



Learning objectives

- Define the benefits of loose parts play
- List the barriers to loose parts play implementation
- Identify the benefits of a loose parts play policy from a legal and risk benefit assessment perspective
- Identify factors to consider in the development of a loose parts policy and elements to consider in a policy framework

Learning outcome

- Understand the benefits of a loose parts play policy and have the knowledge to initiate the development and implementation of a local policy

Introduction

Children need opportunities to be creative and inventive in their environment, manipulating and constructing their ideas through play. This result can be achieved through the introduction of unstructured play with loose parts. **Loose parts** are materials with no specific set of directions and that can be used alone or combined with other materials. They could, for example, include crates, tires, planks of wood, or even water, sand or mud. Combining a variety of these objects during play promotes development and the acquisition of various skills.*

Important to Know: The benefits of loose parts play

The evidence concerning loose parts play indicates that this type of play promotes:

- Problem solving and theoretical reasoning
- Ability to think creatively
- Excitement and adventure through play
- Social skills and team work, including communication and negotiation skills
- Physical activity
- Improved behaviour in the classroom
- Achievement of curriculum objectives

Given these learning and child development benefits, school boards generally want to implement loose parts play; however, factors that inhibit or limit implementation include:

- 1) A lack of direction from Ministries of Education and school boards on loose parts play mandates or policies;
- 2) A lack of standards that address natural elements or loose parts;
- 3) Risk management approaches that focus on complying with safety benchmarks that may limit access to loose parts and nature play.

* The discussion presented here focuses on loose parts play within an educational setting. Similar concerns exist in the municipal context and may be complicated by additional challenges concerning access to and return of loose parts during the day, and responsibilities associated with the supervision of loose parts play.

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These factors result in uncertainty during the planning and implementation for loose parts play. Without appropriate guidance, loose parts play elements may not be incorporated into children's unstructured play opportunities.

What is the Role of a Loose Parts Play Policy?

In Canada, there are few existing provincial or territorial Ministry of Education, or school board policies or guidelines on loose parts play, which can limit the presence of such experiences at school. School board policy supporting such play would be beneficial to schools that wish to implement loose parts play, but are unsure of the requirements to do so. Its development can also act as a reference tool when making and implementing school-based decisions for loose parts play.^{1,2} A loose parts play policy or guideline would identify measures to remove hazards, and balance safety with developmentally appropriate play materials and opportunities for risk taking. The goal would be to provide an approach that manages risks to a reasonable limit.

This type of policy could help streamline processes and be used as to support the inclusion of loose parts and promote compliance with safety practices. It could also be used as a basis for a legal defense as it could demonstrate that a reasonable approach has been applied to consider and mitigate risks by the owner/occupier. It could also support school boards and schools in implementing loose parts play.

Planning and Development

Collaborative Decision-Making

Development of a loose parts play policy should be done in collaboration with all parties who may be affected by the policy. When these parties work collaboratively, they have shared responsibility, accountability, and authority over its development and implementation. This process can help increase acceptance, obtain alignment among decision-makers, and support their shared understanding of the policy's purpose. Parents and children should also be included in this process, as it can work to address their concerns and enable tailored decision-making to meet local needs. More information on this process can be found in the tool entitled: [*Collaborative Decision-Making: Supporting a Balanced Approach to Unstructured Play.*](#)

Guiding Principles for Policy Development

A first step to developing a loose parts play policy involves consulting the core values that were established when the group's play policy was developed. (More information on a play policy can be found in the tool entitled: *Developing a Play Policy.*) These values act as a reference point to support policy development that meets the needs of all stakeholders. All actions proposed in the loose parts policy should be described and implemented to reflect these underlying principles. This consistency allows the community to observe a direct connection between what is valued as important and what actually happens in practice. See the *Collaborative Decision-Making Tool* for examples of key principles to guide policy development.

