

Open-Ended Materials

Relevant Satellite Accreditation Standards

III. The Daily Program for Children

C. The provider uses a variety of techniques to address, extend, and support children's development and self-guided play.



Kids Cave and Learning Den



Small Steps – Great Expectations



Kathy's Kids Home Child Care

The Basics

Open-ended materials can be used in many ways and support a wider age-range than closed-ended materials, which have a specific purpose or predetermined storyline. See the chart below for examples of each.

Open-ended				
<i>Can be used in many ways</i>				
Water	Sand	Playdough	Balls	Scarves
Loose parts	Wooden blocks	Crayons	Puppets	Dolls
Daily living props	Miniature props	Magnet tiles	Natural objects	Cardboard

Closed-ended		
<i>With a specific purpose</i>		
Books	Puzzles	Musical instruments
Board games	Stacking ring	Shape sorter
<i>With a predetermined storyline</i>		
PAW Patrol figurines	Frozen princess costume	Bluey's ice cream truck playset
Pixar's Cars playset	Mr. Potato Head	Marvel Spidey action figure

Why offer open-ended materials? The type of materials that you have in your program impact the quality of children's play, and therefore their growth and learning (Trawick-Smith et al., 2015). Exposure to open-ended materials like loose parts leads to deeper, more autonomous play.

For infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, open-ended materials promote (Cankaya, Martin, & Haugen, 2025)...

- **quantitative development** which includes fundamental math skills like conceptualizing size, quantity, and variability.
- **perceptual performance** which includes visual skills, auditory processing, and motor coordination.
- **memory** or the ability to store and recall information based on experience.
- **self-regulation** or the ability to manage internal processes linked with stimulation, including but not limited to emotions, hunger, sensory overload, and fatigue.
- **convergent** and **divergent thinking** or the process of brainstorming and narrowing ideas to solve a problem.

[How can I support play with open-ended materials?](#) Aim for *more* open-ended materials than closed-ended materials to support deeper mixed-age play among children. Thoughtful introduction of open-ended materials is important for supporting children's active engagement and creative exploration. For example, arrange materials within the environment to invite play by presenting an appealing display. Educators may also scaffold children's play with open-ended materials by modeling creative use. For example, using pine cones as baking ingredients or scarves as a mote around a tower. To further support learning, use rich language, like mathematical and spatial vocabulary, to help teach in context. Remember, the more ways to use it, the *more ways to play*.

I want to learn more!

- [The Power of Open-Ended Materials](#) (Resource)
- [Loose parts: What does this mean?](#) (Resource)
- [Relationship Between Children's Indoor Loose Parts Play and Cognitive Development](#) (Research article)
- [The Value of Open-Ended Play](#) (Article)

[Books available through Satellite's lending library:](#)

(for Satellite participating programs only)

- Loose Parts 2: Inspiring Play with Infants and Toddlers (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2016)
- Family Child Care Homes – Creative Spaces for Children to Learn (Armstrong, 2011)
- Designs for Living and Learning: Transforming Early Childhood Environments (Curtis & Carter, 2003)