunt for ‘natural treasure’
- 3 Build yourself a tower of loose parts – then knock it down!

- 4 Weave yourself a willow crown and hunt for decorations in your yard
- 5 Sculpt your self-portrait with mud clay, then decorate with natural finds
- 6 Learn to interact with others with care, empathy and respect. Now paint yourself or a friend with your pigment and paint brush!

LEARNING OUTCOME 2: CHILDREN ARE CONNECTED WITH, AND CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR WORLD

- 7 Set up a memory game
- 8 Keep score with stones
- 9 Decorate the branches of a seasonal or event tree with your finds



- 10 Practice comparative counting, do you have enough pieces for everyone?
- 11 Build a snail hangout or bug hotel
- 12 Stack stones in a sunny spot in your garden for lizards to lounge upon

LEARNING OUTCOME 3: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF WELLBEING

- 13 Dig yourself a mud pit, pop in a few loose parts and go mud dipping for treasure
- 14 Transport a wheelbarrow full of loose parts from one station to another
- 15 Practice your pincer grip with small parts, then try a different finger combination

LEARNING OUTCOME 4: CHILDREN ARE CONFIDENT AND INVOLVED LEARNERS

- 16 Mix up perfumes and potions with flowers, herbs and seed pods
- 17 Crush and mix up a natural pigment with different types of rocks
- 18 Dig a hole and get some target practice with gumnuts
- 19 Decorate a sand creation
- 20 Introduce subtraction with large seed pods
- 21 Sort your finds by colour, texture, scent and location of find
- 22 Stack your loose parts and measure how high you can build the stack
- 23 Explore volume with pots and pans full of water and loose parts that sink

- 24 Discover what happens when you add loose parts to water from different heights
- 25 Compile a large estimating jar full of seeds (such as conifers or wattles)
- 26 Guess how many pinecones would fit in a jug before one topples off
- 27 Explore trajectory and find out which loose parts have greater momentum downhill
- 28 Compare your finds and consider their size as a unit of measurement
- 29 Practice positional language and ordinal numbers with any collection of loose parts
- 30 Design and construct a dinosaur island
- 31 Explore 3D shapes found in nature
- 32 Design a natural paintbrush using parts found in your play space
- 33 Experiment with printing using natural loose parts and mud paint
- 34 See what beautiful patterns your loose parts make in clay
- 35 Practice counting backwards with beans
- 36 Build a moat around your sandcastle, test out which loose parts you can get to float

LEARNING OUTCOME 5: CHILDREN ARE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS

- 37 Play a listening game - guess which two items (wood cookies, stones etc) are being knocked together without looking

- 38 Put your senses to the test with a loose parts sensory bag, can you guess what natural parts you are holding without peeking?
- 39 Make a mystery treasure bottle with soil, sand and small parts to uncover
- 40 Compile a story sack of parts, try it out at circle time
- 41 Design and decorate a fairy garden or goblin's grotto
- 42 Construct an Australian bush creature with loose parts and home-made playdough
- 43 Create a beautiful mandala with flowers, leaves and stones
- 44 Go on a nature walk and take a collecting basket. When you return, make an artistic interpretation of your journey with what you've collected
- 45 Test your reasoning skills with patterning and sequencing using sticks and flowers
- 46 Practice making arrays
- 47 Practice fractions and symmetry with folded leaves
- 48 Practice number formation then make a stand-up model of your number
- 49 Tear up a large leaf to make your own jigsaw puzzle
- 50 Make yourself a set of scales and compare weight and mass of different parts

