

Loose Parts Play

A SELF-GUIDED PD COURSE FOR CALIFORNIA EARLY EDUCATORS



GETTING READY

Before You Begin

You didn't get into early childhood education to sit through another training that doesn't fit your classroom. So this one is built to fit around you. It's self-paced. You read a section, stop and think about your own room, and try one small thing before moving on. No projector, no substitute coverage, no giving up a Saturday.

Loose parts play is one of the highest-impact, lowest-cost changes you can make for children ages 2 to 5. You almost certainly already have the materials. What this guide adds is the why, the how, and a clear first week — plus a way to document your time so it counts.

How to use this guide

Read one section at a time. When you reach a Reflect box, actually stop and answer it — that's where the learning sticks. When you reach a Try it box, do the small action before you continue. Plan on about two to three hours of reading and reflection, plus classroom practice over the following week.

How this counts in California

Self-directed learning like this can contribute toward the professional growth you document for your California Child Development Permit. Most permit levels require 105 clock-hours of professional growth during each five-year renewal cycle. Use the Professional Growth Log at the back to record your time.



Note on renewals: The Associate Teacher permit does not require professional growth hours for renewal. If you hold that level, treat this as growth that strengthens your practice and your move toward the next permit level.

1 SECTION 1

What Are Loose Parts?

The Power of Open-Ended Materials

Loose parts are open-ended materials with no single correct use. Unlike a puzzle, which has one solution, or a toy truck, which drives in circles, loose parts become whatever the child imagines. They can be natural, recyclable, or everyday household objects — anything children can pick up, carry, combine, and rearrange.

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

— SIMON NICHOLSON, THEORY OF LOOSE PARTS, 1971

In plain terms: the more open-ended, moveable materials a child can access, the more creative and inventive their thinking becomes.

► REFLECT

Look around your classroom right now. Name one material already in your room that you hadn't thought of as a loose part — and where it's sitting.

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SECTION 2

The Four Types

You Have More Than You Think

Loose parts fall into four categories, and the most powerful ones are often the most affordable.

Natural materials

Stones, shells, sticks, leaves, seed pods, pine cones. The most accessible and often completely free — a nature walk fills a bin in twenty minutes.

Household items

Keys, measuring cups, fabric, wooden spools, small boxes — everyday objects children rarely get to explore. Especially powerful in dramatic play.

Commercial materials

Unit blocks, colored tiles, beads, linking cubes, small figures. Things you likely already have that take on new life when combined with the other three.

Recyclable materials

Bottle caps, cardboard tubes, egg cartons, corks, fabric scraps, buttons. Send a note home and you'll have a full collection within a week.

★ TRY IT THIS WEEK

Grab a bin and take a five-minute walk outside — by the door, the parking lot edge, a nearby tree. Collect natural loose parts. That bin is your first invitation's materials.

► REFLECT

Which category do you have the most of right now? The least? Name one item you could add to your room tomorrow at zero cost.

3 SECTION 3

Why They Matter

All Five Domains at Once

One of the most powerful things about loose parts is that they don't support just one area of development — they support all of them at the same time.

COGNITIVE

Sorting rocks by size is early math. Figuring out why the tower keeps falling is science. Deciding what goes where builds spatial reasoning.

LANGUAGE

Children narrate, negotiate, describe, and compare — rich language in every exchange.

CREATIVE

Because there's no wrong way to use them, children feel safe to experiment. The child who struggles in structured activities often thrives here.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL

Sharing materials, building together, handling it when a friend knocks over your creation — real emotional learning.

PHYSICAL

Pinching pebbles, threading beads, pouring sand — the fine motor skills that lead to writing.

► REFLECT

Which category do you have the most of right now? The least? Name one item you could add to your room tomorrow at zero cost.

Creating Invitations to Play

Provocations to Spark Curious Minds

An invitation to play is simply a thoughtfully arranged provocation — materials set out with care to spark curiosity. Think of it like setting a table. You're not telling anyone what to eat. You're creating an environment that says: come, explore, discover.

