

Erasmus + Loose parts play

Module 3: Facilitating loose parts play

Module summary

This module introduces different aspects of facilitating loose part play, including theoretical and personal aspects. This module includes an observation of a loose parts play session – ideally this should be done outdoors during an actual play session, but if it is not possible, a film can be used instead.



Photo © Susan Humble 2022

Target group: This module is for people who will be with children when they are playing and will facilitate loose parts play. It is also important that people who have a wider responsibility for loose parts play understand the skills required.

Previous training or experience required to attend: A basic understanding of loose parts play is required for this module.

Length: 3 – 4.5 hours depending on how the trainer chooses to organise the session. The longer time may be needed to allow for observations to be carried out.

Module 3 Learning outcomes

By the end of this module, participants will:

1. have had the opportunity to reflect on the role of adults in facilitating children's play
2. have gained a personal 'checklist' of possible responses to use in the course of facilitating play
3. be able to recognise 'play cues' and 'play responses'
4. be able to identify play types in the context of observing of children's play (SOOP)
5. will have practiced sensitively carrying out an observation of play (in real life or from filmed play).

Learning indicators

More confident with play types and the play cycle; more conscious about the effect of the space and adults on children's play experience; aware of need for continuous reflection; enthusiasm for creating the best possible space for children to play.

Resources required

Flipchart, marker pens, list of play types with description, play cycle handouts, list of statements about play scenarios, A4 paper, pens, washing line and pegs, scrap materials, rod, buckets, balls.



Manual: 2.6, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5



Tools: 3, 8, 10, 17, 23

Trainer notes

Let participants know that the session will include personal exercises. Part of providing an appropriate space for children to play is based on personal attitudes and preferences regarding safety, fear and play types. In this context when we talk about space, we mean both the physical and the emotional space – we can create the best physical space, but if the children don't have an emotional permission to play (such as being afraid of being shouted at if they get themselves dirty), they won't be able to use it well.

Introduction

Time: 10 minutes

Resources required: flipchart, marker pens, the content of the module written up beforehand

At the beginning, introduce the content of the module to the participants to make it easier for them to follow the programme and make connections.

Icebreaker

Time: 10 minutes.

Welcome the participants and lead a short energising game.

Activity 1: Play types

Time: 15 minutes

Resources required: List of play types with short explanation on separate pieces of paper.



Manual: 4.4

Start the module with a little demonstration game. Ask people to get into pairs and give each pair one of the play types and its explanation. Their task is to prepare a short dramatic demonstration of that play type, and the rest of the group will try to guess which it is.

If needed, hand out a list of all the play types (without explanation), so it is easier for the group to guess.

After the demonstration, run through all the play types together along with an explanation so that everyone understands what they mean.

Trainer notes:

In the Loose Parts Manual you can find references to play types from Hughes (2006), as well as part of the SOOP observation tool. In order to get familiar with the SOOP tool, we suggest using this list.

SOOP is a tool developed by researchers on the [Sydney Playground Project](#) (SPP). The tool itself is an adaptation of another measuring tool, SOPLAY ([System for Observing Play and Leisure Activity in Youth](#)), and was modified specifically to record observational data on the number of children, activity, and physical activity levels during play time in schools participating in the SPP. Our project has generously been given permission to use this tool in our research. This guidance is adapted from the SOOP procedures manual.¹

Trainer input: SOOP Play types

Category	Description	Examples
Sedentary	Sitting or standing and not engaging with	Waiting in line alone, sitting or standing alone, sitting or standing

¹ The original SOOP Procedures manual and an article describing use of the tool can be found in Engelen *et al.*, 2017.

	another person or with an activity.	near another child but not interacting with them, observing others playing, but not participating, reading alone.
Socialising sedentary	Sitting or standing while socialising.	Chatting with friends without moving much.
Playing sedentary	Sitting or standing while playing.	Sand pit, sitting in a den, board games, colouring in.
Moving, not playing	Walking, running, skipping but not as part of a game.	Walking, running, skipping but not as part of a game. Packing away equipment.
Imaginary/pretend/creative play	Games and activities that involve an element of pretend or creativity.	Role playing, relating to piece of equipment as if it takes on a new identity. Nonsense and 'what if..?' games.
Construction play	Using materials to build structures.	Building villages, dens, obstacle courses – this refers to the building stage of the play, not where they are playing with what has been built.
Exploratory	Play that involves testing out materials, exploring spaces, trying things out.	Seeing if a plank will take the weight of a child. Digging in the ground for worms. Making water runs in the sandpit.
Risky play	Play that involves an element of risk taking.	Risks with height, speed, tools, rough and tumble play, etc
Active play	Play that involves physical activity, but is not a sport, construction or creative play. This may also include children who are waiting for their turn in the activity.	Chasing games, ball games that are not sports, dancing, hopscotch, jump rope, races, jumping onto crashmats, lifting or carrying items as part of playing.
Games	Organised games with rules, but not sports).	I-spy, word games, clapping games, verbal games.
Sports		Basketball, football, rounders, etc.

