

Let loose!

Sunbeams Day Nursery has embedded loose-parts play into provision across all its settings, transforming practice and inspiring children. **Nicole Weinstein** reports

In the outdoor workshop at Sunbeams Thorpe Park Nursery in Leeds, a group of four-year-olds are gathered around a dismantled bike, attempting to fix the wheels to a palette to create their very own 'supercar'.

With screwdrivers in hand, two of them pick up the tiny screws while the others try to hold the wheels in place so they can be secured. It's not an easy job. Their hands are greasy from the oil, the wheels are heavy and it's going to take teamwork and determination to get the job done.

This is just one example of the learning that has taken place since Sunbeams decided to redefine its learning environment two years ago and replace all plastic and 'one-purpose' toys with loose parts – open-ended resources that can be used in multiple ways to inspire children's creativity.

The old bike, which was donated by a parent, started off in the workshop being 'fixed' by the children with their tools. When they became more curious about it and what they could do with it, practitioners said, 'Let's find out.'

Soon, the wheels came off and the children used their imagination to create a supercar, with smaller wheels for a steering wheel and cushions for seats. The car has been to space and 'flies' around with wings that the children made out of cardboard tubing.

Manager Shelley Briggs, who works across Sunbeams' four settings in north and west Yorkshire, explains, 'Embedding loose-parts play into the core of our practice has taken time, effort and lots of training. But it's having a profound effect on children's learning, with boys showing greater creativity and girls developing more confidence.'

The setting was joint winner of

case study: Jake

Fascinated by a string of beads, Jake* (right) first explored it, then began 'posting' it into the centre of a cable reel.

Once the beads were inside the reel, he realised he faced the challenge of getting them out again. Throughout, he was absorbed in the task, which supported his learning in various ways: it developed his self-confidence (by working on his own); hand-eye co-ordination;

understanding of shape, space and measure, and properties of different materials; and his problem-solving skills – Jake persisted at the activity, trying various ways to make the beads fit inside the reel and to retrieve them.

This learning occurred independently, and before any adult interaction or support to extend Jake's thinking.

*Not his real name

the *Nursery World* Enabling Environments Award 2019, with the judges praising Thorpe Park's transformation and the nursery's 'solid pedagogy'.

NEW APPROACH

For the past eight years, the Reggio Emilia approach, in which the child leads the play, has been the inspiration behind the learning environments at all four Sunbeams settings. The decision to

Providing loose parts enables children to take control of their play and learning



NW SHOW

Loose parts, tinkering spaces and messy play will be up for discussion in our varied masterclass and seminar programme at the *Nursery World Show* in Islington, London on 7-8 February.

A principal theme of the programme will be the new Ofsted framework and what it means for early years practice. Friday's masterclass will focus on 'Quality of education', while Saturday's will explore 'Behaviour and attitudes', another new judgement within the EIF.

Consultants Jan Dubiel and Penny Tassoni will be explaining how to ensure progression in children's learning, across the curriculum and in reading in particular. Other seminar themes include how to hone your observation skills, Forest School and behaviour.

➔ Visit: www.nurseryworldshow.com

incorporate loose parts into their provision came after opening the 93-place setting in Thorpe Park in 2016 and adopting the concept of 'in the moment' planning (ITMP).

'We found that one-purpose toys, like jigsaws and trainsets, weren't providing children with the challenge that they needed in the here and now, and that levels of engagement were poor,' explains Mrs Briggs.

'We needed resources that offered children opportunities to take risks, to problem-solve and to think critically for themselves. Loose-parts play has, undoubtedly, been the answer to this.'

OPEN-ENDED OPPORTUNITIES

The open-ended nature of loose-parts play, where there is no specific purpose attached to it, encourages imagination, creative thinking, physical dexterity and collaborative play. Materials such as stones, sticks, cones, shells, logs, planks, crates, tyres, cable drums, pipes, ropes, tubes and old phones, which can be found, recycled or bought, have the added benefit of being replaceable at little or no cost.

'The levels of engagement, particularly among boys, have been unbelievable,' says Mrs Briggs. 'They are more willing to have a go and try things because there's no right or wrong way of doing anything. As practitioners, we are on hand to add challenge and ask leading questions like, "What do you think would happen if we added water to that?"'

But the changes didn't happen overnight. They have been introduced thoughtfully throughout the chain's four settings for every age group from babies up to pre-school.

'It's taken a lot of time, research and trial and error to ensure the resources are age-appropriate and safe, while still providing challenge,' says Mrs Briggs.

'All resources throughout each room are now loose parts. The only one-purpose resources are books and small-world animals, figures and vehicles: resources which complement loose-parts play.'

The pre-school room was the first to test the new approach. There was an overhaul of resources in the dedicated learning environments: shape sorters, commercial sorting

and counting resources, plastic counters and wooden food were replaced with pine cones, weighing scales, glass and metal pebbles, wooden spoons and bowls.

Although the key areas of continuous provision remain the same, the resources can be moved and transported around the room. For example, a pine cone can be used as a cake in the role-play area, a tree in the construction area or an item to weigh, create and mix within the creative area.

