Playing with Loose Parts

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Why play with "Loose Parts"?

Most likely you spent much of your own childhood playing with loose parts: Balls, buckets, sticks, blankets, pillows, string, tape, cups, rocks and, of course, cardboard boxes. This did not impede your development. In fact, it was responsible for much of it.

The ideal toy, according to Harvard's Susan Linn, is "10% toy and 90% kid." That means the children decide what exactly the toy is. Is the stick a sword? A flag? A log? This magical transformation exercises not just their creativity, but their planning skills — "Ok, now how will we use it?" — and their social skills: "Let's build a fort!" Playing this way also builds kids' self-control: If they are pretending the stick is a flag they must salute it and not let it touch the ground. It is far easier to get children to learn to concentrate and follow directions if they're doing this through play.

In fact, a famous study in the '40s asked kids 4 to 7 years old to stand still as long as they could. They were timed. Then the kids were asked to pretend they were palace guards and stand stock still again.

All the kids stood still longer as guards. That's because play is the easiest way to practice new and difficult skills, including self-control. This holds true across the behavior spectrum.

With loose parts, kids get the richest of play experiences. They can move, carry, combine, design, take apart and put the parts together infinite ways, playing infinite games.

This is what the child development experts call "self-directed play" — no one is telling them what to create, they are figuring it out themselves, open to new ideas and variations. (In the business world, this is known as "pivoting.")

If you believe your child to be inquisitive, competent, creative and intelligent — or wish to cultivate those qualities — they need the kind of open-ended play that a loose parts environment provides.

Loose parts include anything from stones, stumps and sticks to blocks, rope, beads, wood and recycling.

Fancy toys that "do" things turn the child into an audience. Loose parts turn kids into makers, thinkers, and tinkerers, learning creativity and skills. Given a problem — "What shall we do with this stuff?" — they become problem solvers.

That's a skill that they'll need in their lives a lot longer than almost anything else they could be doing after school.