

102 - Loose Parts for Play

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Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Host Dr. Shipley: Hello everyone and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. We will upload a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

Host Dr. Heald: This podcast is your go-to source for inspiration, and practical tips to unlock the full potential of every little learner.

Don't forget to subscribe to the podcast for notifications about future episodes. Today we have with us Veronica Green. Veronica Green is an early childhood consultant and mentor, who has been inspiring and supporting her fellow educators for the last 10 years.

Utilizing her bachelor's in physical education and early childhood diploma. Veronica has used her experience and expertise, in a variety of early learning programs, from large centers to her own accredited day home, as well as within her 10 years of leadership roles. She is the founder of Cultivating Confidence Early Years Consultancy and curates engaging online and live learning experiences for educators to infuse the magic of loose parts play, sensory processing, regio-inspired practices to support educators in their roles, and continues to impact child development. Her goal is to reinvent the village, and cultivate a community of educators, children, and their families, that is strengths-based, relationship-focused, and unites creativity through play for all.

Welcome, Veronica.

Veronica Green: Oh, I'm so excited to be here. Thank you.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Veronica, I was super excited to see your title because I loved your biography and things like that. And your session today is called The Importance of Loose Parts for Play, for Children and Educators. And the reason that I can't wait to hear more about this is because we need to get play back into our classrooms, and we need to realize that following our gut, and using those developmentally appropriate practices is what we should be doing.

So, tell me what you mean when you say loose parts.

Veronica Green: So loose parts play actually comes from an architect named Simon Nicholson. And he wrote a paper back in the 70s.

And it was titled, *How Not to Cheat Children, The Theory of Loose Parts Play.* And it's a great paper to read. But the gist of it is, is that he felt that children's creativity was being taken away by the environment, and I guess, kind of like the routines and mindsets of the people that were in them as well.

He felt that a lot of the environments that children got to play in, were very static. So, like, schools, playgrounds, even childcare centers, museums, that there was nothing really to like, touch and feel and move about with. And he felt that was really taking away a lot of children's creativity, and that all the fun had been had by the architects, the engineers, the designers, even the construction workers, because they got to actually do the building and the creative parts.

And there was nothing left for the children, they were in very static environments. I mean, even example is when you go to a playground, a lot of the times they clean up the playground so much, that there's not even like loose sticks to play with, or they cut the trees down, trim them so much that children can't even climb trees anymore, right? So, like, there's these natural variables, that children can play with that have been taken away, and it's left with a very static environment. And that can really take away creativity.

So, when we're looking at play, if we don't have a dynamic environment and materials for children to play with, how first of all, how can they play if they don't have that, and it's really taking away their creativity. So, in the paper, he talks about how loose parts play is really like the playing around with the natural components of the world to like explore, discover, transform, transport. So, these are very actionable things, very dynamic words, right? So, like, things have to move, things have to be explored with, but what he also says is that you need to have fun.

So, I think that's really important as well. So, it's kind of like getting us back into that creativity piece. It's really a lot of things that we did as children.

You know, I know my childhood was filled with playing outside and playing with boxes, and all those kinds of things, and I feel like it's been taken away a little bit over the years.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: I know, I think as teachers, we always, sorry Steph, I think we always talk about how kids aren't creative anymore, and they don't play enough, but I think we have to give them those opportunities, and like you say, quit cutting down the tree parts that they can climb. Let's let them get a little dirty, and maybe they're going to fall down and hurt themselves, but that's where they get creative.

Veronica Green: Yeah, and even like in our routines and our mindsets, like what if it needs to be dynamic, or how much of our play environments are static? Like yes, we may have a block center, yes, we may have a house area, but how much of our rules and guidelines don't even allow for transportation, to happen between centers that children naturally want to do? So, like even those little things, can put more static aspects into it when children need to move to learn. So, and moving materials, pockets full of rocks is part of that.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Right.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: You know, this is, this mindset is really kind of a shift, from where we're at with some forms of formal education, and I think it's a great place for us to just pause, and reflect on how these loose parts play does indeed support child-led learning, and indeed the educator's role in this is crucial. So, can you speak to that?

