

Designing Playful Products

Nine principles for including children in collaborative, rapid R&D

Alison Oldfield and Helen Manchester



About the Project

REACT was established in 2011 and funds academic researchers in the arts and humanities to collaborate with creative businesses, and produce prototype products or services. In September 2014, REACT launched 'Play Sandbox', a four month research and development (R&D) scheme that supported six teams to create new products or services aimed at children between 7 and 12 years of age. Central to Play Sandbox was a group of 14 children and young people called 'Young Coaches', who participated at different points from inception to completion to help teams develop their ideas.

The purpose of this paper is to support and guide others looking to do similar collaborative design with children in effective, meaningful ways. Its findings are aimed at individuals or organisations interested in involving children or young people in design processes, particularly in relation to digital play products or services for children or in rapid, collaborative environments.

Research Findings

REACT commissioned the authors of this paper to explore the Young Coaches' impact on and experiences in Play Sandbox. The research examined what happens when children get involved in collaborative design processes. How does it affect the individuals, the design process itself, and the products produced?

The research findings have led to a set of nine principles to consider when involving children in designing products, services or technologies.



Nine principles for including children in collaborative, rapid R&D

1 Start with a shared clear purpose and aim When you consider involving children in a design process, think about your aim and purpose. Make the aim realistic given the resources available, particularly timescales and support for children, and ensure that everyone involved – including the children – is aware of the purpose of everyone's participation.

2 Consider recruitment and selection of children carefully When recruiting a new group of children, consider what cohort suits the aims of the project. Which children are involved should be thought through at the outset. This may require providing additional support or resources to ensure a diverse cohort is recruited and retained.

3 Carefully consider your own aims but also match these with the needs, desires and availability of the children For longer-term design collaboration, consistent, regular contact with the same group of children is useful. When planning children's involvement, consider their availability, motivations for participating and practical requirements like food, transportation and access. Carefully consider what types of design activities are feasible and appropriate, given the time restrictions and the space.

4 Build relationships with individual participants and families Discover early in the relationship what individual children require in order to participate and feel included, including dietary, communication and access requirements, what environments they prefer and their interests. Be aware that certain methods may be more or less appropriate for children depending on their ages, experiences with design processes, time available and interests.

5 Establish procedures and systems to set expectations, roles, responsibilities and ethical guidelines Consider how expectations, roles, responsibilities and ethical guidelines are organised and communicated. How will adults be briefed on the shared responsibilities around child protection, risk assessments, feedback loops, consent and confidentiality?

6 Develop shared but flexible expectations on collaborative decisionmaking Create a shared set of expectations on how collaborative design will happen in the project so that all those involved understand how decisions may be made, how information is being recorded and how feedback is shared. This will change throughout the process as relationships develop and needs change, so making time for dialogue and reflection about the process as a whole will help.

7 Listen, observe and respond Be open to accept feedback and change approaches when things do not go as planned or the plan has unintended outcomes.

8 Help children understand and celebrate their involvement However children are involved, providing consistent feedback on how their ideas are being used is important. Recognise and celebrate their involvement at the end.

9 Take into account adults' previous work with and conceptions of children and young people Consider the previous experience of adults working with the children. Use this to set realistic expectations and plan any additional support or training needs.