

Loose parts play top tips



These tips and practical examples will help you get started with loose parts play and keep it going! From 2020 to 2023, East Lothian Play Association was part of an Erasmus+ funded project introducing and research loose parts play with Windygoul Primary School in East Lothian and partners in Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.

Learning and examples from Windygoul Primary School with input from GratoSfera, Gdańsk, have informed these top tips.

1. Involve everyone

Think about who will be involved in all aspects of the project and discuss ideas with everyone, right at the beginning.

We began the project by thinking about the playground. Children and staff made drawings, took photographs and drew maps to share their thoughts. This helped understand the space, sparked ideas and provided a reference point.

2. Put children at the heart of the project

Children's views, ideas and experience will bring a richness and depth to your project which cannot be replicated in any other way.

The children's focus group has now developed into a Play Leaders group. The children support play at lunchtimes, opening the storage container, tidying up and maintaining the resources.

3. Commit to training and reflection

Increase understanding of play through training and reflection. Introducing loose parts play may require changes to old rules and routines to create a play-friendly culture. Plan for time together.

We held a training day for the whole staff team at the beginning of the school term. We spent time in the playground together, used chalk to draw giant mind maps and worked on action plans for the coming year.

4. Be practical

Think about your loose parts storage early on in your project. Speak to other local settings to get their ideas about storage solutions and to find out the process and costs if new storage is needed.

We installed two shipping containers in the large playground. These have double doors on the long side to maximise light and for ease of moving things in and out. A parent made and fitted wooden storage booths so tidying up is as easy as possible.

5. See the potential

Think about all the spaces for play in your setting. Are they used to their full potential? When we think about loose parts, we often think of objects such as tyres, crates and planks. Features of the space such as grass, puddles or muddy slopes have great play value.

When we first talked about the playground, it was described by staff as "barren". Reflecting on how it is used, where and how play emerges, provided a new perspective. It informed how we positioned new play equipment, for example around the edge of the playground and on slopes.

6. Be clear about expectations

Develop your expectations and routines together. Consistent routines can help with potentially difficult moments, such as tidy up time.

We ran taster sessions for every class before offering loose parts play at lunchtimes. This ensured all children were familiar with loose parts play and let us develop and test routines. Giving a five-minute warning before the end, really helps when children are immersed in play.

7. Don't tidy up

Leave loose parts out in the playground, rather than tidying them all away. Some schools tidy loose parts away every day; in others it's once a week or rarely.

During the loose parts play project, understanding of play developed and concerns relaxed. The playground has signs of play all around – holes have been dug, tyres and crates are left out and the remnants of dens often remain along the fence.

8. Ask, listen and respond

Provide regular opportunities for children, staff and parents to share their views. Keep checking how everyone is feeling about loose parts play. Provide regular opportunities for everyone to share their views, through things like surveys, suggestion boxes or graffiti walls. Be sure to let everyone know what has happened as a result of their suggestions.

We often use a "wellbeing web" as a tool across the school to check how children are feeling about the school day. A session on the playground highlighted the muddy areas of grass were fun but also a problem for the children. We decided together that pathways would help and these were quickly installed by a parent local landscape gardener.

9. Build relationships and support

Gather support for loose parts play from people working directly with children and those with a wider influence. Share stories of play to bring your project to life. Invite potential partners to see loose parts play in action.

A talented group of child filmmakers was keen to make a documentary on loose parts play in their school. With support from a professional filmmaker, they documented the project, conducted interviews and worked on editing. The resulting film is informative, engaging and funny.

10. Get everyone out to play!

Through playing and laughing together you'll get to know children better. Positive relationships will carry over into other parts of the school day.

We introduced Fun Fridays as a new whole-school initiative. Every Friday, there is an extended morning break and all classes – children and teachers – go outside to play. We also offer loose parts play during events when the school is open to families.

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