Loose Parts: Play in Pieces

BETH: ...that this presentation will be recorded and available on the website within a week, and you'll also have the handouts that go with it. So, we're really excited here at HSBS that you could join us today and learn more about a really exciting and vibrant part of any play space, and that's "loose parts." We have, today, with us JC Boushh. And JC is one of our physical activity consultants here at HSBS, and he was kind enough to stop by and share his knowledge and passion about this subject with us. JC is a play consultant and a head – the head playground designer for Designs for Play. He's spoken around the world – worked for many organizations – talking about playgrounds and safety issues, including KaBOOM! JC is a certified playground safety inspector as well as a certified early childhood outdoor play inspector. So, he is a person that really knows playgrounds and really appreciates the value of play and the proper development for young children. So, take it away, JC.

JC BOUSHH: Thank you very much, Beth; and I'm much appreciative of Head Start Body Start asking me to – to lecture on this topic. I'm a very big advocate for play and – and it's very important that children have the opportunity to play throughout their lives. What we're going to be talking about today is loose parts. And when I talk about loose parts, when I talk about play environments for children, many times people ask me what – "How do you design the perfect playground? How do you provide an outdoor environment that engages children during their outdoor times?" And what I say is there are three elements to a perfect outdoor play environment. That is: developmentally appropriate playground equipment; natural features like landscaping and sand and water and all those things; and the last, probably most vital, thing is loose parts.

Loose parts provide children with the opportunity – opportunity to manipulate, to move, to redesign, to line-up, to take apart, to assemble, in multiple different ways throughout their environment. And so, loose parts are key to providing novelty and complexity on the playground because a playground's equipment environment does not change. It's what I call a hard-scaped environment. It's there permanently. You don't add a new slide every day; you don't add a new climber every day. You don't add new things, so you have to provide things in the environment that allow children to manipulate and change it according to how they see it or how they want it to be. So, loose parts are perfect for this example. And – let's talk about some of the reasons why we should include loose parts in our play environment.

So, I've broken this down into five reasons. First, they encourage children to manipulate their environment. What does that mean? Developmental theory emphasizes the need for children to manipulate their environment, to experiment, to interact with materials, in order to learn. So, loose parts provide them with that opportunity and allow them to change the environment, build the environment, add to the environment, use their own imaginations to manipulate it in ways that they see it. So, loose parts help children to accomplish that goal.

Second, children make choices based on the amount of variability of materials that you provide. Many times when I go to centers, I walk into the classroom and I see, many times, a block area, a dramatic play area, a science area, maybe an art area, maybe a constructive play area, and I see all of these things kind

of zoned out in the – inside the classroom. But when I go outside, many times all I see is just a blank slate of playground equipment, maybe a water table here or there, maybe some bikes, stuff like that.

But many times teachers fail to see that we need to provide the same type of materials that we provide for children inside as outdoors. So we need to provide them with blocks. We need to provide them with dramatic play materials. We need to provide them with constructive materials, with art materials, with materials that they can manipulate and move around. So, we need to think of, sometimes – as the outdoor environment as an outdoor classroom; and the same materials that we would use indoors, we want to use outdoors. And we want to provide children with a huge amount of materials that they can provide – they can use.

You provide children with age-appropriate materials. Now, we're talking about early childhood here, but early childhood has a wide range; two to five is average. And most Head Starts are from three to about five years old – three-and-a-half to five years old. So, you want to provide appropriate materials based on the children's age. So, you don't want to provide sharp materials, or you don't want to provide materials like tools or things like that that may injure a child at a small age. Now, you can provide constructive materials, but you want to make sure that you have adult supervision to oversee that. So, your materials that you provide children should be based on the age-appropriateness of your environment. As children become bigger, four to five years old, you provide them with more constructive materials, more materials they're able to build and to shape and to mold, and things like that. You always, though, want to supervise what is going on with children during their use of use – loose parts.