Veronica Green: Yes, so especially like when we're trying to have child-led play, you really have to, as an educator, you kind of, you have to embrace your fears. It's never a free-for-all, but it is about child-led learning, so it's about co-learning together, and experiencing this play experience in a more collaborative approach.

So, what I find is that loose parts variables. So, I think I still need to mention this, because a lot of the time there's a lot of misconceptions about what people think loose parts play is, and that it's only playing with like boxes and sticks, and rocks and things like that, and yes he does talk about like physical, like materials and shapes, but he also talks a lot about other variables. I use the word variables over materials, because that's the word he uses, and I think that changes our mindset. So, he also talks about using electricity, magnetism, sound, smells, nature, animals, motion, even our words, thoughts, and ideas are all variables that can be transported, manipulated, all those kinds of things, right? So when we're looking at child-led play, and how loose parts variables can really ignite child-led play, and bring out so much curiosity and creativity for children, loose parts play just, especially with that dynamic piece, and we have a variety of different kinds of variables for children, we can spark that curiosity that they innately have and keep it going.

So then when we're looking at child-led learning and our roles, this is where we need to go and look at child development theory. Looking at Piaget, looking at Vygotsky, looking at Hawkins, and how we need to use concrete objects and the scaffolding piece, and Hawkins's messing about theory, and how much time is needed for children to actually get into deep engaged play. So, when we combine loose parts variables, along with the child development

theories that we know, we can create some incredible child-led learning experiences, where we can get into deep collaborative play, we can explore hypotheses. And as educators, I found in my role when I was doing this, that it opened up more time for me to step back, and observe more, research more, document more. Instead of feeling like I needed to be saying something to the children, I became more intentional in what I was saying, and I took a step back and I observed more. And I feel like loose parts play was really helpful for that.

I was combining all the things that I learned to create this much more relaxed and calm environment with deep engaged play, and me being able to step into that researcher role more.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: I love that. So, let's just say you have a new teacher, an aspiring teacher, a daycare worker, or even a parent.

How do they get started with this in their environment, like at home, at school? What do they need? How do they do it?

Veronica Green: Well, there's a few things. I always think mindset is the very first thing you have to start with, because mindset dictates what choices you're going to make. How you speak, how you handle situations. So, this is why I always go back to the theory, and those key words of dynamic, and that it needs to be experimented with, transported with.

So, you have to be prepared that things need to move, and that things might need to be taken apart, put back together. The other thing is, you don't need to go and spend money on loose parts variables. You already have them in your settings and in your home.

You just haven't seen them that way before. So, you can use fabrics, metals, nature, glass ceramics, recyclable materials. There's just anything and everything.

It's about how we are open to the possibilities, of what the children might do with them, when we allow that dynamic play. And we are really in control of that. Children want to do it.

When educators or sometimes parents say, they don't know what to do with it, they just throw it or they're not really playing with it. I would suggest to take some reflection, reflective practice and go, okay, well, have they ever been allowed to do that before? Have I always said no? So maybe I can encourage them to do this, or we can model it, we can do it together, give them permission to explore that. Because a lot of the time, kids are told they're not allowed to do those kinds of things.

And throwing and dumping is part of schema play. It's naturally for them. They want to do this.

So how can we use loose parts variables to explore that? So, we could put out fabrics that they can throw that won't cause any damage or hurt anybody.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: I love it.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: So, I'm such a visual person.

Dr. Shipley knows this. I want to see this classroom. I want to see this environment.

I want to see these spaces wherever they may be. Can you start to use descriptive visualization, for our learners so that they can start to see what this might look like?

Veronica Green: For sure. So, another misconception, is that a lot of people think that loose parts play is like one area, like we have our building area, or we have our house area and our reading area.

