

[CONVERSATION]

NATURE'S BUILDING BLOCKS

Exploring the potential of loose parts

INTERVIEW WITH SIMON HUTCHINSON, DIRECTOR OF CLIMBING TREE CONSULTANCY



[ABOUT SIMON]

Simon is a qualified teacher, the father of three nature-play-loving children, a Level 3 playground auditor, and Director of Climbing Tree where he is a designer and consultant known for his nature-inspired designs that offer appropriate risk taking and encourage free active play with loose parts. He also tours regularly with Nature Play SA to deliver workshops across the state.

<http://climbingtree.com.au/about-us/>

*Loose parts should be a feature of all children's play spaces – according to **Simon Hutchinson**, outdoor education teacher and natural play space designer. A father of three who as Director of Climbing Tree Consultancy has designed over 120 natural play spaces, Simon has a pretty good idea about what children want and need in their play spaces.*

Simon, can you tell us where your nature play journey began?

I guess you could say it all started for me in childhood. I grew up on a farm property having to invent my own fun and being creative playing with my brother. We got up to all sorts of things. We would play in fallen trees, build cubbies, play in the scrub, invent games, build BMX tracks, explore old ruins... and at one point we invented our own outdoor circus.

From a professional perspective, it began after I came back from England in 2008. I had spent quite a bit of time in inner-city London where I had seen first-hand the impact that confined spaces, limited opportunities for free play and no contact with nature can have on children. The children were really unhappy, angry, socially and emotionally challenged. When I returned to Australia I could see that we were on a similar trajectory with how free play was disappearing. And really we are the land of the great outdoors!

From my perspective, school and parental restrictions were the greatest barriers to free play. As a qualified teacher, I wanted to challenge these notions in my classroom, school and wider community.

Through my classroom role, I started to incorporate more outdoor teaching to engage the children in different ways and to stimulate their creativity and open their minds to the types of things they could do outside – often outdoor teaching can lead to more diverse types of play in the schoolyard. Questions were raised at the time, and I had to explain the benefits of outdoor education as well as the importance of wellbeing and its relevance to learning outcomes.

A short time later, I took on a different role that enabled me to introduce activities such as cubby building and fire. For example, I went through a process of evaluating sticks for play using a risk-benefit approach and modelled appropriate behaviour and use with sticks to staff and students. I then developed a common language with staff to educate children around the use of sticks. As we communicated the benefits clearly to our parent community, positive parent feedback rose dramatically. I realised we were doing the right thing. This experience developed into a passion that saw me present around the state with Nature Play SA and start my own business. Anyone who wants to learn more about what we do at Climbing Tree can do so by visiting <http://climbingtree.com.au/about-us/>.

You are a strong advocate for loose parts in education settings. Can you tell us a little bit about what loose parts are?

Loose parts are anything that is not designed for play. They are open-ended, movable materials that I believe are the single most important element in any play space. I categorise them into two types:

Natural loose parts: these consist of sticks, twigs, seed pods, pine cones, log rounds, rocks and other things derived from nature. I find natural loose parts encourage quiet, creative, imaginative, sensory and sustained play.

Junk loose parts: these consist of larger, man-made objects such as timber planks, milk crates, tyres, pvc offcuts, cable reels and other items that can't be easily broken. I find that due to their size the resultant play is more adventurous and develops gross motor skills. It also enables children to create appropriate challenges for themselves and experience both success and failure, as well as an overwhelming sense of accomplishment when they navigate an appropriate risk. Junk loose parts may require a space for storage as the perception is that they are messy and junk-like.

You have a strong belief that loose parts are one of the most important elements of a child's play space. Can you tell us more about this?

As I said earlier, they are the most important element. Loose parts make a space dynamic and responsive. Regardless of what you do to your physical space, if you don't have movable parts in the space you won't get

the outcomes – outcomes such as sustained play, greater collaboration between different ages and genders, more meaningful direction in play, more critical and creative thinking, problem solving, and assessing risk and challenge.

In a school context, a nature play space with loose parts allows all children to engage in something meaningful. Traditional playground settings are designed for gross motor play and games with rules, which can be limiting for some children. A space with a balanced approach to play will see a higher level of engagement, greater social interaction and, according to research, a potential reduction in [bullying](#).

Often educators (and parents, for that matter) associate a level of risk with children playing with sticks and stones, and therefore loose parts don't feature within their play spaces. What is your perspective on these types of concerns?

For me a stick is exactly the same as a cricket bat – a serious injury can be caused with any item that isn't used the way it is intended to be used. But we see the benefit in cricket bats, and we need to do the same with sticks and other loose parts. In fact, the only significant difference between the two is that a cricket bat can only be used to play cricket whereas a stick affords endless opportunities for play.

A great way to put risk into perspective is conducting a risk-benefit assessment – for example, assessing whether sticks are an appropriate risk. For educators this is a really important tool. Traditionally a risk assessment measures the likelihood of a negative event; however, a risk-benefit assessment puts the activities into perspective by considering the benefits in comparison to the likelihood of a negative event. More often than not, the benefit outweighs the risks. Without the risk there is no benefit.

I also often ask parents and educators what their play looked like as kids. The conversation from there opens up their minds to the benefits of risk – or, in most cases, perceived risk.

From a practical perspective, what does a "loose parts" area look like and where can loose parts be sourced?

I suggest schools start with a small, unused corner – out-of-bounds areas often work well – and have conversations with the children and school community about how they will be used. For junk play you would need a small storage shed but for natural loose parts it is less important to have a central storage point. With large sticks, simply leaning them up against a fence is a good way of storing them.

In terms of collection, a call-out to your parent community is a good start. Distribute pictures and descriptions to families about the type of things you are looking for, such as log rounds, pine cones, seed pods, smooth rocks and sticks as natural loose parts or, for junk loose part play, items such as tyres, pallets, crates and safe offcuts from building sites.



What issues can be encountered with introducing loose parts and what advice do you have for educators to approach these issues?

A common problem can be ownership and hoarding behaviour whereby some children withhold or secure all their materials, not allowing other students to use them. This can be managed by packing up and resetting at the end of the session or establishing a set time for loose part play such as every Friday. As the expectations get established, it is the hope that these can stay out for longer and longer periods, resulting in deeper play as children add and develop the village over time. This, along with discussion with the students, will help manage the behaviour. However, it is also important to recognise that some conflict can actually result in strong learning outcomes and can encourage emotional regulation.

Parental perception is sometimes a challenge, but educating parents and carers on the reasons why is crucial. If parents understand the benefits of natural play to their children's learning, they are more likely to accept it and even embrace it within their home environment. You can do this through videos, photos, podcasts, parent information sessions and snippets of information within parent correspondence.

What would be the one thing you want to convey to educators?

Children are very capable and competent. They are able to make amazing decisions about their own lives, and sometimes we need to step back and let them do that. ★

[MORE INFO]

- [Loose Parts = Creativity + Discovery + Imagination Fact Sheet](#) [Nature Play SA]
- [Natural things](#) [Adelaide and Mt Lofty Ranges NRM Board]