You want to inject novelty into the play environment. What does that mean? What does "novelty in the playground" mean? It means when children have exhausted the possibilities of one arrangement of loose parts, they rearrange the materials for some new game or purpose. It provides children with open-ended materials. One of the things that I remember from my childhood was I used to have a Fisher Price Play Village, and one of the things that I very much remember is that I was able to use it in various ways. And I had this – I had the Main Street Play Village and I had the Castle Play Village. And I remember very distinctly when I was a child that I went to Disneyland with my family, and that very next week when I came back I used those materials and I changed them around, I manipulated them around, to recreate Main Street Disneyland and the castle and everything like that.

And one of the things that has happened over time is that many times we have not provided children with open-ended materials. We haven't allowed them to be able to use them; they're only one thing. Think about it when – children open toys on Christmas and they get this fantastic new – new product, you know, Dancing Elmo or Singing Elmo or some other technological toy. Well, what happens? Once they become bored with it after a week or two weeks of playing with it the most, they no longer use it anymore because it no longer is novel and complex. But think about the times when you've used milk cartons or boxes or drapes or rugs or curtains or sheets or things like that, and you've used it as a cape to be Superman, or you've used it as a tent and you're an Indian, or you've used it as a magic carpet that you're flying through the air like Aladdin. And so, you want to have materials that allow children open-endedness. It allows them to change it into anything that they can create with their own imagination.

BETH: Hey, JC, this is Beth. I think also, for educators, it's good to note that it allows them to, as they're trying to facilitate play – that by having all these different manipulatives and loose parts that they can kind of pick on what they've been working on in the classroom, you know. So, it's a nice bridge. If you've been working on a – a song in the classroom and you're – you've been using a parachute – a book about a parachute, you can take your parachute and balls outside and play outside and just make the connection, and as you said, really use this as your outdoor play – your outdoor classroom.

JC: That's a great point, Beth, and I think many times teachers are afraid to teach outside. And loose parts provide children with materials, with curriculum in – in a way, in order for teachers to teach them various subjects: whether you're doing music play, as you talked about; whether you're doing science and you're trying to teach children how the volume of water is compared and the coloring in the water. Or you want to use it in natural – natural environments to teach kids about science and nature; or you want to teach them about counting and you have a certain amount of blocks to stack them up a certain amount of ways; or things like that. All these things provide curriculum moments, provide academic moments, that foster learning. And so, many times teachers need to use loose parts, need to use the outdoor environment as an extension of the classroom, and build their curriculum around that, and not get so tight into this "I need to stick to this, you know, set curriculum" but use things that engage children. And we know from brain development that children engage with experiential moments, and loose parts provide children with experiential moments to learn about the world around them.

Let's talk about different types of loose parts; and there's natural parts and there's manufactured parts. Natural parts are things that the natural world provides us with: rocks, flowers, sand, pieces of wood. All these things can be used as loose parts for children. And many times, at some of the preschools that I've gone to, they use it as part of block play area so it provides children with an extension of that block play. So when they're building a castle, or they're building a – a city, or they're building a house, they can use these natural loose parts to enhance their environment.

Manufactured parts – there are so many things as Home Depot or Lowe's or Ace Hardware that can be used for loose parts. And many times, if you go to these establishments or you go to places like this that have a bunch of just loose parts trash they're getting rid of... Scraps of wood, scraps of plastic, piping, all these things can be used as loose parts for environments. When your parents at your schools are throwing away old pots or pans or old Tupperware containers, or you go to a garage sale and you could pick up things for pennies or for dollars that can be used as loose parts. So, you want to think of loose parts as kind of succotash – this kind of big, gigantic succotash soup that you can just pick and choose and add little things as you go along to make it much more flavorful for children.

BETH: Absolutely. Another good tip is if you have parents that work in the construction trade, they often – jobs will have leftover parts. So, things like PVC pipe you can turn into a million different things in terms of loose part play, so really tap into the resources you have in your community.