Practical Considerations

- **Evidence-base.** The policy should be evidence-informed and balance challenging play with safety, without removing opportunities for children to explore their own limits.
- **Acceptance.** Gain top down and bottom up acceptance to strengthen the commitment to implementation, and for maintaining, renewing, and repairing the inventory

- **Avoid prescriptive play.** Avoid a comprehensive, overly prescriptive policy that could result in structuring play that is meant to be unstructured, and avoid placing excessive limits on children’s risk-taking during play.
- **Culturally appropriate materials.** Consideration should be given to the context in which loose parts play will be implemented, and steps taken to include only culturally appropriate materials.
- **Costs.** The cost of materials maintenance and replacement should be considered.
- **Education and training.** Opportunities should be provided to principals and educators on how to effectively implement and develop loose parts play experiences. Education should also be provided to caregivers and parents on the benefits of loose parts play, as a means of responding to risk-averse perspectives.
- **Collaboration with insurance and risk management.** An inclusive and collaborative process should be used to determine appropriate site-based procedures.
- **Inclusion of children perspectives.** The development process should be collaborative including the integration and implementation of children’s and youths’ perspectives.

An example of a loose parts play policy is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. An example loose parts play policy.

Policy item	Details
Guiding Principles	<p>The guiding principles of the loose parts play policy outline the core values that will support the development and implementation process.</p> <p><i>Example</i> This loose parts play policy will be based on values of child-centeredness, inclusivity, and enhancement. These principles will be realized through engaging child-development experts and children themselves, by recognizing the diverse needs of all children, the training needs for staff and stakeholders, and by considering the effects and value loose parts add to play spaces.</p>
Vision Statement	<p>A vision statement outlines the overall purpose of having a loose parts play policy.</p> <p><i>Example</i> This loose parts play policy defines our approach to loose parts play decisions and provides a framework for development of opportunities for this kind of play. It recognizes the importance and value that loose parts play adds to children’s unstructured play experiences, and responds to the need to implement this kind of play with a risk-management lens.</p>
Policy Objective	<p>Describes the policy’s vision and objectives by providing specific goals.</p> <p><i>Example</i> This policy will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness about the developmental benefits of loose parts play and identify our commitment to providing this type of play experience • Guide the implementation of measures to remove hazards and balance safety