Activity 2: Play cycle

Time: 15 minutes

Resources required: Tool 8. play cycle poster



Manual: 4.3



Tool: 8

Introduce the play cycle through a short input. Explain the steps of the cycle, give examples, and make sure participants understand. See Section 4.3 of the manual.

To have some fun and aid understanding, you can ask participants in pairs or small groups to act out different play clues and different responses to them. Ask the rest of the group to guess the play cues and responses.

Remind them, a **play cue** is a hint or an invitation to someone to join in and play. Children communicate these invitations to play in different ways, sometimes verbally but often through gestures, posture or expressions. For example:

- tap on shoulder and run away laughing
- make a funny face
- wink
- throw a ball to someone
- move closer to someone with things to play with
- allocate roles, for example “you can be the dragon”
- make space in a group for someone to join.

The **return** is a positive and equally playful response to a recognised cue, which can also act as a further cue – an indication to take the play further.

Activity 3: Attitude scales

Time: 15 minutes

Resources required: List of statements

Explain to the group that next, we are going to explore personal attitudes towards loose parts play. Explain that there will be an imaginary scale in the room, where one side of the room means “I don’t like this at all!”, while the other side means “I love it!”.

Explain that you are going to read out some hypothetical play scenarios and are to decide how they feel about that particular scene. For example, would they like it if it happened in their group? Read out all the statements and ask them to position themselves along the imaginary scale according to how they feel. As it is a scale, they can stand in the middle as well, if they somewhat agree or disagree.

After each statement, interview some participants with an imaginary microphone. Ask them why they are standing where they are. Choose people to interview from either side of the scale.

Trainer notes

This game provides an opportunity for a facilitated debate. Encourage people to share their reasoning, so everyone can hear the different perspectives. Make sure that people stay respectful of each other’s opinions and values.

Trainer input: here are some suggested statements for the activity. You can also come up with further statements of your own.

- A child is plays in mud.
- Children are playing tig in the school corridor.
- Some children are playing “Truth, kiss or dare”.
- Two children are playing rough and tumble during the break.
- Some children are climbing a tree in the school yard.
- Three children are cutting up worms.
- Some children are encouraging another child to jump off a fairly high wall.
- Children are talking excitedly and swearing.
- A group of children are having a snowball fight in the schoolyard.
- Some children pull together school desks to make an obstacle course.
- A group of children create a “band” and make music with different “instruments” (hitting objects with other objects).

Activity 4: Role of adults

Time: 10 minutes

Resources required: None



Manual: 4.1



Tool: 3

Following the game about personal attitudes, use section 4.1 of the manual to explain more about the role of adults in loose parts play. Facilitate a little discussion with the group about it, connecting these principles to the previous discussions on personal attitudes. Encourage participants to reflect if they feel they want to change their attitude or not.

Trainer notes

While explaining the importance of allowing children to play as freely as possible, highlight the importance of personal boundaries as well. While our intention might be to provide them as much freedom as possible while making sure of their safety, we must be able to reflect on our own emotions. It can happen that rationally I would like to let them climb trees, as I have completed a risk-benefit assessment and concluded that I have carried out all necessary actions to minimise danger, and I also see the number of benefits this activity provides. However, I might still have a visceral fear when I see children climb up the trees. As a practitioner I have a need to work through these complex feelings to develop my practice.

Activity 5: Observation

Time: 30 minutes

Resources required: Handouts of the play cycle and the list of play types



Manual: 4.3, 4.4, 4.5



Tool: 23

Share the handouts for the play cycle and the play types if you haven't already. In this activity, participants will be asked to go outside and observe children at play. Before going out for the observation, make sure participants understand what "observation" is. Ask them to:

- be respectful of both children and supervising staff
- remember the principles of loose parts play: it should be freely chosen and child-led. This means observers shouldn't intervene, and should try to position themselves in the space where they are not disturbing the flow of children's play
- remember the discussions about the role of the adults. Be mindful that even if adults don't intervene, we can have an effect on children's play.

