

# Waltham Forest Early Years Guidance

## Open-ended play and loose parts

The purpose of this guidance is to support early years practitioners in developing opportunities for children to learn and explore in all areas of the EYFS, through the use of open-ended play and loose parts.

### What is open-ended play?

Open-ended play provides children with the time and space to play with resources, following their own interests, creativity and imaginations, without having to follow any adult instructions. There is generally no pressure or expected end result / product. It is all about children having the time and the space to explore a process as they play and learn, rather than having to work towards producing something.



***“Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution.”***  
*Albert Einstein*

### Why open-ended play/ materials?

Open-ended play provides opportunities for children to be experimental, engage in the process of trial and error and to develop a sense of perseverance. Children love open-ended material because of the possibilities they provide. Using open-ended materials encourages imagination, creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, social skills, and spatial reasoning, so play can be richer and more complex. This kind of play ensures rich learning and is fun. The use of open-ended materials supports children’s roles as scientists who are constantly conducting experiments, testing ideas, and developing their

understanding of the world. As children play with the materials, they are exploring what happens, coming up with new ways of manipulating the materials, deciding that one material can symbolise something else and using lots of language. This type of play builds creative thinking.

### Role of the adult?

An effective practitioner is key to the process of open-ended play. This involves the adult knowing how to provide the right materials, when to step back and let the children practice, when to intervene with new ideas or prompts and when to let the children find out for themselves through a process of trial and error.

Children need adults around them to set up an [enabling environment](#) where there are enough of the right resources to allow skills to develop. Adults should be able to step in when help is required and step back when children are engaged and learning on their own.

### How?

Keep resources as open-ended as possible and try not to set them up in a way that you would like to play! If the resources are nondescript and simple, true open-ended play will evolve. Children will then bring their own unique culture into the play as their imagination takes over. If nothing is prescribed, then nothing will be wrong.

## Loose Parts

Loose parts do not have a fixed purpose in the play context, they are open-ended and can be anything the children want them to be. Unlike structured toys with predetermined uses, loose parts play involves using different materials to construct, deconstruct, and transform. They are things that children are free to move around, combine, carry, line up and take apart. A loose part can be made of any material and some of the best loose parts come out of the recycling bin.

Children will play with loose parts in many ways, depending on their age and stage of development. Loose parts play helps children to discover more about the world by learning about natural and man-made materials. This can help them develop many skills; early counting and sorting, hand to eye coordination, grouping and matching, and identifying patterns.

Loose parts support heuristic play and sensory exploration; they engage multiple senses, stimulating sensory integration. The varied textures, shapes, and weights of the materials provide a rich sensory experience, heightening children's awareness of the world around them.

***"All children love to play, experiment, discover, invent and have fun."***  
– Simon Nicholson

## What?

Loose parts can be found all around us. These materials can include **natural objects like rocks, leaves, shells, sticks, pinecones, corks** and **recycled items like cardboard boxes, fabric scraps, and bottle tops**.

Other items that can be used as open-ended/loose parts resources include:

Wooden blocks / tree stumps / sticks / logs / wood chips / clothes pegs / planks / curtain rings



Large beads / cogs / hoops  
Nuts and bolts  
Empty tubs / bottles / pots with or without lids – yogurt pots / butter tubs / ice cream tubs / metal tins etc  
Toilet paper / kitchen paper / wrapping paper rolls  
Dirt – mud / clay / sand  
Balls of wool / pompoms / feathers / cotton / rope  
Ice lolly sticks / matchsticks  
Pipe cleaners  
Buttons  
Tyres / guttering / crates / buckets  
Cooking utensils including garlic presses, potato mashers, spoons, etc

## Link to Children's Interests

Use observations to adapt the open-ended materials provided to develop children's play further. For instance, if children are interested in construction, add mark making materials and information books to support them to design their own buildings. Think about how children can be encouraged to make links with other areas of the environment to enhance their own learning. They could make their own structures, inside and outside, maps, building designs, and obstacle courses! When observing, try not to intervene. Listen and reflect. Then, make the necessary enhancements to meet the children's emerging needs or interests.

## Further Information

- [Unlocking the Power and Potential of Block Play | Early Excellence](#)
- [Loose Parts Play - Play Scotland](#)
- [Community Playthings - what is open-ended play in the early years?](#)
- [Waltham Forest – The Hub Supporting Children's Learning and Development](#)

