

Going Deeper

Risk benefit assessments

Every action includes some degree of risk, whether we're driving, eating somewhere new, or starting a new job. Some of these risks are frightening to think about, while we take others completely for granted. We regularly consider risks, weighing the likelihood of dangers against potential benefits.

Children want to take risks. They climb trees and balance in high places. They perform for audiences and introduce themselves hopefully to new friends. Taking risks is how we learn what we are capable of, what we can achieve and how to survive failure. Opportunities for risk in play are vitally important, if children are to be their most brave, confident, competent and resilient selves.



When we're selecting loose parts for play, we are also creating opportunities for children to create and experience new kinds of risk. Below are some terms which we've found useful in determining what sort of risks are possible and helpful to provide through play.

Risk: this is the actual chance of injury (whether physical, emotional or social). Risks may be high or low, depending on how likely that injury seems to be.

Hazards: these are potential sources for harm which offer no benefits to children's play, and which they may not notice and so do not consider.

For example, children may decide to risk climbing on a piece of old wooden equipment. If they are unaware that the wood is rotten, that is a hazard. We work to increase opportunities for risk-taking, by removing hazards. This creates an environment in which children are safe to take risks!

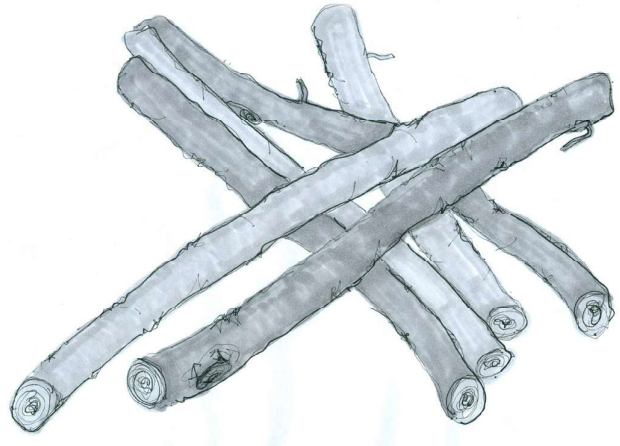


While we encourage opportunities for children to define and take their own risks, we do not want to suggest that adults be negligent or allow unacceptable hazards in their setting. Likewise, when adults in a setting are profoundly uncomfortable they communicate that to the children, even without knowing that they are doing so. Instead, start small and choose materials that everyone feels easy with. When observing how children take risks in your setting, try not to intervene unless serious injury seems likely. You might be surprised to see what children are capable of!

Questions and Concerns

Who gets to play?

Children are often separated by age in educational and care settings. However, playing in mixed age groups allow children to practice being leaders and nurturers, and more closely resembles a large family or village dynamic. A rich and varied setting, with children of all ages and abilities, helps to establish an environment in which all are equal in play, and where everyone can be good at something. Diversity benefits everyone.



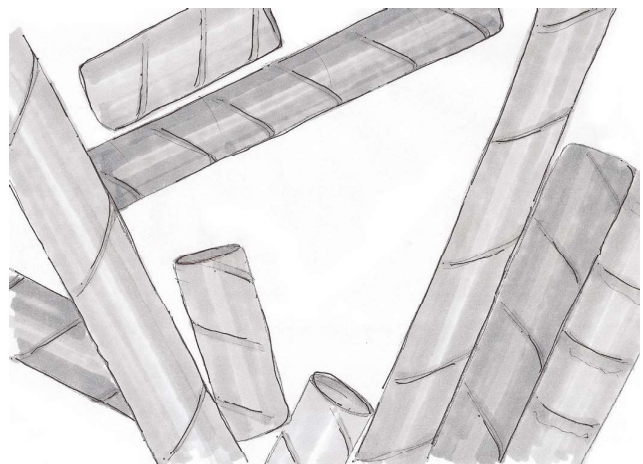
“If adults are not in control, don’t the children become chaotic or very noisy?”

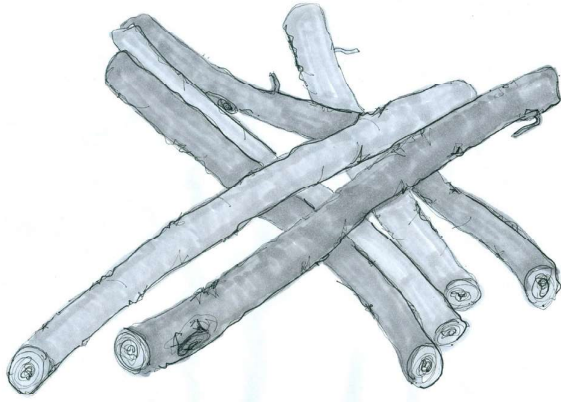
When groups of children are free to play together, yes, there can be a lot of noise. There can be a lot of activity, as games are created and abandoned. However, while it may appear chaotic to some adults, children have a clear structure which they create themselves. Without rules, games do not work. A clear understanding of one another’s roles and responsibilities is essential if children are going to play together. As they manage these complex tasks, children at play are not ‘uncontrolled’ at all, but instead are learning self-control. These are skills which one cannot be taught, and which will last a lifetime.