Tell participants they will have around 20 minutes to observe how children are playing, and during this time they should focus on identifying the different play types and the elements of the play cycle. Ask them to take pens with them and make notes or drawings if they recognise some of the types or elements.

Bring participants back together to share what they have noticed or learned through this exercise.

To close, you can suggest various methods of observations, such as:

- Noticing – for example, making mental notes
- Photographic – for example, taking pictures as and when things happen
- Timeline – for example, identifying a child or area and checking in every 10 mins
- Frameworks – for example, checklists or looking for characteristics
- Targeted/focussed – for example, looking at a specific area/child for a period of time
- Written – for example, a detailed 'story'.

Trainer notes

It may help to provide a sheet with some prompter questions or reminders on it.

This activity is best done during a loose parts play session, in a school, an adventure playground, etc.

If this is not possible, consider options in the area – you might go outside and visit a public playground. Be cautious and plan ahead for this option. It needs extra attention to the environment, and it might cause disturbance for other parents or carers who don't understand what the group is doing there. Choose this option only if you feel confident about being able to explain what you are doing and ask for permission from strangers.

If there are no opportunities for seeing a play session in person, look for appropriate films where participants can practice observation. For example, **films from this LPP.**

This may be an appropriate point for a break in the session. Let participants know if refreshments are available and when and where to meet after the break.

Activity 6: Levels of intervention

Time: 50 minutes

Resources required: flipchart, marker pens, play scenarios



Manual: 4.2

For the next session, remind participants of the play cycle, and that the role of the adult is helping to maintain the cycle. How can we do this? By observing what is happening, and when you see the cycle is threatened, you might intervene – your actions are aimed at supporting the cycle rather than terminating or changing it. So, in this model, intervention is not to stop the children or redirect their play but to enter the frame if appropriate and try to re-establish it if it is in danger of breaking down.

Use the notes in the manual to introduce the four levels of intervention:

- play maintenance,
- simple,
- medial
- complex.

Make sure people have understood. Facilitate a discussion about participants' attitudes.

After getting familiar with the levels of intervention, explain to the group that it is one thing to be aware of these, and another to practice them in a real play session. Ask them to form groups of four to five people, and hand them a previously prepared play scenario (you can see examples in the Trainer notes, but you can also use other examples).

Ask the groups to read the scenarios and discuss whether they should intervene and if yes, how can they do so in line with the principles of facilitating loose parts play. When they are ready, ask each group to present the scenes. After each scene, analyse the situation with the whole group (make sure to avoid any judgements. Explain that these are complex situations, and we are here to discuss our options in the real world). Discuss with them, whether they agree with the level of intervention, or if they have any other ideas what to do.

Close the activity by presenting the list of factors to consider when intervening, which you can find in Session 4.2 of the manual.

Trainer notes

If you feel the atmosphere is not right for the dramatic scenes, you can also ask them to simply discuss their ideas.

Play scenarios

A group of children are queuing to sit in the swing, then jump out of it while it's moving, to the sandpit in front of the swing. They seem quite excited about this. You notice that they are egging on a child who seems a bit unsure about it.

A group of five girls are playing with pots and pans in the sandpit, they are "running a kitchen". A boy is around them, and he would like to join their kitchen, but the girls are dismissing him and telling him to go play elsewhere.

Three children are building an obstacle course using car tyres. Another group also wants to use the tyres for building a tower. They approach the group to take some away, but the obstacle course builders don't want to share them. They are arguing over who can use the tyres.

Children created a "band", and they are making music by hitting all kinds of pots and pans together, drumming on the dustbins and using any tools they can find to make noise. A neighbour of the school shouts at them to keep quiet.

A group of children are playing "Palace." (They are queens, princesses, kings and lords, dressing up in different fabrics). You notice that they have appointed only one child to be a servant, and they are asking all kinds of favours of them.

Children are building a tower of plastic pipes. They are trying to reach the top of the small hut in the yard. The tower is quite advanced already, but you notice that they have built a narrow section in the structure which cannot support newer ones, so is unstable. You anticipate the tower will fall down when they put the next pipe on.

Sum up: with principles of facilitating loose parts play

This may have been an intense discussion. Give a short summary about the principles of facilitating loose parts play, using the notes from the manual, section 4.2.

This may be an appropriate point for a break in the session. Let participants know if refreshments are available and when and where to meet after the break.

