

Using open-ended materials

Connections to *Aistear* and *Síolta*

Aistear

Themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking

Guidelines for good practice: Learning and developing through play (pp. 57 and 103-106)

Síolta Standards

1: Rights of the Child, C1.1, 1.2, 1.3

2: Environments, C2.5, 2.6, 2.7

6: Play, C6.5

[Research Digests](#) linked to the above Standards

- by joining a **recycling centre** where businesses bring end-of-use or by-products.

Why use open-ended materials?

Children love open-ended materials because of the possibilities they afford them. Using open-ended materials encourages imagination, creativity and problem-solving skills so play can be richer and more complex. This kind of play ensures rich learning and is fun! For example, the use of open-ended materials supports children's role as scientists who are constantly conducting experiments, testing ideas, and building their understanding of the world. As children play with the materials, they are exploring what happens, coming up with new ways of manipulating the materials, deciding that one material can symbolise something else and using lots of language. This type of play is open-ended and builds creative thinking.

What are open-ended materials?

Open-ended materials (also called loose parts) are materials that can be used in numerous ways indoors and outdoors by babies, toddlers and young children. They can be moved, carried, combined, and redesigned in any way the child decides. These materials can be natural or manufactured and can be sourced in several ways:

- in **nature** - simply by going to woods, beaches and gardens
- asking parents to bring in materials from **home**
- by **recycling** in the setting



Using open-ended materials gives children the freedom to choose and create, developing confidence and competence. Access to sticky-tape, scissors, paint, paper and glue extends creative opportunities for older toddlers and young children.

A simple length of fabric can be a river, a cloak, a table cloth, a blanket, part of a den or even something else!

Open-ended materials are suitable for use by all children as they will manipulate and use them according to their stage of development.

The role of the practitioner

Your role is to prepare the environment with lots of safe, challenging, open-ended materials. Occasionally you may need to model or suggest how materials might be used, without telling children what to do. A key part of your role is to observe and document what is happening/what children are learning and to plan to support and extend that learning in other ways.



Storing open-ended materials

Some materials such as bark or sand need to be covered and replaced regularly. Large boxes, trollies or open shelving, indoors or outdoors can be used to keep materials in order. It is important though to let exploration flow from one day to the next so sometimes materials can be left overnight and worked on again the following day.

Have a selection of storage items in different sizes. Smaller items can be stored in baskets, wooden boxes or clear plastic containers. If mixed ages are using the space, ensure that items suitable only for older children are safely stored when babies and toddlers are in the area.

Safety precautions

Keep materials clean, well-maintained and replace as needed. Be aware of any allergies that children may have and avoid using open-ended materials if they are linked to allergens, for example, milk cartons or materials that may have been in contact with nuts.

Also with babies and toddlers be mindful of materials that might pose a choking hazard!



Listed below are some examples of **open-ended materials**. The list is not intended to be exhaustive, just to give some ideas of materials that might interest children. Use any materials that are suitable and look out for items that are available in your locality.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balls • Bamboo • Bark • Baskets • Blankets and throws • Blocks • Bottle caps • Boxes (variety of sizes) • Buckets • Buttons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chains • Chalk • Crates • Cushions • Dress-up props • Egg cartons (un-used) • Fabric (curtains, shawls) • Feathers • Flower pots 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food containers • Funnels • Guttering • Hair curlers • Hoses • Jam-jar lids • Keys • Leaves • Lentils • Logs • Leather purses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Magazines • Moss • Newspapers • Nuts and bolts • Pallets • Paper • Paper plates • Pasta • Pebbles • Pegs • Pine cones • Pipes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planks • Plastic bottles • Ribbons • Rope • Sand and gravel • Saucepans • Shells • Spools and reels • Sticky tape • Stones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Straws • String • Trays • Tree stumps • Tubes • Twigs • Tyres • Wall-paper • Water • Wind chimes • Wooden utensils
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