	<p>with developmentally appropriate play materials and opportunities for risk taking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guide a risk benefit assessment approach to this type of play and demonstrate that a reasonable approach has been applied to consider and mitigate hazards while considering the benefits of the activity • Streamline processes, provide a basis to require materials, and support compliance with safe practices that reduce hazards while allowing the child to set their own limits.
<p>Definition of Loose Parts Play</p>	<p>A clear definition of loose parts play is necessary. Information should be drawn from child development research and exemplar loose parts play policies to provide a concise, evidence-informed definition.</p> <p><i>Example</i> Loose parts play occurs during children participate in unstructured (freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, and personally directed) play with materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways. Loose parts are materials with no specific set of directions that can be used alone or combined with other materials. This type of play can occur indoors or outdoors.</p>
<p>Play workers, Educators and other key players roles and responsibilities</p>	<p>Clear expectations of those who facilitate children’s play opportunities can support high quality play provision by outlining the responsibilities of the key participants and providing links between policy goals and delivery. This section should describe the responsibilities and expectations of those who facilitate and manage risks of loose parts play.</p> <p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Determine supervision ratios:</i> how many facilitators will be needed based on the size of the play area and number of children. This should be included in educator supervision agreements. • <i>Define the role of the play facilitator:</i> include the need to avoid directing, structuring, or policing play, while facilitating play in an environment where children are empowered to direct their own actions. Outline the role, responsibility, and expectation of a facilitator. This expectation should include that direction to only interrupt play when it is necessary for the safety and welfare of a child. <p>Provide training for educators regarding the organization of play spaces and delivery of play. Identify those responsible for, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspection schedules • Item replacement • Informing the students of their expectations
<p>Children’s roles and responsibilities</p>	<p>Children should have roles and responsibilities concerning the loose parts, as a means of supporting child-centeredness while reducing the likelihood of prescriptive play. Children should be encouraged to lead their own play, while providing them with the opportunity to manage risk.</p> <p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine what responsibilities and expectations will be explained to children about using loose parts.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine how, and how often, children will be reminded to identify risks and hazards.
Evaluation	<p>The policy should be monitored and evaluated at regular intervals and the findings used to inform improvements in both the policy and play opportunities. Organizations should review existing evaluation procedures and/or specify new procedures as necessary.</p> <p>Considerations: Recognise that the implications of a loose parts policy should be tested and evaluated, and allow for adjustment (i.e. materials and their uses). Evaluation approaches should be developed and applied before implementation (baseline measurements), during, and after they policy’s implementation. Subjects to consider could include accident report logs, child reviews of play-time, taking pictures or videos, and inventory counts of first-aid supply.</p>
<p>Risk Benefit Assessment Elements The following items should be outlined within a loose parts play policy. Documentation that provides thoughtful justification for why materials are included or excluded, processes for takeout and storage, how hazards will be assessed and addressed, how and when materials will be replaced, and how to implement loose parts play during various environmental conditions can help to demonstrate application of a risk benefit assessment approach.</p>	
Determine appropriate materials	<p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sourcing materials: set guidelines for how parts will be collected or obtained, including specifications for acceptable donated or recycled items. Cultural and community factors should be considered. • Consider appropriate types of materials, sizes and weights, as well as consideration of choking hazards, finger entrapments, durability, chemical properties and toxicity, splintering of wood, sharp metal or nails, and unsafe electrical or flammable parts. • How often new parts will be introduced to keep play fun and creative. • Age appropriate materials to support progressive learning (graduated challenge) practices, e.g., age and grade appropriate introduction of materials such as hammers and nails. • Consider accessibility and usability of parts within the space, with consideration given to different sensory and tactile elements.
Take-out and storing processes	<p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The number of materials to be taken out should be based on the size of the play area, and age and number of children. • Consider the zoning of the play space for loose parts play to occur. • Determine how items will be taken out and put back after play, including their proper handling and organization, and the responsibilities of children/youth, play workers, educators, and principals in this process. • Consider how much time should be allocated to the put-back and take-out process. • Determine with the facilities team where loose parts should be stored. • Consider environmental conditions that could expose materials to mold or bacteria when they are stored.

Checking for Hazards	<p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How should items be inspected for hazards (i.e. dangers that a child could not identify or a broken item)? • How often should items be inspected (e.g., at every take-out and/or put back)? • Are there processes to support maintenance of the equipment? • Do procedures exist for checking the outside play environment for hazards (glass, nails, needles, and other dangerous items)? • Is there a process for identifying hazards and removing or mitigating them?
Replacement of items	<p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define the conditions that will result in disposal of an item. • Determine processes for safe disposal.
Environmental considerations	<p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which materials should be used during various weather conditions? • Consider designating an indoor, alternate space when outside play is not appropriate. • Consider how the take-out and storing processes could alter with seasonal or weather considerations.

Resources:

For evidence-informed selection of equipment consider:

Ragen J, Bundy A, Engelen L, Perry G, Wyver S, Naughton G, et al. An Innovative Program for Promoting Active, Creative and Social Play at School: The Sydney Playground Project, 2015. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/2123/13127> (Accessed November 20th, 2018).

For play worker values, consider adopting Play Work Principles from the UK and Wales:

Play Wales. Play work Principles, n.d. Available at: <http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/Playwork%20Principles/playwork%20principles.pdf> (Accessed November 20th, 2018).

For the benefits of loose parts in children’s play spaces:

Flannigan C, Dietze B. Children, outdoor play, and loose parts. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 2018;42(4):53-60.

References:

1. Bristol City Council. Making Play Matter: A Play Policy for the Children and Young People of Bristol, 2003. Available at: <https://bristol.goplacestoplay.org.uk/uploads/File/Grown%20ups/Making%20Play%20Matter.pdf> (Accessed February 27, 2018.)
2. Welsh Assembly Government. Play in Wales: The Assembly Government’s Play Policy Implementation Plan, 2006. Available at: http://gov.wales/dcells/publications/policy_strategy_and_planning/early-wales/playpolicy/implementationplane.pdf?lang=en (Accessed February 20, 2018.)