

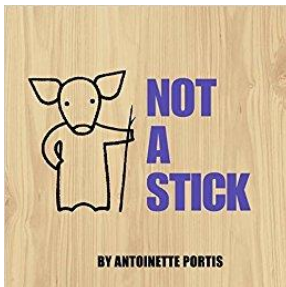
## “Loose Parts” in Children’s Outdoor Play Environments

Carla Gull

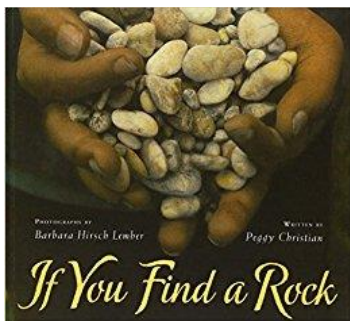
University of Phoenix, USA

Guest Book Editor

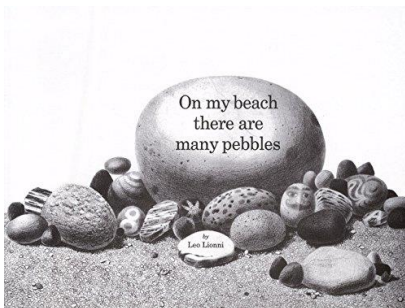
The *Theory of Loose Parts* was coined by Simon Nicholson in 1971. As a landscape architect, he believed children should have more open-ended materials and input in their outdoor play experiences, advocating for what he called “loose parts” as part of the intentional design of spaces. With these loose parts, children could manipulate the environment in any way they desired. He suggested, “In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it” (p. 30). The following books, both children and professional, look at children using loose parts in some way, often in a natural context:



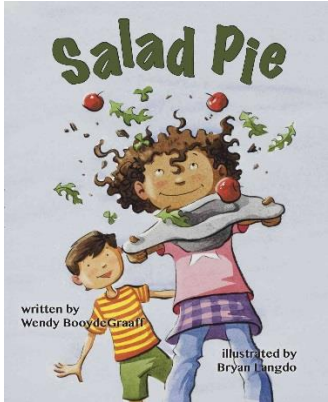
*Not a Stick* by Antoinette Portis cleverly illustrates the many ways a stick can be a part of child’s play. From slaying a dragon to conducting music, sticks have unlimited potential. Simple line drawings allow the imagination to soar.



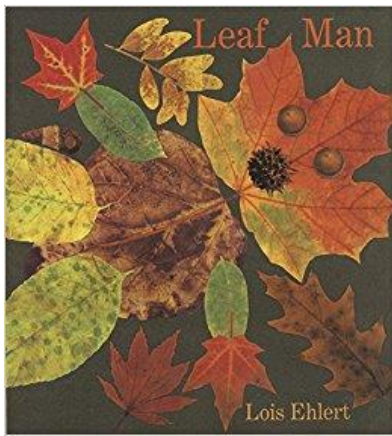
*If You Find a Rock* by Peggy Christian centers on another childhood favorite loose part—rocks! This story has a very conversational tone, helping us find the perfect rock for skipping, resting on, writing with, or for whispering. Photographs bring this story to life.



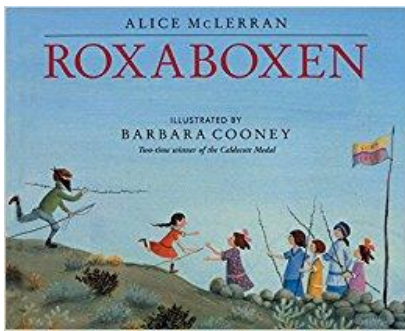
*On My Beach There are Many Pebbles* by Leo Lionni uses hand drawn illustrations to explore the variety of rocks on the beach. The text is sparse in this book, yet children will soon be hunting rocks, looking for patterns, letters, and more.



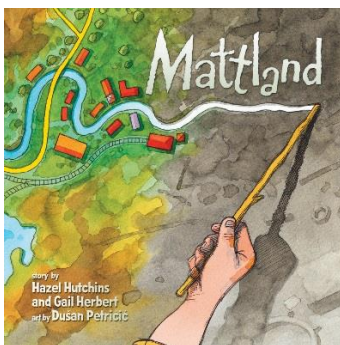
*Salad Pie* by Wendy BooydeGraff follows a young girl enjoying her time alone at the playground making “salad pie” with natural loose parts until a boy wants to play. The girl refuses until the salad pie (clover, crab apples, dandelions, a gum wrapper, etc.) spills and she realizes the boy just wants to help. The girl chants over her concoction, welcoming audience participation. This may go well with a discussion about friendship.



