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Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

Coordinated by Kirsten Haugen on behalf of NACC

Set Your Imagination Loose with Large Loose Parts!

Before reading on, gather up some boards, boxes, sofa cushions, sticks or blankets and build yourself a cozy reading den…

"*The theory of loose parts says, quite simply, the following: '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.'*"

– Simon Nicholson, 1971

Finding some irony in Nicholson's use of the phrase, 'quite simply,' I was delighted to come across this simply evocative description of loose parts from Libby Pearce and Emma Foy, Directors of The Treehouse Nature Nurseries in Yorkshire, England (www.thetreehouseyorkshire.co.uk):

You know when you spend all that money on kids' toys at Christmas time and they end up sitting playing with the wrapping paper or the cardboard box they came in? Loose parts.

Remember those childhood memories building dens in the woods with sticks or forts at home with the bed sheets? Loose parts.

Did you ever make potions or perfumes with an old container and some petals or leaves? Did you stir them with a stick? Loose parts.

Have you ever explored the treasures of a jewelry box, made a daisy chain, skimmed a pebble in the sea? Loose parts.

If you give a child a plastic castle, it's difficult to pretend that plastic castle is anything else except a plastic castle. If you give a child a pile of bricks, they can create a castle, a house, a tower, a boat, a wall or anything they decide to make. They can practice hand eye coordination, balance and use their creativity and imagination endlessly. The learning possibilities and memory making opportunities are endless with loose parts. Do you remember any loose parts play from your childhood? What's your child's favourite loose part to explore?

As you ponder Libby and Emma's questions, read on! Loose parts guru Carla Gull illuminates the magic and learning that opens up when children shape their own worlds with large loose parts. Closely observing those creations, educator Kat Griffith, generously shares the insights offered about materials, risk, and play, in unique 'conversations' with children that transcended words, time and space. And let's not forget what can happen when adults also embrace loose parts construction. Long-time NACC Leader Bishnu Bhatta of Nepal rarely does anything on a small scale. As co-founder of International Mud Day, he's brought elephants to his Mud Day celebrations. So it was not surprising to learn of his connections to loose parts play on a grand scale, where thousands of plastic bottles (often left by

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worldforumfoundation.org/nature

trekkers and tourists) have been upcycled to construct an informative Plastics Pavilion at Lantang National Park, while the bottle caps are used in a variety of educational projects. Learn more in the 15-minute documentary "A Plastic Story - PSD Nepal" (psdnepal.org/plastics).

Have you built your own fort yet? If not, take a tip from Jim Greenman to "casually plop down and play with the materials yourself, but not with the aim of getting the child to do what you do." (Greenman, *Exchange* magazine, July/August 2007). Then, check out two of our Exchange Reflections guides on Loose Parts Outdoors, and Transforming Environments, Transforming Behavior, available from exchangepress.com.

With Gratitude,
Kirsten Haugen

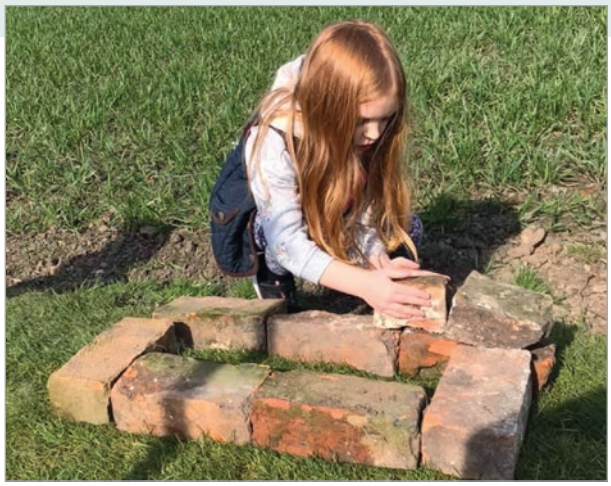

Photo courtesy of The Treehouse Nature Nurseries

Sticks, Crates, and Sheets, Oh My! Loose Parts Fort Building

by Carla Gull

Do you remember that special hideaway you made as a child? Large branches and bark leaning on a fallen log? A snow fort in winter? A blanket den in the house? Children innately build with the materials around them. I love finding a stick lean-to in the woods while on a walk, as it tells me a few things:

1. Children built with natural materials found nearby.

2. The landowners allowed (or at least tolerated) children playing outside.

3. The adults with the children respected space and time to play.

As an educator, I witness fort building firsthand when I gather children for nature play. As host of the Facebook group, Loose Parts Play and podcast, Loose Parts Nature Play I see examples of forts and dens from around the world—box forts and cities, sticks leaned against the tree, and many, many blanket forts. Universally, fort building allows children to show their voice and choice in play, and loose parts are an essential part of building forts.