Make it beautiful

Children are drawn to beauty. A tray of sorted stones with a magnifying glass and a jar of water draws them in before you say a word.

Keep it open

The hard one. Don't demonstrate. Don't show the right way. Set it up and step back to let independent discovery unfold.

Be intentional

Choose materials for a reason. Ask yourself what you want children to notice or practice, then pick materials that connect to it.

EIGHT QUICK-START INVITATIONS

- Acorn sorting tray with tweezers and a muffin tin
- Stone watercolor painting station
- Stick structures: how tall can you build?
- Shell and sand sensory bin
- Pinecone and seed collage on cardboard
- Fabric and ribbon weaving on a simple frame
- Color sorting with bottle caps and egg cartons
- Rock weighing station with a simple balance scale

► REFLECT

Which of these eight could you set up next week with what you already have — and exactly where in your room would it go?

Loose Parts Across Learning Centers

Integrating Open-Ended Materials Everywhere

Loose parts don't have to live in one corner. They can enrich every center in the room. Here is how simple materials transform traditional play areas:

BLOCK AREA

Add stones, shells, and small figures and children stop just stacking — they start building habitats, neighborhoods, and stories.

DRAMATIC PLAY

A piece of silk becomes a river, a veil, a cape. Keys and kitchen tools add realism that plastic props can't match.

ART CENTER

Pebbles, leaves, buttons, and yarn let children make work that reflects their own thinking, not a rigid template.

SCIENCE AND DISCOVERY

Natural loose parts are made for this. Add a magnifying glass and a balance scale and you have an interactive science station.

OUTDOORS

The outside world is already full of loose parts — mud kitchens, stick structures, leaf collections. Your most resource-rich environment.

► REFLECT

Which center in your room would benefit most from loose parts this month, and why that one?

Your Role

Observer, Questioner, Facilitator

The hardest part of loose parts play isn't collecting materials or setting up the invitation. It's knowing what to do while children are actually playing. We're trained to teach — to show, explain, and guide. With loose parts, the most powerful thing you can often do is get out of the way.

OBSERVER

Before you say anything, watch. What are children building, saying, wondering? Documentation starts here — a quick photo or one-line note captures learning that would otherwise disappear.

QUESTIONER

When you engage, language matters. "What are you making?" invites the child's story. "Oh, is that a house?" replaces it with yours.

FACILITATOR

Provide the environment, the time, and the materials — then trust the children. There is no right way with loose parts. That's the point.

► REFLECT

Which of these three roles comes most naturally to you? Which is the most challenging?

Questions That Spark Thinking

The Language of Play Facilitation

Asking open-ended questions is easier said than done in a busy room. Keep these six in your back pocket to expand children's cognitive horizons naturally:

Six Questions to Ask

1. "What are you making?" — open exploration; the child defines the work.
2. "Tell me about what you're doing." — not even a question. An invitation.
3. "What happens if you add more of these?" — prompts inquiry and prediction without directing.
4. "How is this one different from that one?" — comparison and early math.
5. "What do you need to make it work?" — problem-solving.
6. "Can you show me how you did that?" — this one is gold. It says your process matters.

Language to Avoid

"Good job!"

Shifts attention from the intrinsic joy of work to seeking your external approval.

"Is that a ___?"

Replaces the child's rich imaginative narrative with your adult projection.

"Let me show you how."

Signals that there's a single "correct" way to play, dampening experimentation.

Try instead: "You figured that out!" or "Tell me more about this part."

★ TRY IT THIS WEEK

Pick two of the six questions above. Write them on a sticky note and put it where you'll see it during child-directed play. Practice using only these when engaging with children.

Making Cleanup Work

The Practicalities of Open-Ended Classrooms

Cleanup is the number one concern teachers raise about loose parts, and it's a fair one. The truth: it does take more time at first, especially before children learn the systems. But it gets easier fast — and the cleanup itself becomes learning.