JC: I – and I – and I think you're right, Beth, that many teachers don't realize just the huge amount of resources that they have. And many of these people – many people see this stuff as just junk; you know, old sonotubes that are use in construction sites when you pour foundations. All those things like that

provide children with just incredible amount – or on a job site... But one thing you want to make sure though, from a safety perspective, you always want to check what people are bringing in. You want to wash it, you want to sanitize it, and you – especially if using construction materials, you want to look for nails or staples or splinters, or things like that. So, make sure you go through your stuff so that you know that you're providing children with a safe and healthy environment.

Let's talk about – more about natural parts. Natural parts are one of the things that I most see missing from many child care centers. I see a huge amount of catalogue stuff; I see a huge amount of Kaplan or Lakeshore, or all these other products that are manufactured. And many times teachers miss those opportunities for natural loose parts, and very easily. I did a Head Start recently where – down the street from my house they were chopping down an old sycamore tree. So I went over there, I went to the pile of sycamore stuff, and I pulled out a couple stumps, I pulled out a couple branches, and I pulled up a couple pieces of log. And I took them back to my house and I chopped up the logs into little wood cookies, and I made the branches into various forms of blocks, and I used the – used the stumps as little tables or little climbing things. And I took it down to this Head Start. The kids just went crazy about it, they loved it. They had never seen these natural things in the play environment.

And especially if you live in a suburban area where you just don't have access to nature, this provides children with a fantastic bridge into the natural world. You know, let your grass grow a little bit longer. You don't have to cut it every single week that it's just manicured like they're in Good Home – *Good Homes and Gardens*, you know. Use things like leaves – a big pile of leaves. I mean, many of us as children can remember just jumping into a big pile of leaves and just laying there and doing angels as we – we move our hands back and forth. These are things that many children are missing today. And so, loose parts like this, like natural environments, allow children to get that connection with nature.

BETH: Another great resource for getting tree stumps and branches and mulch and leaves and all that is your local Department of Parks and Recreation or your state DNR – Department of Natural Resources. They often, you know, pull up stumps and have to fall trees, and they have these things and will often donate them to centers and schools.

JC: Oh yeah, because – I mean, honestly, they're just going to throw them away. And many times you can also contact your local tree removal service and ask them, you know, "Do you have... ?" And many times they'll take it back to their yard before they take it back to the dump or they have it gotten – gotten rid of. You can go there and pick through the parts; they're more than happy to get rid of this stuff because it ends up, honestly, saving them money in dump fees of getting rid it from that perspective.

BETH: Plus you're doing good for the Earth by recycling materials.

JC: That's it. Let's talk about the function of loose parts. One of the things that I really, really emphasize when I do designs, when I lecture about outdoor classrooms, is there is absolutely nothing that you cannot do indoors that you cannot outdoors. You can eat outdoors. You can teach outdoors; you can do circle time outdoors. You can do reading time outdoors, science, art, all these things. Children love to engage with the outdoor environment. And so, you want to think of, like we talked about, is using the

area as an outdoor classroom, allowing children to use miscellaneous things, miscellaneous parts, and allowing them the opportunity to learn. And one of our things as – as a teacher is to provide children with the materials and the ability to learn, and loose parts do that. It allows them to kind of pick and choose how they want to engage with learning. So, we don't necessarily have to sit there and say, "Hey, you know what, you use this water thing this way, you use this bucket this way. This is how you use that." We want to let children manipulate the environment themselves. Now, yes we want to sit there for safety and we want to observe the observation so that we make – make sure that children are fully capable of using the materials in a safe and – and good manner.

But we also want to make sure that we allow them the opportunity to have free play, to not be structured in how they use the parts, but allowing them the opportunity and pretty much coaching them, mentoring them, on what they need to do. Some of the best environments that I've seen are, from my perspective, here in California. And they're – they're known worldwide. Pacific Oaks College has an incredible ability of using loose parts, and also Bev Bos' Roseville Preschool up in Roseville. Her environment is centered around providing children with loose parts stations, and the picture on your right is a prime example of that. This is kind of her science area that she's used. And she's used these old tables and she's just thrown a bunch of Tupperware, cooking stuff... She's hanged strings with bottles and things like that, provided them with a big wash basin, tree stumps to sit on, piping, and all these things to allow them to kind of use this as a science area. And that's how we want to think of the function of loose parts.