How long can they play for?

In countries around the world, recess time is being reduced in schools. Sometimes this is an attempt to create more time for classroom instruction. However, without time to play children will quickly grow irritable and disobedient in the classroom, and with less time to play children will be more impatient with their peers and experience more conflict!

When time is extremely limited, children play particularly hard and are less inclined to compromise.





How many can play?

We are often asked how many children should be able to play at the same time. There is no right number. We have seen how loose parts can help improve the experience of one child playing alone, and we helped organize a pop-up adventure playground at an event attended by 15,000 people! At events of all sizes, children are able to manage themselves accordingly.

“Doesn’t it look very messy?”

It can! Playing with loose parts suits a child’s aesthetic, rather than an adult’s. As well as the loose parts themselves, dirt and water and paint have a tendency to go everywhere. It’s important to emphasize the freedom and joy children experience in these places, and say “yes, it might be messy, but aren’t they having a wonderful time?”

If other adults are concerned about the appearance of your loose parts playground, try to find a corner where it is tucked out of sight or think of ways to screen it from public view. Sometimes this can be beneficial for the children too, who often prefer to play with a little bit of privacy.

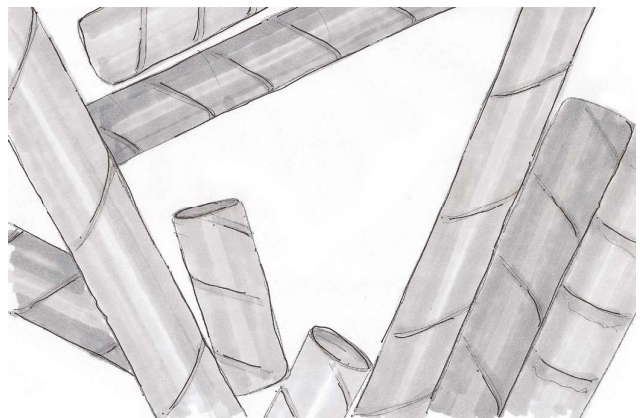
“Won’t finding and keeping loose parts take a long time? We have other things to do!”

While loose parts playgrounds don’t take much money, they do require an on-going investment of time and effort. You can choose materials that take your specific circumstances into account. For example, if you don’t have much time to clean up then choose large recycled materials which are quick to tidy up (such as tires and sheets) and small natural materials (such as pebbles and acorns) which can be shaken from containers and left outside.

“What if they hurt themselves, or each other?”

When you start bringing loose parts to an environment, children who have been play deprived may struggle with skills of negotiation or self-regulation. You can select loose parts to let them get the practice they need. For example, if you are uncomfortable with the idea of play fighting then don’t provide sticks!

Think about the quantity of materials you bring, as bringing only one of something can encourage unhelpful competition.



“Do the children get dirty?”

They can! Hands may become black from rolling tires, and clothes may get covered in dirt from digging. We understand that it's important and often difficult to keep children's clothes clean. In some cases, encouraging parents to send their children in old clothes is very helpful. In other settings, old shirts can be supplied by the setting and buttoned over what children are wearing when they arrive.



“If we use these loose parts, will other adults think we have not invested in our children? That we are giving them only rubbish?”

Seeing children playing in dirt, or building little houses out of scrap materials, may feel uncomfortable. They may be troubled by memories less happy than the ones children are creating currently. We want to acknowledge that playing with ordinary materials may be difficult for some adults to recognize as important and valuable. Even if the loose parts are junk, the experiences children are having here are gold!

If people complain at these free, scrap materials being provided for play, it's important to be clear that you're developing staff and setting in line with current best practice, and invested in providing the very best opportunities for children.

Curriculum integration

In this document, we have looked at a number of philosophies and techniques which are central to playwork approaches. However, we appreciate that you will have a different title and other responsibilities such as the children's education or physical health. Play is our first priority, but it may not be your only one - however, supporting play can help children to have much better experiences at school, in health clinics and more!

If you are working within a school setting, there are many ways to take materials and ideas from these recess suggestions and incorporate them into the classroom. Being clear about the benefits of loose parts play for children's educational achievement may help you win support from parents, administrators and grant funders.



Studies comparing children's understanding of specific phenomena show that being able to 'play with ideas' helps them make it their own. For example, a section on the flow of water may allow time for children to experiment with weights, measures, floats and funnels. In an art class, children may be given a subject to depict, but be allowed to use any materials or techniques they like. When children are free to experiment, they are more able to become innovative problem-solvers, and to develop flexible thinking. Consider the difference, in your own experience, between being shown how to do something and the thrill of figuring it out for yourself.

When including loose parts in the classroom, you are able to decide how 'free' to let the children be with them. There is a spectrum of approaches, with adult-directed at one end and child-directed (or self-directed) at the other. You can decide where on that spectrum each activity will fall - though, we would always encourage your finding ways to move farther towards self-direction whenever possible!