# A Few of My Favorite Things: Nothing Wrong with *Stuff*

by Jim Greenman

People who write columns for years sooner or later succumb to what I think of as the Larry King list phenomena. Before he was released by *USA Today*, his column had become a string of brief comments about things, subjective lists, and random mentions of people and events. Of course, you also become a bit (or a lot) repetitive, reworking themes and critiques and mining earlier content to come up with things to say.

So, a confession: Larry, I understand where you were coming from. My time has come after 25 years of writing for *Exchange*. What's wrong with lists and a string of comments, particularly when on deadline? You be the judge. This column is focused on a simple theme: the idiosyncratic furnishings, equipment, and stuff that I would have in any center where young children are going to spend a good chunk of their childhood. Great early learning environments don't look like school. We ought to create great places to live and learn: one part classroom, one part laboratory, one part home, one part playground, one part park, and one part vacant lot. These ought to be: empowering places rich with possibility for exploration and creation for the days, weeks, months, and years children will spend in child care. Here is the *good stuff* I don't want to do without: it, too, can promote success in school and life.

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## Great stuff indoors

**Loveseats**
Loveseats, easy chairs, and futons create laps for reading and snuggling. They are also great for sitting, cruising around, and climbing up and on with friends. They can essentially become multipurpose learning centers as well as places to pause when life gets stressful.

**Pillows**
Stacks of washable pillows on hand help children make their own places and create "places to pause." Bed pillows with pillow cases are the most washable alternative and allow for the most color flexibility.

**Small rugs and carpet squares**
Bathmat size rugs can serve to define learning areas. Carpet squares, long a staple of Montessori programs, are great to allow children to define their own work space.

**Small, low tables**
Tables that are perfect height for toddlers, also work for preschoolers because, unlike most of us, they like to kneel, often preferring kneeling to sitting. Twelve to 16 inches high and 18" x 18" surface and smaller make great learning stations for one to three children.

**Plants, dried flowers, and other plant materials**
Why not use eucalyptus, pine, or other aromatic plant materials to enhance the aromascape, as well as pussy willows, dried flowers, and grasses to create a more natural aesthetic and reduce an institutional look. Why *not* grow plants?

**Fountains**
Fountains aren't expensive anymore and can create a visual and aural

aesthetic that add charm and interest to the soundscape. For health reasons, they need to be kept out of the reach of children.

**Inexpensive cardboard "brick" blocks**
Yes, you can make them out of milk cartons but they are pretty reasonably priced and great for any age group, particularly under threes. You can make pretend trains, towers that can safely tumble, walls to crash though, pathways, and "falling dominos." Great math, physics, small motor learning, and opportunities for the exercise of personal power.

**Treasure baskets**
A *treasure basket* is a great concept to organize experience for infants and toddlers, a mobile variation of a learning center or an activity box, and a good source of unstructured materials and other loose parts. The treasure basket is a practical way to assemble different objects to engage and stimulate developing senses and understanding. What makes the concept come alive is putting thought into what the treasure basket is filled with and using natural and everyday household objects.

**Infant carriers**
Is there a better place for a young baby to be, than against the body of a primary caregiver? One of the marvelous virtues of body carriers is the responsive communication that occurs when teachers move about and work with young babies secure on their chests or hips. As a baby moves or makes a sound, a caregiver almost always responds with a reassuring sound, touch, and adjustment of her body to the baby's movement. If a baby carrier of some sort is the evolutionary solution for billions of women who must work while caring for young babies in almost every culture throughout time, why not in child care? (Overuse of body carriers is a concern only if a child goes from the carrier to the boppie, crib, chair, or other restraining equipment and has little time "unrestrained").

**Indoors and outdoors fabric**
Fabric, like pillows, allows children and adults to transform a place. A tablecloth on a table can signify a change in learning centers (e.g. green felt for small blocks, blue plastic for play dough). Fabric over pillows creates a pillow mountain for infant crawlers; vary the color and texture (silky, scratchy, leathery, sticky, and so on) and you have a series of great sensory-motor experiences for children trying to *make sense* of the world. Giving older children fabric (quilts, blankets, tarps, parachutes) to create forts or tents or wrap structures ala the artist Christo is fun, adds interest, and also involves science and math problem-solving. Children love working out the physics of places with their bodies and feeling that they have the power to change environments.

**Boxes**
Large and small cardboard allow children to create habitats. So what if they don't last?

**Large plastic blocks**
Just like with indoor cardboard or wooden blocks, plastic blocks outdoors add greatly to the play and educational opportunities.

**Measuring instruments**
Children learn to love to measure with yard sticks and tape measures (almost magically retracting), measuring cups and gauges, and scales of all sorts.

**Garden tubs**
Inexpensive garden tubs are great for the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th simultaneous opportunity for 2-3 child play with water and other sensory materials: sand, dirt, leaves.

**Loose Parts**
Loose parts, and more loose parts: materials that can be used together, combined, collected, sorted, separated, pulled apart, stacked, lined up, and dumped. Loose parts are almost anything safe and not fixed in place; they allow children the freedom to use them in inventive ways. They can be stored in stuff sacks, backpacks, utility carts, and duffel bags for easy use.

## Great stuff outdoors

**Picnic tables and benches: child size and adult size**
Adding places to gather, hang out, and work increases play and social possibilities.

**Bird feeders and bird baths**
Why not?

**Hoses**
Water, water, everywhere: to run sprinklers, to wet sand, to water vegetation, to fill tubs and buckets. Soaker hoses are great for running through and for stringing overhead to create a "drippy world."

**Plastic gutters and pipe**
Gutter sections and pipe, combined with hoses, creates multiple creative opportunities to create interesting water flow and explore the properties of water and gravity.

