

The Joy of Stuff! Exploring the value of open ended 'loose parts' in play Presented by Niki Buchan

Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.

When you teach a child something, you take away forever his chance of discovering it for himself. Jean Piaget

Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning, observe carefully what children do, and then, if you have understood well, perhaps teaching will be different from before. Loris Malaguzzi

'Adopting a play-based approach does not mean that children are left on their own with adults acting only as "supervisors". 'Instead, it means that informed educators observe children in play, interact sensitively with them and use their professional knowledge to promote and extend every child's wellbeing and learning.
(Kennedy and Barblett *Research in Practice series: Learning and teaching through play* (ECA, 2010))

TOYS

Ironically, we are surrounded by an overwhelming abundance of toys and yet fewer and fewer encourage fantasy and imagination. Who is to blame? It seems that childhood has become commercialized as children are viewed as a niche market. Toy manufacturers spend millions each year on advertising, targeting children directly and encouraging them to pester their parents to buy what they see promoted.

Today, we endure toys that have a short lifespan and cannot be fixed; buying a new toy is cheaper than fixing the old one, so we simply toss it away. If we are to help children learn the meaning of sustainability, this must change. Industry analysts estimate that at least 75 percent of toys introduced this year will have a mini-chip. The complexity of the technology changes the child's intellectual engagement with these toys. Natural toys are easy to understand; electronic toys, in contrast, work as if by magic and cannot be understood.

May 2013 by Environmental Health News (EHN), 'chemicals of high concern' were found in thousands of children's products from plastic building blocks to dolls and baby accessories.

Children's items contain low levels of dozens of harmful industrial chemicals including cobalt, ethylene glycol, bisphenol-A (BPA), phthalates, parabens, and mercury. Cobalt is used in many blue dyes and other pigments and turned up in 1,228 products in 40 categories. Ethylene glycol found in baby feeding bibs, dolls, soft toys, educational and developmental toys, fancy dress costumes, and games

Stages of play with objects: Approx 5-10 months – What is this object like? Approx 10-20 months – What can I do with it? Approx 20 months onwards – What can this object become?

Heuristic Play – Treasure baskets. Non-mobile children, sensory exploration – what is this 'stuff'?

Heuristic Play. Mobile children, lots of everyday and natural resources - what can I do with this 'stuff'?

Schematic Play – repeated patterns of behaviour

Children have their own agendas and time scales. As they find out more about the world and their place in it; they work hard not to let adults hurry them. We need to hear their voices. Cathy Nutbrown

Evidence suggests that the 'involved' child is gaining a deep, motivated, intense and **long term learning** experience. (Chikszentmihayli, 1979; Laevers, 1994)

Involvement does not occur when activities are too easy or too demanding. It is situated at the edge of the child's capabilities – "Zone of Proximal Development" (Vygotsky, 1962)

“Children learn most readily and easily in a laboratory-type environment where they can experiment, enjoy and find out things for themselves.”

Theory of Loose Parts

Loose parts - materials which can be

- moved around,
- designed and redesigned,
- tinkered with;

These create infinitely more opportunities for creative engagement than static materials and environments. Basically, the more materials there are, the more people can interact. Simon Nicholson 1972

“In exploring children extract attributes of and uses for objects and individuals. Then use these attributes as bases for play bouts.” (Malaguzzi, L. 1998)

Loose parts provide a high level of creativity and choice, as there are endless possibilities for how they can be used.

“Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand” Albert Einstein

Loose parts are springboards for play, and are an essential element of a rich, child-centred play environment.

Eric Erickson “natural genius of childhood and their spirit of place.” In this free exploration and creation adults can see: children’s concrete ways of thinking and doing, the connections to formal learning.

Children need ‘Stuff’ to do ‘stuff’ with!

Play Value – Play affordance

What is the financial cost? What is the environmental cost?

VERSUS

How many different things can children do with it? How many different age groups can engage with it?

How much learning does it offer? How long will it be played with?

Why Nature?

Theory of Loose Parts “...the constantly evolving natural world creates and infinite number of variables for children to interact with.” (Nicholson, 1971)

With a higher level of complexity and variety, nature offers the materials that support longer and more complex play (White and Stoecklin, 2014).

Being able to use objects symbolically, to stand for something other than what they really are, is related to children’s language progress” (Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2003) p. 209).

A good toy is really only 10% toy and 90% child
(Joan Almon, cited in Linn, 2008)

Complexity in learning is offered by the simplest of resources (Niki Buchan)



Niki Buchan is an Educational Consultant with Natural Learning Early Childhood Consultancy. She has a biomedical background, is originally from South Africa, lived in Scotland for many years and has been calling Australia home since 2011. She is passionate about the environment, animals and the people of Australia. Niki has a great love for the outdoors and has been working with both adults and young children in very consultative, naturalistic and sensorial environments both indoors and outdoors for 35 years.

She works internationally as a conference keynote speaker, nature pedagogue, nature kindergarten facilitator, naturalistic playground advisor, international study visit facilitator, mentor, author as well as delivering a large range of professional learning opportunities on all aspects of early child care.

Niki founded her own Family Day Care, Long Day Care and Pre-schools in South Africa, moved to Scotland where she was Head of Morrison's Academy Nursery, recognised as a Centre of Excellence. She worked with Claire Warden, delivering Early Years training, leading an action research project, co-authoring books and establishing the first Nature Kindergartens. Under Niki's Headship these attained the highest possible status from the Scottish Educational Inspecting body. She was delighted to be offered a position in Australia with its similarities to South Africa where she most recently worked as a senior consultant and a company director.

Niki has developed a reputation in Australia as a strong advocate for children's right to a high quality childhood, including having regular access to nature and having their voices heard. She is considered a leading voice in promoting Nature-based practice, and is the author of the Australian publication "[Children in Wild Nature](#)" adapted for the UK market as "[A Practical Guide to Nature Based Practice](#)". She is an adventurer, keen photographer, is seldom seen without a camera in her hand and is usually surrounded by children! For more information or to contact Niki as a speaker please e-mail: niki@naturallearning.net.au

