



Loose Parts Play

Early childhood educators recognize play as the foundation activity for almost all future learning. Loose parts play is an important part of this learning continuum. Found objects such as balls, hoops, wooden blocks, costumes, hockey sticks, logs, sand, leaves and re-used tires provide opportunity for more kinds of play than occurs with standard play equipment. Children can experiment with their physical and creative abilities by manipulating found loose objects.



Design details

Materials

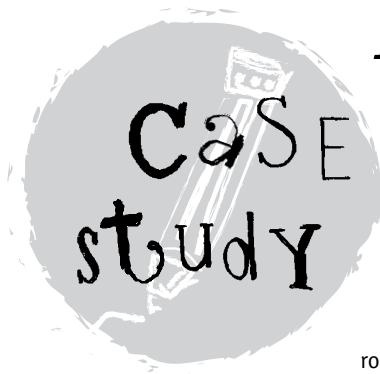
Loose parts play makes use of a variety of materials, both natural and created, and can take on the form of whatever is imagined. As the following examples demonstrate, loose parts can be used individually or in combination.

1

Rock piles

Many children will play with rocks to build walls and towers and make patterns on the ground. For safety and vandalism reasons, rocks are typically not allowed on school property. However, some schools have successfully incorporated the use of rock piles at the elementary school level with a bit of creative design, monitoring and rules for play.





École Plein-Soleil, Saint-Étienne-de-Lauzon, Quebec

The idea of a rock pile for play (place de jeux et cailloux) was suggested to the school by Denise Blais, a designer who helped École Plein-Soleil create their naturalization project. The idea was welcomed since the children already enjoyed playing with some rocks they found in the wooded area around the school. So, a more formal play area was designated. Rocks were collected from the wooded area and placed in two play areas. Each area was carefully designed to allow space for a number of children to play. One area was designed in a circle, using the rocks to edge the play area. The children could then move the rocks within that designated play space. École Plein-Soleil has not had any problems with vandalism or injuries as a result of including the rock piles for play on their grounds.



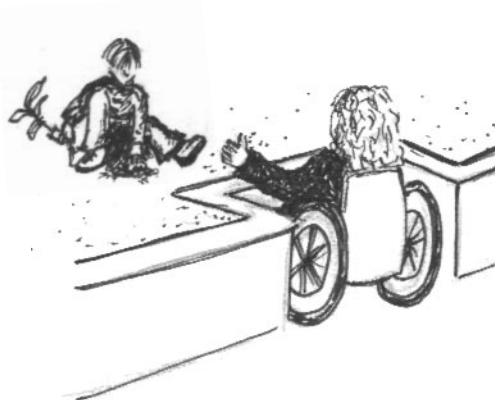
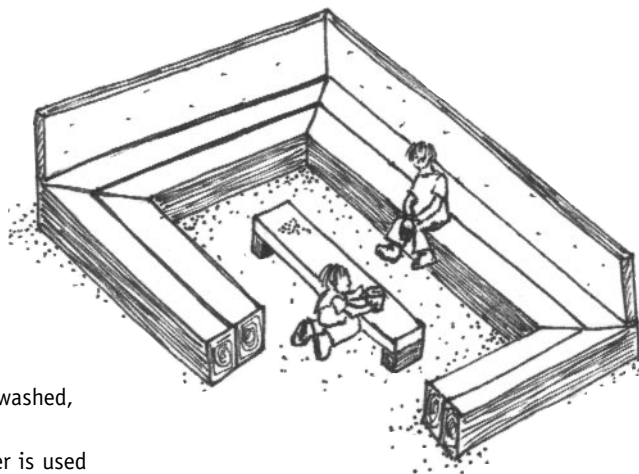
2

Sand

Sand is one of the best play materials available. It can be dug, sifted, sculpted, poured and drawn upon and can be used with water to shape and mould. Sand is an excellent medium for creative play and social interaction. It has been found that children playing in sand develop cooperative play skills from playing in close proximity to one another.

Designing Your Sand Play Area

- Provide shade during the hot months and sun in cool weather to create an ambient microclimate for your sand play area. This can be accomplished by planting deciduous trees or using built features like a pergola or arbour covered in vines.
- Provide shelter from prevailing winds so sand does not blow away.
- Provide a box or container for your sand area. This helps to set boundaries for the play area and prevents sand from spilling out over grass and asphalt, where it can cause slippery surfaces.
- Make your sand area deep enough for children to dig — 20 to 45 centimetres (eight to 18 inches) is recommended.
- Use a mix of fine to coarse (maximum 1.5 mm) sand that is well-washed, packs easily and is free of dirt, clay and other contaminants.
- Include places to sit and shelves to work on. If the sand container is used as a ledge it should be a minimum of 7.5 centimetres (three inches) wide. A curb along the ledge is recommended to prevent sand from falling over the edge.



