



# HANDY TIPS FOR CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY SESSIONS

By Jill Wood

## GETTING READY

### 1. GATHERING MATERIALS

Some of the best supplies for play are called *Loose parts*. These are materials without any predetermined purpose that can be moved, stacked, combined, taken apart, collected, sorted, or made into most anything a person sets their mind to. The classic example of a loose part is when a child is more interested in a box than the toy inside. The box can be anything they wish, but the toy is meant to be played with a certain way.

The term *Loose parts* was coined by artist, Simon Nicholson in 1971.

In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and variables in it.



*Loose parts* should be inexpensive or free. This will help you feel less precious about them. Look in your recycling bin, ask friends



# HANDY TIPS FOR CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY SESSIONS

to save boxes and food containers, tubes, and pieces of fabric, or get donations directly from businesses. Consider the age of your young people, particularly if the supplies are small and could be swallowed, like beads or magnets.

There are many helpful resources on Loose parts but these two are fantastic:

*providing Loose parts to Support Children's play: A Toolkit* by play Wales.  
bit.ly/3+W5ZKJ



*Loose parts Manual* by pop UP Adventure play.  
bit.ly/3VmkIQ4



\*\*\*Beware of Loose parts guides that dictate how materials should be used. The purpose of loose parts, by definition, should be decided by the people using them.

## 2. SELECT A LOCATION

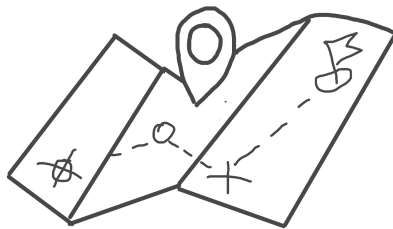
There are strengths and drawbacks to any location:

- parks are ideal for their space and popularity, but may require permits and are susceptible to the whims of weather.
- Backyards are free, but not open to the public.



## HANDY TIPS FOR CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY SESSIONS

- partnerships with community centers or libraries are wonderful for the existing infrastructure, including established communities, but play sessions indoors can have more restrictions, and can be too loud for some people.



Wherever you choose, become familiar with the site. Are there guidelines regarding use? Certain materials that are not permitted? Do your partners understand child-directed play? Noise? Freedom?

### 3. RECRUIT VOLUNTEERS

- Although child-directed play sessions can look effortless once they get started, volunteers make the set up, hosting, and clean up much easier and more fun! There should be two adults present.

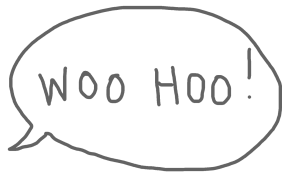


## HANDY TIPS FOR CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY SESSIONS

# THE DAY OF SETTING UP THE ENVIRONMENT

### 1. Walk the site to identify any HAZARDS.

- A HAZARD is something a child doesn't know about. This is different from a RISK, which is something a child chooses to do in order to challenge themselves.



RISK = a person sees something they've never done before and chooses to try it out, even if it is new or even intimidating. In play, a risk should always be considered in relationship to its benefits. Children usually choose to challenge themselves for good reasons.

HAZARD = something a person doesn't know exists which is likely to cause harm.



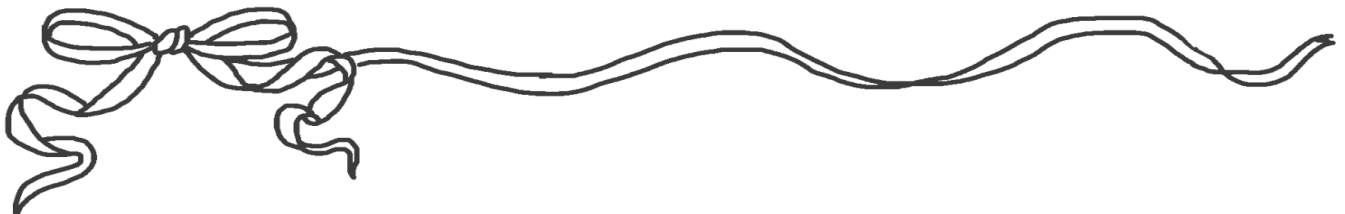
In a park this could be dog poop, or other litter that could transmit disease. Or car traffic nearby. Indoors this could be a floor that is slippery or a piece of furniture that will collapse if climbed.



## HANDY TIPS FOR CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY SESSIONS

2. Make your environment as **FLEXIBLE** as possible.

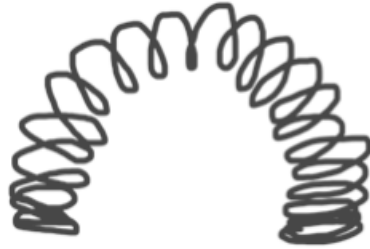
- Have multiples of things, so children don't battle over limited resources. This is another reason to choose inexpensive or free loose parts.
- Spread supplies out, so there is a diversity of places to explore. Although avoid setting up 'centers' that are prescriptive.
- If you are sharing space with other activities at a park or community center, it is helpful to mark the play area. Try to make the border playful, i. e. ribbon instead of caution tape.





## HANDY TIPS FOR CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY SESSIONS

3. Make sure your adults staffing the play area are flexible too! We highly recommend you become familiar with **PLAYWORK**.



**PLAYWORK** is an approach to supporting play developed on adventure playgrounds in the United Kingdom. playwork puts children's ideas **FIRST** and honors children's process. In playwork, play is the goal, not building skills like social emotional strategies or literacy. **HOWEVER** those things happen all the time on their own because play is how children explore and they are extremely curious. And inventive!