Activity 7: Communication during play time

Time: 30 minutes

Resources required: flipchart, marker pens, handout on communication

Give a short talk on communication techniques, looking at how to communicate in a supportive way and what the barriers are to communication.

Trainer notes

Explain to participants that when adults intervene in children's play, it can make a huge difference what kind of language or communication they use.

Judging, threatening, lecturing, etc. when trying to resolve an issue, are more likely to make children feel put down and create a barrier. Using supportive communication techniques such as mirroring, open questions, etc. gives children a chance to express themselves more freely.

Explain also that there can be some tensions in the loose parts play approach, mainly regarding whether children are really able to choose freely all the time. Connect this to communication: using supportive communication can help children feel more involved and understand reasons for certain rules or guidelines better.

Remember also, that if you are using supportive communication, you are serving as a role model for children, demonstrating how can they use these techniques as well in certain situations.

You can print and share the Communication Handout provided below.

HANDOUT - Communication Tools

Mirroring (“I see that you were distressed when you couldn’t finish in time.”) When we use mirroring, we try to put it into words what we see or hear from the other person. We don’t interpret but describe what we understood. It doesn’t really matter if we are not exact in our observation, as the other person can correct us and continue sharing.

Open questions (“How did you feel about the change of plans?”) If we want to know more, we should phrase our questions in an open way, so the other person feels they can share their feelings. If they can only answer with a yes or no, they might not go into details.

Rephrasing (“So you are saying that you were bored during the game.”) Rephrasing the other’s comments serves the aim of making sure we understood them well, and also gives a chance for the other person to describe their feelings in more details.

Self-exploration (“I also feel angry, when someone doesn’t listen to my ideas.”) We can share a bit of ourselves in order to facilitate discussion about feelings. It is important not to shift the focus on to us (as by telling our own story), but show that we often feel the same way.

Summarising: Summarising what we have heard during a discussion can help people become more aware of what has happened and this way they can take away more from the situation.

Informing: In case we can help the other person by sharing concrete information on a troubling topic. This often solves the situation more easily.

Activity 8: Fears and solutions? Checklist

Time: 40 minutes

Resources required: flipchart papers, markers pens

Let participants that by the end of this module, they will have had some time to reflect on the issues covered, and finally create a “Checklist” they can use for facilitating loose parts play.

Ask participants to form groups of three to five people. Hand each group flip chart paper and marker pens.

Ask them to, for a short time, play the “devil’s advocate”. Put on their dark glasses and try to look at loose parts play through the lens of what kind of problems might arise. Tell them, that our ultimate goal is to provide the appropriate safe space for children, both in a physical and a mental sense, it is important to be aware of the difficulties.

Make sure to note that they should only share as much as they feel comfortable in the group. Ask them to note concerns on the flipchart (for example: “I will be constantly in conflict with the neighbours because of the noise.”; “I will feel stressed out if I see children doing something “dangerous””, etc.). Give them about 20 minutes for this activity, during which encourage discussion about attitudes.

When they are ready, ask each group to share their notes. See how similar or different the notes are. While they are sharing, make a list of the shared concerns.

Once all groups have shared, begin to consider solutions. Reassure the group that it is normal to have fears or doubts, but, as we did in the beginning of the module, we can always find solutions. Spend the next 20 minutes on a group discussion about possible ways to address the concerns.

Examples might be: If you are worried about children climbing in trees, you might:

- seek support from colleagues
- discuss with the children how high is acceptable and safe
- ask someone knowledgeable about trees to check the strength of the branches.

Ask each group to make a note of the solutions or write them up for everyone to see.

During the discussion, emphasise that it is always okay to ask for help from colleagues, whether in their own school, or even this group of practitioners. Suggest that you all exchange contacts with each other, so if someone has a question, they can seek an understanding ear or advice.

Trainer notes

If the atmosphere is right for this, you can also ask the group to choose one or more of their ideas and create a small dramatic scene about the situation. Seeing the scenes might help lighten the mood.

Closing

- Thank everyone for their participation.
- Return to the learning outcomes you introduced at the beginning of the module to check with participants if they have been achieved.
- Ensure participants know arrangements for any other modules they can participate in.
- Create an opportunity for participants to set their own personal goal or task to carry out as a result of the session.
- Plan a short evaluation exercise to check satisfaction with the training content, the training style, the venue and arrangements.
- Provide contact details as appropriate.



**Co-funded by
the European Union**



In Scotland, the project was co-ordinated by
East Lothian Play Association
www.elpa.org.uk
Scottish Registered Charity SCO50202