**Driftwood**
Driftwood is great to carry around, fill wagons and wheelbarrows, and attach together to create sculpture.

**Wood rounds**
Wood rounds allow children to create their own pathways, mini stages, and other places.

**Wheelbarrows and wagons**
Wheelbarrows and wagons are nearly perfect pieces of educational equipment for children as young as two. At one

## The Value of Unstructured Materials (A/K/A Stuff)

These are loose parts materials that you won't find in a catalogue: various found, made, household, or low-cost purchased objects, the uses of which are not predetermined by adults and only limited by the child's skills and imagination. The objects tend to be simple and perhaps "junk" to the adult eye until a child recognizes the potential of the item. Look for objects that can be grasped or squeezed and those with texture or the potential for action such as rolling. A few examples include:

*Natural objects:*
- pine cones, differing sizes
- large stones
- shells
- dried gourds
- large chestnuts
- big feathers
- corks, large sizes
- piece of loofah and natural sponge

*Objects made of natural materials:*
- woolen ball
- little baskets
- bamboo whistle
- small wicker mats
- yarn

*Brushes:*
- toothbrush
- shaving brush
- small shoe brush
- house painting brush
- cosmetic brush

*Wooden objects:*
- cylinders, bobbins
- wooden rings
- spoon or spatula
- wooden dowels/knobs
- clothes peg (peg-two types)
- cubes, short lengths of wood

*Metal objects:*
- key rings linked together
- bunch of bells
- triangle
- closed tins containing rice, beans, gravel, salt, etc.
- tea strainer
- tin lids – all types
- lengths of chain
- spoons – various sizes
- small egg whisk
- canning jar rings
- bunch of keys

*Objects in leather, cloth, paper, rubber, other:*
- scarves, gloves
- small bags containing lavender, rosemary, thyme, cloves
- small leather bag with zip
- velvet powder puff
- leather glasses case
- small notebook with spiral rings
- wax paper
- tin foil
- cardboard
- length of rubber tubing

What do young children do with these? They hold, rub, squeeze, sort, put together, line up, drop, fill, stack, pile up, count, and on and on. They combine the materials in ways we would not think of. In fact, the best way to approach junk is that if an item is safe, and that means safe to explore with the mouth, then give it to children and see what they do with it.

Use the materials in a treasure basket or combine with a variety of small containers and store them in containers that require different motor skills to use. Carrying a container without a handle requires different skills than carrying one with a handle, and there are numerous variations of handles: for example, jug handles, wire, cane, and fixed. Possible containers include:

*Plastic objects:*
- film canisters
- cups
- baskets, bowls
- hair curlers
- tubing
- margarine tubs
- utility trays
- funnels
- boxes
- tennis ball cans
- cylinders
- buckets
- bags

When using unstructured materials, keep in mind the following:

- Always be aware of the hazards materials present for small scientists who use their mouths to explore: for example choking on small pieces (which may have come off a larger object) and ingesting toxic finishes. Keep a choke testing tube handy. Look for sharp edges or possible edges if an object breaks.

- Close supervision is important when children of mixed ages are present. An older child has the strength to lift objects which are too heavy for a baby, and in their hands a large stone or a small spoon, perfectly safe for a baby to play with, can become an inadvertent dangerous object.

- Rotate materials in different combinations. Facilitate play by putting out different materials every week or so. For example, some jar lids on a plate next to a teddy sitting in a chair suggest crackers for morning snack.

- Every so often, casually plop down and play with the materials yourself, but not with the aim of getting the child to do what you do.

- Use the materials in a bounded area to reduce the pickup and incorporate them into learning centers.

center, a child repeatedly struggled with not dumping the contents, showing great persistence, looked up at the teacher and said angrily: "Damn, Teacher, there is a wheel missing." While the teacher was tempted to put away the wheelbarrow as developmentally inappropriate or substitute a sturdy two-wheeled vehicle, she realized that the child's struggle to make it work was the learning — learning to integrate mind and body and take into account all of the factors that were important. Maneuverability changes depending on the load and the surface, and requires constant thinking and adjusting. Wheelbarrows and wagons also satisfy the primal childhood urge to haul and dump things.

■ **Waterproof pads and blankets** Young babies need to get out, and waterproof fabric increases the possibilities.

## A final word

It is not particularly difficult or very expensive to create a learning environment for young children. Their restless urge to discover and master will make a laboratory out of any setting that has sufficient loose parts and motor opportunities. But it does take a lot of observation and reflection to provide environments that provides a *safe* laboratory for experimentation for children in groups and a manageable environment for staff — one that strikes a balance between a too-stifling order and a too-flexible chaos.

### Nicholson's Theory of Loose Parts

Landscape architect Simon Nicholson's theory of loose parts (*Alternate Learning Environments,* Dowden, Hutchinson, & Ross, 1974) is powerful in its simplicity:

*In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kinds of variables in it.*

*Creativity — the playing around with the components and variables of the world in order to make experiments and discover new things and form new concepts — has been explicitly stated as the domain of the creative few. . . . This is particularly true of young children, who find the world where they cannot play with building and making things, or play with fluid, water, fire, or living objects, and all the things that give us the pleasure that results from discovery and invention. . . . The simple facts are these:*

*There is no evidence, except in some special cases of mental disability that some young babies are born creative and inventive and others are not.*

*There is evidence that all children love to interact with variables, such as materials and shapes; smells and other physical phenomena, such as electricity, magnetism, and gravity; media such as gases and fluids; sounds, music, motion; chemical interactions, cooking, and fire; and other humans, and animals, plants, words, concepts, and ideas. With all these things children love to play, experiment, discover, and invent, and have fun.*