We want to think of others as discovery play. Loose parts allow children to discover the world around them. It allows them to manipulate it. It allows them to understand science concepts – the volume of water. What happens when you mix food coloring with water? What happens if you mix multiple food colorings with water? What happens when you pour water through different types of tubing or different types of materials? How does it go through? How does it react? Does it bubble? Does it overflow? Does it provide children with the opportunity to use sand in the water? How do they – how do they mix together? Does the water rise; does the water sink? Does the sand sink?

All these things allow children the ability to discover the world around them. And in – in chance, it allows them to then begin to ask the teacher about why is this doing this. Why is this reacting this way? Why do – when I mix red and blue do I get purple? Why do all these things happen? Why does the water overflow when I pour more sand or I put a rock into the – into the bottle? All these things provide open-ended moments for children to be taught about the world around them.

Constructive play – constructive play is so vital for children. It just allows them to physically manipulate their environment. It allows them to use their imagination and their creativity. Think about some of the fondest moments you had as a child and I bet you many of those would be involved in constructive play, whether it was building a tree house; whether it was building a go-kart; whether it was building a tent or a campout area for you and your friend; or whether it was playing in the sand; and watching the water go through gutters; and building a dam out of rocks and sticks and stuff that are in the environment; or actually building a tent with pieces of wood; or constructing a model; or something like that. All these things are constructive play. And it allows children to translate abstract images in their mind, from their

imagination, their creativity, and turn them into concrete objects. It helps them to foster that kind of ability to be creative, to transfer abstract into concrete.

BETH: I just want to piggyback on – on constructive play as really vital for MVPA, for – for moderate to vigorous physical activity. Think of all the – the pushing and pulling and stacking. A lot of upper body strengthening and crossing [inaudible], which doesn't always happen on the – on the playground. So this is really exciting from that standpoint, as well. They're also working on movement-based vocabulary. So we – we have some – some young men on the slide here that are under, but they can go over, they can go around, through. So, there's so many things you can do from the standpoint of really reinforcing movement during constructive play.

JC: There's – there's just – there is so much opportunity for teaching and – during the use of loose parts and constructive play. And I think many times teachers miss that. They miss what I call a "teachable moment," that moment when a child is just so engaged with an activity. Their mind is just open like a spring flower and they're just waiting to suck in that cognitive learning, and many times teachers miss that. They just see it as play. They just see it as children burning off steam, or they see them as just playing around or stuff like that. They miss, many times, that this is a teachable moment. This is why we're – this is the moment that we as teachers most anticipate and pray – pray for. This is the moment when they are open to learning about anything that they want to learn. And constructive play provides that opportunity to do that, opens up children's minds to learning.

Dramatic play. Many times when I go to centers, dramatic play is either a playhouse or a bike path or some type of water play or something like that with a table. But many times we don't – I don't think we fully utilize dramatic play items or loose parts out in our outdoor environment. I think many times we see dramatic play as only an indoor activity. And one of the things that I've seen as I've visited schools all over the place is that dramatic play is really, really great outdoors. It just fosters so much imagination and creativity. And many times we have this fear of – of bringing the dramatic play stuff outside because is it going to get dirty, is it going to get broken? Are they going to use it right, you know? And many times we don't allow kids to bring their costumes outside or bring blankets outside, or sheets, or all these things that they can use to kind of enhance their dramatic play experience.

And so, we really need to think about bringing those things out in – as loose parts out on the playground: having maybe a box of sheets and towels and blankets that children can use as a tent; that children can use as a cape to be their favorite super hero; or they can use it as a blanket and have a teddy bear picnic as they sit out there using rocks and maybe sticks as little tea party items. Second, you want to provide them with an area to play this dramatic play area. You want to provide them with an open area that they can use just to be princesses.