Play Wales, *Playwork: What's so Special*  
<https://bit.ly/4cVQC9g>



Ways to stay a flexible during a child-directed play session:

- Embrace the possibility that children will not use items the way you expect.





## HANDY TIPS FOR CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY SESSIONS

- Let go of the idea that children should 'make' something. The process of play is important in and of itself. Some children may focus on making a finished product, but just as many or more will make piles of materials, take something apart or just walk around.



- Think of play as anything a child chooses to do. The fewer expectations you have going into it, the more flexible the environment will be. For instance, sitting on the periphery and watching is as important as being in the center of activities.



- In playwork, all of the following is play: watching clouds, burying a dead dragonfly, trading hand-drawn pokemon cards, running, jumping, growing edible plants, finding a quiet place to listen, making shiny wings from fabric, braiding hair, and reenacting your favorite tv show or video game, building a fort. All play!

*What makes play **PLAY** is that it is chosen by the child and they feel a sense of ownership.*



## HANDY TIPS FOR CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY SESSIONS

# DURING THE SESSION



1. Welcome people to the space:
  - Let children know that this is a 'free play zone.' Children are allowed to use the materials however they like and they get to choose how to spend their time. If you say this in front of the parents, they will hear this message too \*\*wink
  - Explain that the grown-up volunteers are there to help the children, to get them supplies, or be an extra pair of hands.
2. Continue looking for hazards and keep the area fresh.
3. If children ask you to play, feel free to join in and follow their lead. Don't be afraid to appear silly or do something you have no knowledge about. That tells the children you are not there to 'teach' them — that you





## HANDY TIPS FOR CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY SESSIONS

see **THEM** as play experts. It also models that *perfection is not the goal.*

4. Do not worry if the play area looks 'messy,' even chaotic. Children have a different aesthetic than adults and lots of movement means that your space is welcoming and well-explored! For instance, what may look like a pile of random things, could be a collection of carefully gathered treasures.

5. However, if children leave the play session, it is appropriate to take their creations apart to make materials available for others.

6. If children want to take their creations with them, that's a great sign! It means they feel connected to their play and want to continue it. If it is okay with their parents, let them bring things home.



## HANDY TIPS FOR CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY SESSIONS

# END OF SESSION



1. Give children and families a warning that the session will close at the 15-minute mark. Ending your session will likely interrupt a child's **PLAY CYCLE**, which might be difficult for them. Some warning softens the news.

2. **LEAVE NO TRACE** is an important philosophy, because it makes us good play ambassadors and will lead to future invitations. Pick up all litter, collect loose parts you would like to reuse and leave the site ready for whatever comes next.

3. Encourage others to create their own child-directed play sessions in their communities! Our favorite resource is **Pop Up Adventure Play**. They offer support and connection to other community play organizers all over the world.

<https://bit.ly/3BmuXcU>





## HANDY TIPS FOR CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY SESSIONS

4. Take time to REFLECT with your team of adults.
- What worked particularly well?
  - What needs some improvement?
  - Were there things that were difficult for you? For instance, conflict, risk, and boredom are examples of things that can be difficult for some adults. Other challenges can involve parents who are unaccustomed to child-directed play and want to interrupt or take charge. Talk or think through how to deal with these challenges in the future.

Feel free to reach out to Bayou City Play if you don't have anyone to reflect with.

We are excited you are doing this and want to support you!

Here is a great video intro about reflective practice:

<https://bit.ly/3Z0qgTN>





## HANDY TIPS FOR CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY SESSIONS

# SOME THINGS TO NOTE:



- 1 Child-directed play will not be easy for everyone. Be prepared to explain that this is a unique space, where children get to be in charge, as long as they do not hurt themselves or others. It is important to do this in a way that is gentle and with respect for the wide range of cultural beliefs people have about childhood.
- 2 Many children do not have opportunities to guide their own activities so will have what playwork terms play deprivation. This means that some children will struggle with what to do and may expect you to guide them throughout the session. A good approach is to sit next to them and try some things out until something clicks. When it does, try to quietly step away.
- 3 In child-directed play, it can be helpful to think of play as freedom rather than fun. Although joy is often a part of



## HANDY TIPS FOR CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY SESSIONS

the equation, if given the opportunity, Children's play can go deep. It will sometimes touch on topics that are big, such as identity and power. They may work through big changes in their lives, such as new family structure or illness among loved ones. Let children take the lead and do not offer advice. Having an adult acknowledge their ideas and feelings is the gift you can offer during a short play session.

Bayou City play is a group of playworkers, artists, educators, and therapists who advocate for child-directed play opportunities in Texas.

We believe self-directed play is an essential part of childhood and a human right.

[www.bayoucityplay.org](http://www.bayoucityplay.org)  
[bayoucityplay@gmail.com](mailto:bayoucityplay@gmail.com)



# HANDY TIPS FOR CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY SESSIONS

## SUPPLIES THAT WE LIKE AN AWFUL LOT

Boxes and paper: appliance, shoe, cereal, oatmeal containers, other cardboard forms

Fabric: all sizes and textures

Drawing materials: tempera paint sticks, scented markers, or chalk depending on the Venue

Foam rubber forms including pool noodles (avoid Styrofoam due to mess)

Materials from nature: twigs, leaves, pods, sand, water

Connectors: masking tape, twine, clothes pins, aluminum foil, pipe cleaners, glue dots, clamps

Chairs and other lightweight movable furniture are great for quick forts

Random things:

Buckets, pots and pans. Muffin tins

ping pong balls

plastic drainpipe and flexible tubing

Magnet wands

Bubbles