- Provide adequate drainage for your sand area. This will vary based on site conditions, but can typically be provided by having gravel beneath the sand area.
- Locate your sand play areas away from active play areas.
- Provide enough room for many children to play without getting in each other's way. A two- by two-metre (40 square foot) space is a comfortable play area for groups of up to 10 children. Try designing the area so there are a variety of places and activities for children in small groups (one to four) or for playing alone.
- Provide a variety of sand play opportunities for different age groups and capabilities. Provide a shallow sand table or bench for toddlers to stand at and play. Sand areas for older children can be at ground level. Multilevel or elevated sand areas provide accessibility for children in wheelchairs.

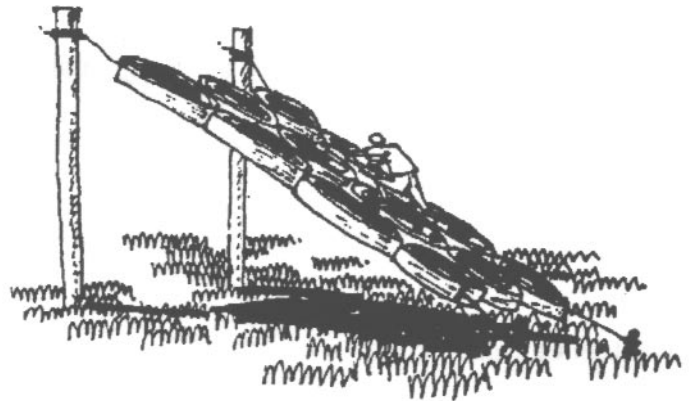
- Keep sand areas far enough away from buildings to prevent tracking sand onto floors. Or, provide a pea gravel strip or a sand grate at entrance ways.
- Build your sand area near a water supply, both for play purposes and to wet the sand down to keep it from blowing away.
- Use nylon netting to cover sand areas when they are not in use. The netting allows sun and rain to clean and purify the sand, while keeping animals and debris out. It also provides protection from vandals possibly leaving garbage or breaking glass bottles in your sand play area. Use wire mesh screens that are bordered by a wood frame and fastened with latches and a bolt, or use landscape fabric that you can roll on and off your sandbox. To provide stability, attach flexible wire lengthwise along the fabric that will bend when rolled but will keep the fabric from resting in the sand under the pressure of rain or falling debris. Ensure the cover can be tightly secured both when on and off the sandbox.

3

Tires

On the ground, tires can be used to jump through, over and around, and to sit on. Strung with sturdy rope, they can be used for climbing. Tires can also be used to provide a container for sand play areas and container gardens. Care should be taken when using tires on school grounds for both safety and health concerns.

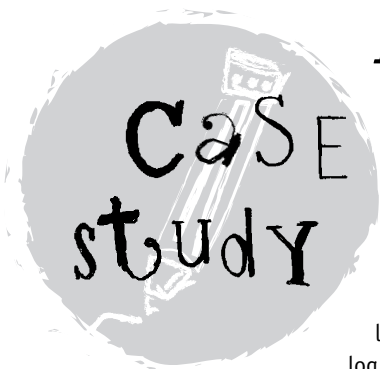
- Ensure that the tires will not trap water and allow standing water, dirt and debris to accumulate.
- Avoid, if possible, steel-belted tires or check them regularly for possible protrusions and sharp edges.
- Ensure that the tire material does not have any chemical residue that could rub off on children's hands or clothing.
- Secure tire climbing structures at both ends with anchoring devices and join each tire with flexible rope or cables that will not cause friction or wear. Ensure that the tires cannot swing together and pinch fingers or hands.



4

Logs

Logs can be used as props or seating, and to explore or arrange in patterns. Use logs that are too large to pick up but can be rolled or moved about by groups of students. This deters vandalism and improper use as well as encourages cooperation and group dynamics. Or, allow the logs to be movable but not removable by chaining large log pieces together.



K.B. Woodward Elementary School, Surrey, British Columbia

Approximately 20 log stumps were used throughout the "Gathering Place" at K.B. Woodward Elementary School. We discovered that they had more value than aesthetics. The students use the logs for seating, but more often move the logs, re-arranging them for play. They like to step from log to log, place river rocks in patterns on or around the logs and chip at the bark to see what's underneath.



K.B. Woodward Elementary School

5

Leaves

Leaves are an excellent loose part for play as well as for arts and crafts. Leaves can be raked into piles to play in, they can be explored for sound, colour and shape, and they can be used for tracing and creating leaf rubbings for outdoor art classes.



Codes and Safety Standards

Loose parts play settings need to be carefully designed and managed to properly integrate them into your school grounds. Formal standards have not been created since using loose parts has not been a common feature on most school grounds. However, care can be taken to locate these play areas in appropriate settings away from active play areas and in designated areas where boundaries are clearly defined and children can be monitored by teachers. Remember to also educate parents, teachers, students and the community on the importance of including loose parts for play on school grounds to alleviate any concerns.



Where to *go* from here?

Sources for this fact sheet

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Example projects

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