I love the architecture, building, and material skills children develop as they create their space within the larger world. When creating a den, children exercise many skills simultaneously: imagining possibilities, figuring out a plan and how to use materials, problem solving as they work through challenges, cooperating and collaborating with others, and exercising physical movement and core body strength. Loose parts outdoors allow children to create their own special places, develop executive functioning skills, and build grit and resiliency. They work in groups carrying larger branches they could not handle on their own. As children build a fort, they often then transform it into a cozy hideaway, personalizing it with stuffed animals, special toys, and cushions. Other children may add to it. The structure may fall, dealing with disappointment. The fort might be redesigned, destroyed, or reconfigured.

My research colleagues and I came up with this loose parts definition—notice how fort building checks all the boxes!

Loose parts are open-ended, interactive, natural and manufactured materials that can be manipulated with limitless possibilities. Interaction with loose parts includes experimentation, exploration, and playful interactions with variables through creativity

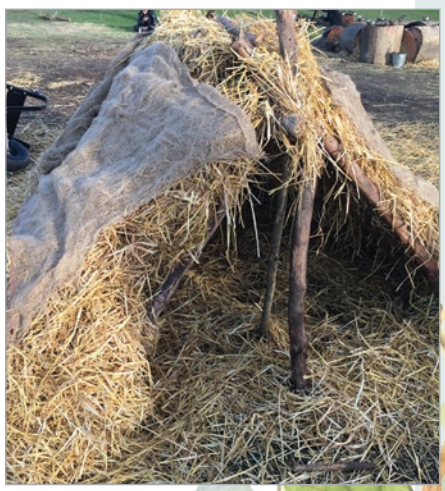

Photo courtesy of Carla Gull

and imagination. Participants have the freedom to explore variables, combine materials, and react to complex themes and ideas that emerge. Facilitators encourage participants, make loose parts available, stimulate discovery, provide opportunities, allow for open-ended play, and prompt meaningful connections and experiences. Through loose parts exploration participants develop imagination, creativity, and collaborative skills. Process is more important than the end product fostering overall growth and development. (Gull et al., 2019, p. 51)

Table 1 is a starting list of potential loose parts to put together in an outdoor area, crate or bag for a kit, to support fort building. What else might your students like that is readily available? Space and time are needed abundantly while making forts.

Table 1: Potential Large Loose Parts

Structure	Covering	Connectors
Wooden pallets, planks or boards	Old sheets	Twine
Sturdy plastic crates	Sheer curtains	Rope
Bamboo poles	Tarps	Clothespins
Large sticks or tree branches	Donated fabrics	Clamps
Existing structures (i.e. picnic table)	Shower curtains	Bungee cords
Furniture (chair, couch, table)	Pine branches	Duct tape
Partially built fort	Bark	Stick-lets
Boxes	Cushions	Pipe cleaners
Snow	Pillows	Rubber bands
Large building sets	Ice	Garden stakes

Need more inspiration? Find a list of children's books related to outdoor fort making at my fort building blog post on Inside Outside Michiana, my local nature blog at insideoutsidemichiana.blogspot.com.

References

Gull, C., Bogunovich, J., Goldstein, S.L., & Rosengarten, T. (2019). Definitions of Loose Parts in Early Childhood Outdoor Classrooms: A Scoping Review. *International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education,* 6(3), 37-52. naturalstart.org

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Reading What They Leave Behind

by Kat Griffith, Educator, Ripon, Wisconsin

Bill Clinton used to say, "When you see a turtle on a fencepost you know somebody's been by." One of my rituals is an evening walk past the several-months-old "nature playground" at our nearby 4PK-2 elementary school. I like to see if "somebody's been by." What have the kids have made—or unmade—since the last time? What can I divine of their activities by looking at what they have built? How are they and their play evolving? What have they learned?

When they started with the new materials—hay bales, boards, stumps, and brush—every time I went by, I saw ramps and bridges barely overlapping the edges of the big round bales. Yikes! I kept trying to increase the overlap, adding lips to some of them. Eventually, most ramps were laid sturdily against the bales. Phew! They learned!

Then there were the forts. I kept making tripods for them to rest branches on, but every time I came back there was just another pile of brush moved ten feet over and dismantled tripods lying uselessly on the ground. I assumed collapsing forts. Over time, their forts would survive until evening. Then came interior decorating. Gradually, they got fancier. A ring of stumps to sit on. A stump in the center with a perfect ring of stones on it. A fan-shaped array of sticks. A pyramid of short beams. A row of chunks of bark. Here is a symbolic language with natural items! Here are stories being told! This isn't just a bunch of sticks and rocks—this is a world they are creating!