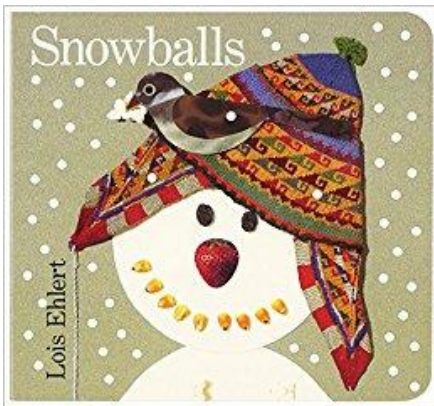
*Leaf Man*, by Lois Ehlert, is a great fall book for imagination and creativity. As the wind blows, Leaf Man travels past ducks, geese, orchards, meadows, and cows. The entire book is made of fall leaves and cut paper. Many leaves are identified in the back. This whimsical book inspires imagination as children will surely look at the potential of fallen leaves in a different way.



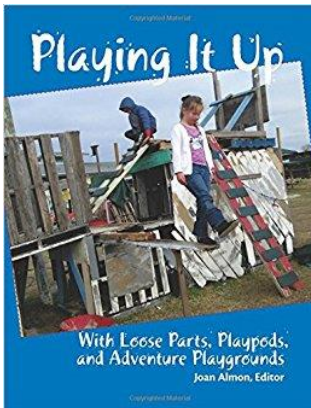
*Roxaboxen* by Alice McLerran depicts the classic nearby empty lot where many children flocked to before children had more supervision in their lives. In the book, siblings and neighborhood children of many ages gather across from their houses and explore. They find a box of black pebbles which become money. They gather stones to build their own city. Old wooden boxes became shelves and tables and chairs. The children continue using found and natural items scavenged outside to create an elaborate community of imagination and play.



Similarly, *Mattland* by Hazel Hutchins and Dusan Petricic, follows the story of Matt who is new to an area. He is lonely and considers breaking the stick in his hand, but instead draws a line in the dirt. The line becomes a river and soon he creates a whole city of found objects found around the construction site. A nearby girl begins bringing supplies, including chicken bones for a dinosaur wasteland. When rainclouds appear the city is in jeopardy until additional neighborhood children save the city, alongside Matt. His smiling reflection in the puddle tells it all as he begins making friends.



In *Snowballs*, also by Lois Ehlert, on a good snow packing day a family makes a snow man with a variety of everyday objects they have been collecting, such as strings, popcorn, a hat, strawberries, raisins, and more. They end up making a whole snow family, including a cat and dog! Gone are the days of just rock eyes, carrot noses, and twig arms with this inspiration for snow building with loose parts.



*Playing It Up! with Loose Parts, Playpods, and Adventure Playgrounds* by Joan Almon highlights the current outdoor play initiative, with various sections written by playworkers across the United States. Joan Almon starts the book assessing where we are with play in the United States. She shares the need for play to work through stress and anxiety, though recognizing that play is often feared due to the inherent risks. Rusty Keeler then writes a section on play, giving hope as he shares examples of a current push for play in the United States. In Chapter 3, the reader is introduced to several groups promoting play, such as Pop-up Adventure Play, the Let's Play Initiative in Illinois, Santa Clarita Valley Adventure Play in California, Redeeming the American Dream through Play in Ohio, and the Adventure Playgrounds and the Make Movement in Washington. These spaces all include risky play, child led play, engaging loose parts, and the playwork principles in common. Another section looks specifically at more portable play options for recess, such as playpods that have a multitude of recycled materials as loose parts. Section four returns to nature and the Nature Play Zone at the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, the Children at Play Initiative in Kentucky, and An Adventure in the Forest in Washington. The book ends with a variety of resources, such as groups promoting play, playwork principles, and additional resources. This is a call to action for more play in our children's lives and outdoor spaces. While this book does not focus exclusively on loose parts, play is at the core with the spaces where loose parts are used outside and the principles to allow children adventurous play are used in natural and child made settings. This book helps understand the context of play and shares numerous examples of loose parts in action. Find it

through major online retailers or find it as a free download at [allianceforchildhood.org](http://allianceforchildhood.org).

