

OUTDOOR LOOSE PARTS

5 Materials to Spark
Imagination and Curiosity

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hank you for downloading this guide! My name is Christina Pickles and I am passionate about outdoor play. My work revolves around the fact that children need to be outside.

Children are more physically active, connected to nature and develop community connections when they are outside. As adults in children's lives, our job is to provide the time, space, materials and most of all permission to play outside in child care, school and our communities.



This guide focuses on materials, the easiest and least expensive place to start when creating outdoor play spaces and experiences that engage children's curiosity and wonder. In this guide, I share 5 ideas of materials to start with, but really, the possibilities are endless!

I would love to hear about your experience with outdoor play! Drop me a note at christina@getoutsideandplay.ca or give me a call at 403-998-4782. Now....

Get Outside & Play 



Outdoor spaces in child care, schools and communities are often dominated by static, metal play structures, plastic toys, rubber or artificial turf and massive, flat fields of grass with a couple of goalposts. Such environments would suggest that outdoor playtime is solely for physical activity rather than viewing outdoor play spaces as a holistic environment that supports children's development in all domains.

We can do better for our children.

The features and materials found in these spaces need to offer children a full range of learning and play experiences. These spaces must become complete learning environments that support individual children's needs and all different types of play and learning.

Let's begin!



Materials

The easiest and least expensive place to start!

In wild spaces there are plenty of materials lying on the ground like sticks, leaves and rocks, but in child care, schools and community parks these natural items are not always plentiful. What materials can we add to existing spaces to spark curiosity and engage children for hours? Loose parts of course! These are open ended-materials that inspire:

- Creativity and imagination as materials are combined in unique and meaningful ways.
- Problem-solving and innovation as children, individually or collaboratively, test how materials are used in different ways.
- Unstructured, child-led play where children explore their own questions and pursue their special interests.

The options for loose parts to bring into outdoor play spaces really is endless! Here are a few ideas to start your journey with loose parts in your outdoor spaces.

Kitchen Things

A popular place to start when introducing loose parts to an outdoor space is an outdoor kitchen, often called a mud kitchen. Children of all ages recognize pots and pans and dive right in. Yes, you can purchase an outdoor kitchen but please don't! Keep it simple. A board balanced between stumps or a simple table is all children need for a work surface. The most important component are REAL kitchen materials gathered from the thrift store or from the back of the cupboard.

Tips

- Give the kitchen a feeling of a special place by placing it in a corner or enclosing the space on a few sides with wicker fencing.
- Using hooks to display each pot and utensil individually rather than a box or piles helps children find the tools they need.
- Have a worktop large enough for several children to work alongside one another.
- Not everyone is ready for mud! Children can get the same experiences of pouring, combining, mixing and creating with natural loose parts and water. Call it your Nature Kitchen.



Baskets and Buckets

Check the pockets of most children and you will find treasures. Humans are natural collectors, it goes back to our roots as hunter-gatherers. We can support this natural interest of children by providing baskets and buckets to collect and move items in the play space.

Tips

- Thrift stores have surprising collections of beautiful, inexpensive baskets.
- There is a natural connection between these materials and the kitchen space, buckets can be used to haul water to the kitchen for example.
- Beach pails may not stand up to rugged use. Seek out sturdy buckets with solid handles. Restaurants often have buckets or search your local buy and sell for 4-5 gallon pails or utility buckets.
- Go on collecting expeditions in the community - give each child a basket and before you know it you will have an excess of loose parts brought back to your play space.



Tarps and Sheets

Creating cozy corners, forts and dens is a favourite activity. Sometimes these special places just have to be found, like when there are bushes nearby but if this isn't possible, tarps and old bedsheets can be used to build secret hide aways!

Tips

- Ropes, big clips and bungee cords are useful loose parts to attach tarps and sheets to trees, fences and playground equipment.
- Long sticks or poles are handy to prop up the middle of the structure.
- With younger children, set up a basic structure and provide materials for furniture and decoration.
- Sheets also make excellent canvases for painting. Hang one a fence, grab paint brushes and a bucket of mud and paint!



Wheels and Sleds

The heavy work of pushing and pulling carts, wagons and sleds around a play space builds strength and teamwork. When children are given a large space and plenty of materials, they need ways to move items and sometimes each other around the space, provide an opportunity for this type of activity.

Tips

- Providing tires also fills a similar need to roll and move heavy items around.
- Consider unique items with wheels like a real shopping cart and a moving dolly.
- Allow children to use these items in the ways they want to use them. If they want to move their friend around on a dolly, let them!
- These are often coveted items in a play space and many children may want to use them. Think about how you want to approach this, do you step in and set the 'rules' or do you let the children work it out amongst themselves?



Boards

Building, balancing and bridging are common activities children get up to with boards. These are easy materials to track down from a local contractor or left over from a fence project. Inspect these materials for staples and left over nails before adding them to the play space.

Tips

- Consider having really long boards that one child may have trouble moving on their own. This encourages collaboration.
- Slivers will happen with boards. Be prepared with tweezers and bandaids.
- Bring out the paints and allow the children to decorate their boards.
- Boards can be used to build simple ramps and teeter totters.
- Stumps and tires compliment the boards by providing a base on which to balance boards.





From the research

1. In a study of 16 child care centres, it was found that the static play structures were unoccupied 87% of the time.
2. Physical activity was higher in programs with less fixed and more portable playground equipment.
3. Adding natural features and loose parts has positive effects on children's play, social behaviour and mental health.
4. When play is compared between a natural-oriented play space and a contemporary play structure, children in nature-oriented play spaces develop their play further and longer than children in the contemporary play space

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2. Dowda M, Brown WH, McIver KL, et al. Policies and characteristics of the preschool environment and physical activity of young children. *Pediatrics*. 2009;123:e261-e266.
3. Brussoni M, Ishikawa T, Brunelle S, Herrington S. Landscapes for play: effects of an intervention to promote nature-based risky play in early childhood centres. *J Environ Psychol*. 2017;54:139-150.
4. Luchs A, Fikus M. A comparative study of active play on differently designed playgrounds. *J Adventure Educ Outdoor Learn*. 2013;13:206-222.



Thank You...

Thank you for taking time to consider how you can create engaging outdoor play spaces for our children.

You are part of a movement that is working to bring back unstructured outdoor play into the lives of our children who need these experiences for a healthy, complete childhood.

Questions? Feel free to drop me a note anytime. Get Outside and Play offers workshops, events and consulting supporting outdoor play in the early years, schools and communities.



Contact Information

Christina Pickles
christina@getoutsideandplay.ca
403-998-4782
getoutsideandplay.ca