Now there is a Corner Construction Zone. They have started combining boards and mats from the straw

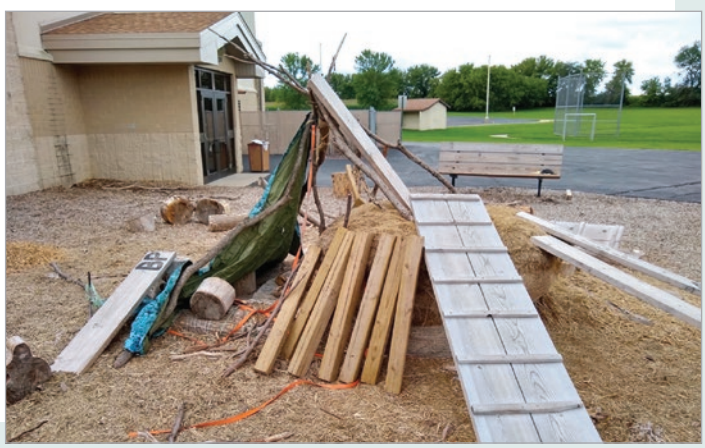

Photo courtesy of Kat Griffith

bale circuit, branches and tarps from the forts, tree stumps from the see-saws, pebbles from the edge of the building, and pieces of string pulled off the tarps. Anything goes—and everything is needed to create the complex, messy world evolving day by day in this protected corner of the building. Is that a store? A bedroom? A kitchen? I don't know, but here is what I see: they have abandoned their mindless (if happy) conga line going around the adult-created circuit of bales and boards to being builders of their own world. They have confidently dismantled the grown-ups' plan in favor of what springs from their imaginations. They are the authors and masters of this new world.

What's next? This archaeologist is waiting!

Upcycling in Nepal: PET Plastic Pavilions

by Bishnu Bhatta, PSD Nepal

PSD Nepal with help of local masons and engineers are constructing five PET plastic pavilions, each made of around 2,500 PET plastic bottles, all collected in Langtang National Park. Why? This work is inspiring us to grow PET plastic collection and recycling - as well as awareness and education—in the national parks of Nepal, with a new 'upcycling' edge to our vision. Recycling has predominantly focused on collecting, sorting and recycling thousands of PET bottles from the park, whereas upcycling (adding value to waste) offers a new opportunity to explore. Each plastic pavilion has a shelf life of 7 years and aims to:

- Facilitate educational visits from local school staff and students.
- Engage over 18,000 tourists and trekkers who visit Lantang National Park each year.
- Encourage porters, mule herders and plastic collectors in Langtang—with a goal of 40,000 PET bottles being collected per month.
- Collaborate with local schools, youth groups and women's co-operatives.

Our short PSD Nepal documentary 'A Plastic Story' (August 2020) showcases various opportunities around recycling and upcycling in the Himalayas, and helps us all reflect on how to turn the tide on waste, by refusing/reducing/reusing/recycling plastic and finding alternative solutions. Please enjoy this 15-minute documentary and our infostory on recycling plastic at altitude (2:30) at: psdnepal.org/plastics.

Upcycling for Learning

Upcycling simply means reusing waste materials for products of higher quality or value. Using PET plastics is a powerful, creative, intuitive, and resourceful tool for education. In trauma-inflicted areas, such as Rasuwa in Nepal—still recovering from the devastation of the 2015 mega-earthquake and the 400 lives lost—PSD Nepal hosts workshops on how to use pet bottle caps. PET plastic has become a powerful agent to teach concepts of colors, size and shapes at early childhood education centres, through play, fun, and storytelling, and to teach creative stories to schoolchildren in Syabru Besi (nearby schools), talking of hydropower and clean rivers. At the ECD conference in Kathmandu in June 2018, the participants' response was overwhelming—everybody loved and appreciated the idea of upcycling plastic waste.

Photo courtesy of Bishnu Bhatta

Gull's, Griffith's and Bhatta's powerful stories around large loose parts might be best summed up in Jim Greenman's words:

"Children need a place where they have full use of their bodies and senses and enough freedom to take advantage of the variety of life, where they can find or invent the spaces they need and have places and moments in time to pause and recharge."

—Jim Greenman, *Exchange*, Nov/Dec 2007

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Write for WONDER!

Send your "Wonder-filled" story about connecting children with the natural world to **kirstenh@dimensionsfoundation.org**