Loose parts play happens everywhere. So, we want to take those variety of variables that I mentioned earlier, the fabrics, the boxes, the sticks, the plastic, all that kind of stuff, and have them throughout your environment. So maybe in your block area, you might want to think about having mirrors, boxes, tubes of different weights as well, different sizes.

You could have old film reels. That's what we had in there. We had seashells, and old scraps of fabric.

So, lots of different variables for children to be able to explore with. And even in the house area, I had the plastic food when I first started. That was the first thing I removed, and I replaced it with wine corks and pom poms and some glass stones because I had older children.

I didn't have to worry about smaller pieces at that point. But you can fill it with anything. There's many large loose parts.

It's not just small pieces. So you want to think about textures like fabrics and like the plastic, recyclable pieces, boxes, packaging materials, like some of the best loose parts I have found, from like the old, the boxes that my parents got from Ikea and like some of like the pieces that are in there to hold the shelves in place. Like some, those are some of the best things that we have used, because they're strong and sturdy and they can uphold too.

So, that's why the part of the theory as well, is about making sure that we have the right kind and number of variables, as well in our settings. So, we don't just want to only have cardboard boxes. Like we want to make sure we have fabrics with different textures, different visuals on there, you know, tape, string, rope, connectors, old DVDs, like across like all those different variables, the light, reflection, sound, like all those different things as well.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Yeah, and when you walk by, that's the classroom that you're like, I want to go into, you know? And that's how I always envisioned it. When people walk by my classroom, what are they seeing on the inside? What makes you want to come in? What makes it inviting? What makes it fun and engaging for my children that are in here? So that was always my goal. As we wrap up, I want to ask you Veronica, what are three takeaways for our listeners that you want them to remember most?

Veronica Green: So, as I said right at the beginning is the paper written by Simon Nicholson.

A lot of people aren't even aware that there is a paper written. And so, you can just do a simple Google search, and you can type in Simon Nicholson, theory of loose parts play and it's there. And every time I read it, I learn something new from it.

So, I think it's really important to go to the source, of where this term has been coming from, as well and kind of dive into it and have conversation with fellow educators about it. You know, it's not about knowing what's right or wrong with it. It's about diving into that reflection piece and like, what did you learn? Or what, you know, how did you interpret this? Like, how is this already happening in an environment? And then the second thing would be, reflect on your environment for that dynamic aspect versus static play.

You know, how are routines and even our mindsets encouraging dynamic, or static play to happen? And it's just about critical reflection. It's not about shaming or judging or saying you're a bad EC. That's not what this is.

It's critical reflection and going, how can I enhance, and implement the theory and see what might happen? And the last thing I always say is go slow, introduce them into your practice, be open to where the children might take you with this kind of play, but don't have the expectation that you need to bring in a hundred new items tomorrow. You can start off with just a few things and see what might happen.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Yes.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Yeah, I think you've given us some manageable strategies, to really start being more open-minded about how this is a great way to support children's authentic and unique learning. And I love it. Are you able to provide us with one challenge for our readers, for them to walk away with after this episode?

Veronica Green: The biggest thing that helped me implement Loose Parts Play, actually, I was inspired by another educator, in one of the big Loose Parts Play groups that I'm in on Facebook.

And this educator always shares a lot of photos of them playing with the variables before they introduce them to the children in their setting. And I found that playing with the variables, really helped me get back to what it's like to play as a child, to know what it feels like when you build a tower, and it falls over. How are you going to balance that block on

there? How are you going to move your body balancing it? What kind of emotions do you feel when you're playing? What problems come up? And engaging with your own curiosity, which enhances your creativity.

And that's what the essence of Loose Parts Play is. So, I challenge listeners to play with the variables. It might feel weird to play with these items, but I actually found it very calming, and it helped me bring back my creativity, and remember what it's like to be a child.

And I felt it could help me connect with the children more.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Veronica, this has been amazing. I love it because we have to remember that these are things that children need.

They need to be creative. They need to get those electronic devices out of their hands, and let's let them play and let's let them be kids. So, thank you so much for coming on to our show.

We appreciate you so much. And thank you listeners.