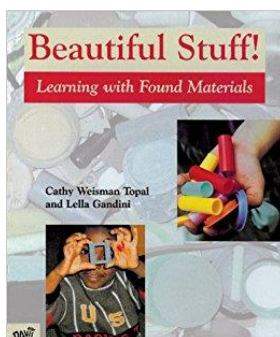
Inspiring Scotland, an advocacy group focused on supporting disadvantaged communities in Scotland, published a resource, *Loose Parts Play*, in 2017. The toolkit is authored by Theresa Casey and Juliet Robertson. This is a stand-alone resource that contains the what, why, and how to make loose parts happen in any setting. It includes a definition of loose parts and benefits in using these in play. The authors share practical approaches to getting started with loose parts, evaluating how we currently use loose parts, finding bits and bobs, and looking at safety of loose parts.



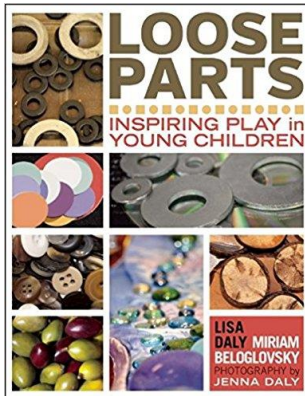
The concise 68 page resource also includes information on how adults interact with children using loose parts, how to make loose parts a portion of the regular play routine, risk-benefit assessments, and practical advice on common concerns. Playwork principles, helpful resources and organizations, and examples to more fully implement loose parts are included. As a host to an online Facebook group on Loose Parts Play, this is the first, go-to resource I share with interested newcomers as it has all the nuts and bolts in one place for loose parts success. Additionally, the toolkit is sprinkled with great quotes, tips, and resources. If you are new to loose parts or want to expand your understanding, this is a must read.

Find this free resource online at:

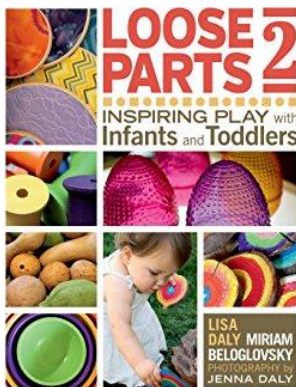
<https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/hub/loose-parts-play/>



*Beautiful Stuff! Learning with Found Materials*, by Cathy Weisman Topal and Lella Gandini, was published in 1999 as an example of one classroom's approach to collecting, organizing, sorting, classifying, and using "beautiful stuff" or loose parts in a Reggio inspired classroom. While the book does not focus on outdoor or natural loose parts as much, the principles and examples can be carried over to a more natural outdoor setting. This book was published long before the term loose parts was trendy, offering solid advice and context of using loose parts in the classroom as part of creating, evaluating, and learning. The book is specific to one classroom's approach from the gathering of loose parts in paper bags from each child's home to the artwork and projects created from the many treasures.



*Loose Parts: Inspiring Play in Young Children* by Miriam Beloglovsky and Jenna Daly is the first in a series of books on loose parts. After a brief introduction to loose parts, the topics of senses, creativity, action, and inquiry loose parts are explored through photos and examples. Both natural and found loose parts, both inside and outside, are highlighted. Specific examples of children are shared in each section, along with numerous photos for inspiration. While some photography seems repetitive, there is a cohesiveness to each spread of photos. The ideas are sound and provide many loose parts ideas and options.



The second book in the series, *Loose Parts 2: Inspiring Play for Infants and Toddlers*, specifically takes on loose parts with younger children. The book is organized by schema, looking at the major topics of object exploration, assembly exploration, instrumental exploration, locomotion, and action. Subcategories help the reader explore each schema with related loose parts in more depth. With a focus on larger items that would be safe with younger children, recycled, found, and natural items are included. Tires, rocks, tree cookies, water, cocoa mulch, cardboard tubes, fabric balls, and blocks are just a few of the outdoor options. Themed photography spreads replicate the approach of the first book with a slightly younger focus. The blend of both indoor and outdoor approaches make this book applicable to many settings.



A third book, *Loose Parts 3: Inspiring Culturally Sustainable Environments*, was released in Spring 2018. The book looks at loose parts through a lens of creating a sense of belonging, helping support a child's identity, and showing cultural sustainability. It focuses on aesthetic, authenticity, equity, dynamic, praxis, and critical reflection.

## References

Nicholson, S. (1971). How not to cheat children - The theory of loose parts. *Landscape Architecture*, 62, 30-34.

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