And one time, I remember very distinctly, I went to visit Pacific Oaks to do a paper on them, and I was watching these – these – these little girls and this little boy play Cinderella. And they would]use little sticks and they would use little leaves and that was their tea – tea party thing. And two – two of the little girls were the bad sisters and one was Cinderella, and then this little boy was the Prince that was going to come and rescue them. And it was just fascinating to see how they used objects that weren't even

connected to what they were doing; leaves aren't – aren't – aren't connected like that way, and rocks and sticks and all these things. But through their imagination, through their creativity, through their ability to communicate those items to each other, they were able to change those items into a saucer or a plate or a teacup or a little cookie that they would pretend that they would eat. So, all these things provide opportunities for children to enhance their dramatic play time.

You want to create areas for loose parts. You just don't want to kind of willy-nilly throw loose parts out there. And many times I see, you know, loose parts in milk cartons, and blocks and stuff like that, but there is no real area for them to – to express themselves with these items. It's kind of just – kind of they're off in the corner not really thought about, you know – that we have this huge piece of playground equipment in the middle of the – the play – play yard. And maybe we have a sand box over here and maybe a water table here, but there's no defined areas for children to play loose parts.

And so, when we design our play environments, when we – we model our play environments, we want to provide children with specific areas in order to use loose parts. Maybe just a huge sandbox, like you see here at Roseville Preschool, where it's just a pile of sand and there's wheelbarrows and logs and buckets; and you can see in the background there's PVC pipe and drainage pipe and gutters, and all these things that children can use specifically in this area. Then they – she has another area that she has, like I said, the science area, where she just has two-liter bottles – coke bottles and water bottles – and Tupperware containers and all these things in big bins – water that children can use specifically in those areas as play for loose parts.

You want create storage areas for loose parts. I'm doing some evaluations now for some Head Starts in San Diego, and one of the things that we talked about is the accessibility of loose parts for children. And many times what I see is loose parts stored in storage sheds way off at the way end of the – of the environment for – for children to play with. And what happens is – is that teachers become kind of frustrated, or they become kind of discouraged about it, because they have to go outside, they have to pull all these loose parts out of the storage shed, and then they've got to lay them all out. And then when the children are done, they've got to lug them all back and put them all away again. Well, it becomes kind of tiresome and teachers don't want to do that many times. So, you want to provide multiple storage areas.

You want to provide areas that children can store their dramatic play things, children can store their sand things. One of the things that I helped a center do was create this kind of two-leveled shelf system where you could store milk cartons in there. And so, you had the bottom level with three milk cartons and then you had a second level with milk cartons, and what the teachers would do was put all their sand toys in there. So when it came time to close up the center at night for security reasons, so they didn't have theft, they would simply take the milk cartons out of the shelf, put them in the storage unit, and lock them up. And in the morning they would come out, take this milk carton, stick it on the shelf so it's easy access right there next to the sandbox for the kids to play with. And it made it accessible for the children rather than to have to track down a teacher to find out where are the sand toys. So this – so these are some of the ideas that you can use in order to store your loose parts.

So, let's talk about what are the four keys of success. How do we do this? How do we provide loose parts for children? Well, very simply. We provide ample materials for loose parts; and we talked about getting donations from local businesses, having our parents donate old stuff, going to garage sales, visiting our park and recreation departments for natural stuff. All these are – are perfect opportunities to provide loose parts for our children. We don't have to go to a catalogue all the time and – and I'm not shooting down, you know, going through Lakeshore or going through Kaplan, or going through any of these companies that sell loose parts, but many times we don't have the budget to do those things. Many times we don't have the ability to spend all that money on loose parts so we should have alternate means of being able to provide loose parts for our children.