LABEL EVERYTHING

When children know where things go, they clean up independently. Trace the item's silhouette on the shelf label or laminate a photo of the materials in their correct bins. The matching process itself becomes an early math sorting game.

GIVE A FIVE-MINUTE WARNING

Children in deep play need a runway to land. Avoid abrupt stopping points. Use the same consistent auditory signal every single day — a chime, a singing bowl, or a specific song that welcomes the transition.

ASSIGN ROLES AND MAKE IT FUN

Create active community roles: Collector, Sorter, and Checker. Time the cleanup with a stopwatch to beat yesterday's record. When cleanup is structured as part of the overall activity rather than a punishment, children eagerly engage.

► REFLECT

What's one cleanup routine you already use in your classroom that works? How could you apply it to loose parts play as-is?

Your First Steps This Week

Taking Loose Parts into the Classroom

Not next month. This week. Five concrete steps, each small enough to actually do.

- 1 Do a classroom audit** — Walk your room with new eyes. Stones in the sensory bin, buttons in the art supplies, fabric in dramatic play. Find what you have before you go looking for what you need.
- 2 Send a family letter** — Keep it simple: We're collecting bottle caps, buttons, cardboard tubes, and fabric scraps. Most families are glad to help.
- 3 Set up one invitation** — Not the whole room — one. A tray with three materials. Done is better than perfect.
- 4 Observe and document** — While children explore, practice the Observer role. Take one photo. Write one sentence. What surprised you?
- 5 Reflect and share** — At your next team meeting, share one observation. What did children do? What did they say? What will you try next?

★ TRY IT THIS WEEK

Put a date on step 3. By Friday I will set up one invitation in the _____ center using _____, _____, and _____. Then log it.

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SECTION 10

Reflect — and Document Your Growth

Locking in Your Classroom Practice

You came in as an experienced educator, and you're leaving with something new to try. That takes courage. Before you close the guide, sit with these three questions.

PROMPT 01

What is ONE thing you learned that you want to try in your classroom?

PROMPT 02

What is ONE question you still have about loose parts?

PROMPT 03

Which child in your class will love loose parts play — and why?

Professional Growth Log

Track your reading, reflection, and classroom implementation hours.

Documenting Your Hours

Fill in the log below as you go. Record the date, which section or activity you completed, the time you spent, and a note on what you tried or noticed. Independent study and the classroom practice that follows both count as professional growth. In California, bring your completed log to your Professional Growth Advisor to confirm how it applies to your Child Development Permit.

DATE	SECTION / ACTIVITY	TIME SPENT	WHAT I TRIED / NOTICED
	Page 1-5: Course Intro		Reviewed California PD alignment & types of loose parts.
	Section 1: What Are Loose Parts?		Reflected on existing classroom items that can be repurposed.
	Section 2: The Four Types		Walked outdoor parking/yard; collected seed pods and pine cones.
	Section 3: Why They Matter		Mapped loose parts benefits onto learning domains.
	Classroom Practice		Introduced first natural-materials tray in sensory center.
	Section 7: Sparking Thinking		Sticky notes on walls with open-ended play prompt questions.
	Classroom Practice		Tested specific facilitation language during morning choice.
	Section 9: First Steps		Created and sent the family donation letter for recyclables.
	Classroom Practice		Observed and documented children utilizing bottle caps/corks.
	Total		

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Completion Record

Keep this page for your professional growth file.

This confirms that I completed the self-guided professional development course **Loose Parts Play: A Self-Guided PD Course for California Early Educators**, including independent reading, reflection, and classroom application.

NAME OF EDUCATOR

PROGRAM OR CENTER

CHILD DEVELOPMENT PERMIT LEVEL

TOTAL HOURS COMPLETED

DATE COMPLETED

EDUCATOR SIGNATURE