Resources in the baby room focus on the senses; for example, children are able to explore pasta, oats, jelly or baked beans in Tuff trays. There are also plenty of materials and textures to explore – hessian, shiny materials and netting – as well as large metallic pots and pans and wooden spoons.

A favourite play activity enjoyed by infants from 12 to 20 months is posting smaller items through tubes and emptying and filling egg cups (see Case study: Jake).

'There's a focus on schematic behaviour and this continues in the toddler room,' explains Mrs Briggs. 'Children enjoy moving sand and water around in pipes and

Clockwise from top right: Jake experimenting with beads; a bowl of loose parts; the resources in each room are mostly loose parts

It's taken a lot of time, research and trial and error to ensure the resources are safe and age-appropriate

guttering, hiding in dens and cosy spaces and using the loose parts with small-world play items like dinosaurs, as their imagination beings to develop.'

CALMING EFFECT

The reduction of brightly coloured plastic resources has resulted in an environment that is less overwhelming and chaotic, which means that children are calmer and able to concentrate better.

The building, which is a converted farmhouse, has retained its natural wooden beams and has floor-to-ceiling glass wall partitions between the rooms, allowing children and staff to observe and role-model to their peers. Set in an acre of greenbelt land, in a rural location, the nursery enjoys access to fields, a forest and a pond.

One of the most remarkable observations following the introduction of the loose parts is the improvement in children's concentration and levels of engagement, says Mrs Briggs.

'They don't flit between activities and areas but spend time interacting with resources,' she explains. 'Their interests and

enabling environments

motivations are clear, they share their ideas, and when difficulties arise, they persist and try different ways to achieve an outcome.'

Adults are on hand to scaffold the learning. Boys, in particular, spend extended periods of time on an activity, building upon it from one session to the next. Their early literacy skills have improved as they are now motivated to write because they have a reason and a purpose – for example, designing and creating their own construction models.

'A couple of girls have shown a keen interest in the woodwork activities,' says Mrs Briggs. 'They started off screwing and hammering nails into boards and progressed onto designing small houses on paper. They then used pieces of wood in different sizes and shapes to make their own houses.'

STAFF OWNERSHIP

Loose-parts training that was specific to each age group was held at each site before implementing the concept in the nurseries. The staff collected examples of loose parts, and team development evenings were held where staff were able to explore loose parts and see for themselves how differently each of the parts could be used and what they could create with them.

The group's quality manager spent time in each room modelling practice, completing peer-on-peer observations and offering ongoing guidance and support to develop staff knowledge and confidence.

'It was important to us that the staff teams had ownership of this and fully understood what we wanted to achieve,' explains Mrs Briggs.

Staff morale has improved because there is less pressure on

case study: party time

The creation station is a hub of activity in the pre-school room. It contains jars of porridge oats, rice, lentils, pasta, flour, food colouring and lots of squeeze bottles with oil and water that children use to mix and create potions. One morning, the children were mixing flour, water and food colouring and a practitioner asked, 'What are you doing here? This looks interesting.' The girl replied, 'We're making a birthday cake.'

The practitioner asked some other questions such as, 'What else do you need for a birthday cake?' 'Candles,' the children replied, and then hurried off to get some pencils to be the candles. The children took the cake to the home corner and set up a tea party. They then decided to invite the whole class to attend.

Collaborative play took place, with one group of children making invitations for everyone and another group making paper party hats. Some then decided they wanted to dress up for the party, so they



made jewellery out of string and small tubing that was donated by a parent who worked in a prosthetic limb factory.

Staff were on hand to help access any resources that the children needed. They also asked such questions as, 'How can we join these together to make a crown?', which encouraged the children to continue problem-solving.

The children loved the party, which included music and a game of pass the parcel, because it was their own work and they were in control of the outcome.

Clockwise from bottom left: two of Sunbeams' rooms with collections of loose parts; girls taking part in woodwork activities



them to complete paperwork, and they can spend quality time interacting with and supporting their key children. They are described as 'excellent play companions' for the children in their 2019 Ofsted report, which received Outstanding under the new inspection framework.

Mrs Briggs says, 'In planning from children's interests and extending their learning there and then, we have reduced any gaps in children's learning as they are curious and motivated, and staff are skilful in extending the learning that is already taking place.'

'Observations are more specific – the ITMP approach means we have focused children to observe

each week and we carry out "wow" observations [snapshots of a significant moment of learning or child development] on all other children.

'The focused observations allow us to closely track each child and enable us to fully identify their current levels of understanding, their interests, their schematic behaviours and to really get to know them as individuals.'

'This has made a huge difference to how we support and scaffold children's learning, particularly when working with children who are less vocal or less confident and usually drift into the background.'

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

Mrs Briggs admits that at first, the biggest challenge was explaining to parents why playing with resources that look like junk would be better for their children than 'normal' clean toys.

'We put lots of case studies together and ran parent workshops on how the learning comes into play. Because the staff have been blown away by the changes, they translated this to the parents and they tried out the concepts at home. We find that parents are now more willing to share with us children's interests, special events and achievements from home.' ■