Second, you want to provide a rich variety of loose parts. Having wooden blocks out there is not the only type of loose parts that we should have. We should have multiple different variations of blocks; we should have milk cartons. We should have pieces of wood; we should have two-by-fours cut into small sections. We should have a variety of objects that children can manipulate in their environment and be creative with.

Third, we want to provide areas that encourage constructive play. We want to provide areas that foster the ability for children to use loose parts. If all we have is a huge playground out there and we have no opportunity for children to be able to play with loose parts, they're not going to use it. They're not going to be comfortable in doing that because how are you going to build a – a tower or a house at the foot of a slide or in an area that's high-traffic because there's a bike path, or an area that's all noisy with children swinging back and forth on the swings? So, you want to provide specific areas that encourage the use of loose parts.

And then fourth, provide ample storage and easy access to loose parts. Think of it – think about it as you design your kitchen. We design our kitchen so that when we cook the stove is in a specific place; we reach down and get a pot. We know where the spices are. We know where the refrigerator's set up. We know when we're going to wash out our dishes; we usually turn around and the sink's right there. The same thing – you want to provide a hospitable environment, an environment that allows children to have access to loose parts. They shouldn't be locked away all the time, and they shouldn't be a burden for teachers to have to drag out onto the playground. They should be stored in a secured location but then able to be reachable by the children.

Thank you, Beth. And I hope that everybody here has understood just the value of loose parts, and that loose parts can not only enhance your outdoor environment and play for children but it can enhance the way we teach children; how we teach children math; how we teach children reading; how we teach children how to write. How we teach all these things can be used and manipulated through loose parts – loose parts. And loose – loose parts provides us opportunity for children to have open-ended play and teachers can teach that teachable moment.

BETH: Good, and now we're going to take a minute or so for any questions. Looks like we have one. Tanner, can you read that please?

TANNER: Yes, someone was wondering what the regulations were for logs, stumps, and boulders on playgrounds.

JC: Okay, that is a very, very good question. First of all, if it is – there are many playground companies that do what I call "manufactured natural play – play stuff." For instance, they do rocks; they do climbing rocks, stepping stones. There's a couple companies that – that simulate logs and stuff like that. If it is specifically designed as a piece of playground equipment and that is the purpose of it – for instance, there is one company that does a wooden balance beam made out of logs, and it's specifically denoted as a balance beam. Things like that must comply with the playground guidelines. And you must provide surfacing; you must provide proper use zone. They must be mounted to the ground to prevent them from tipping over or falling. So, anything that is considered a piece of playground equipment or is designed specifically as a playground equipment must meet the guidelines according to CPSENASTM.

Now, on another note, if it is being used as a landscape feature, if it is being used as a loose parts material, like blocks or things like that, then they are exempt from the statutes. But, that doesn't mean we don't have to supervise the children, we don't have to monitor what they do, we don't have to err on the side of caution sometimes. But what we do is we plan out the environment. We don't want to put log stumps next to a bunch of jagged rocks, you know, or we don't want to – we don't want to provide a bunch of rocks, you know, in an environment that are going to cause children to fall and strike themselves on – on those rocks. So, you want to kind of use your common sense. You want to provide children with – with log stumps; log stumps are great. And depending on how you're using them is going to be incumbent upon you to provide the safe environment. If you're using them...

BETH: I think it's really important for everyone that they need to check with their local guidelines. Every...

JC: Correct.

BETH: Every locality has them – but certainly logs and stumps and boulders and all sorts of things are used successfully and safely throughout the country in centers, as well as typical preschools and elementary schools. So, there – there are guidelines at your locality that you can access. So, thank you, everybody. JC, can you do the next slide for me, please?

JC: Yes, I can, Beth.

BETH: So, I want to thank everybody for taking this time and – and coming to play with JC and us here at HSBS, and talk about loose parts. Again, you can find this presentation within a week up on our website; it'll be recorded. And feel free to share this with – with your fellow staff members or anyone you think that might find it interesting. This is our website: headstartbodystart.org. And you'll see the number there as well. So, thank you very much for joining us. Everybody have a fun and play-filled day.