

# Designing With, Not For: International Perspectives on Co-Creating with Young People

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# Shaping the digital future for kids, with kids

The Joan Ganz Cooney Center is a nonprofit research and innovation lab at Sesame Workshop in New York City, dedicated to advancing children's learning and well-being in the digital age

A report to  
Carnegie Corporation  
of New York -

The Potential Uses  
of  
Television  
in  
Preschool Education

by  
Joan Ganz Cooney



# Inspired by the R&D practices behind *Sesame Street*

We take the child-centered innovation and design methods that Sesame has pioneered for more than 55 years and help creators apply them to today's emerging media and technology



# How we work



**Co-design** with children and families

**Support product teams** with research and insight

**Advise industry leaders** on responsible, child-centered innovation

**Translate research** into product strategy

**Build cross-sector community** to drive collaboration and impact

# The Sandbox



- Our **design and innovation lab** that helps digital media innovators create products that are good for kids
- We combine **evidence-based research** with **co-design experiences** alongside kids, families, and educators to help answer two essential questions:
  - Is it **engaging and appropriate** for children?
  - Will it have a **positive impact on their learning** and well-being?

# What is co-design?

Co-design is a **participatory research framework** that emphasizes the co-creation of research objectives, methodologies, data collection, and dissemination among researchers, practitioners, and technology developers.



Co-design brings **learners and educators** into the education innovation and R&D process, ensuring education solutions are designed **with, not for**, learning communities.



What happens  
when you  
co-design tech  
products with  
kids?

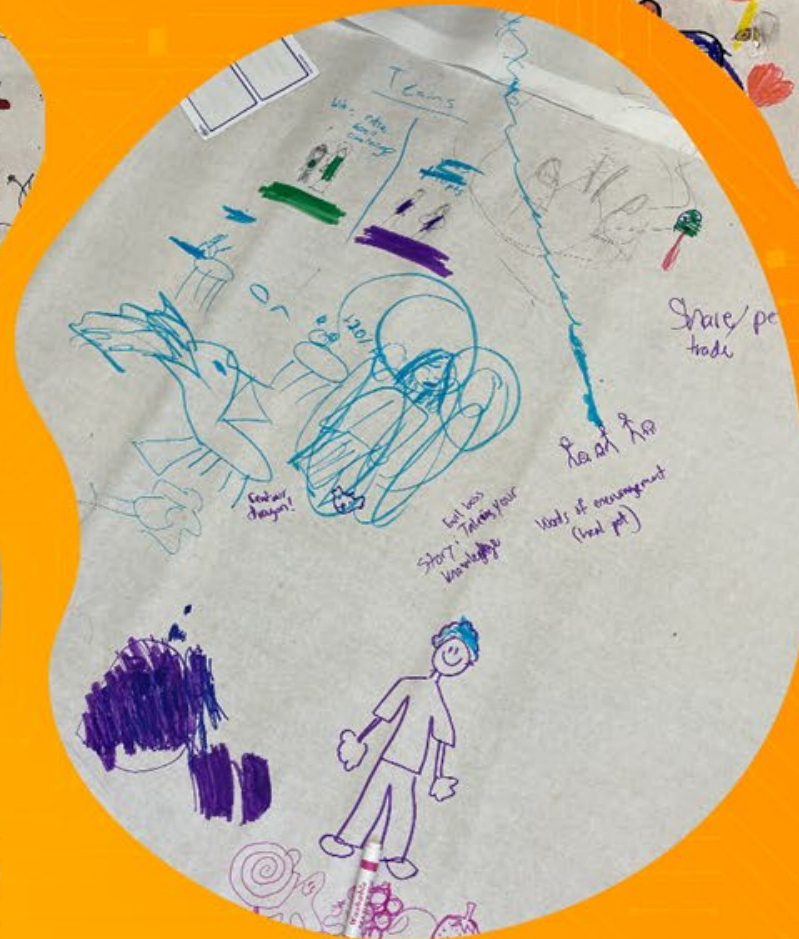
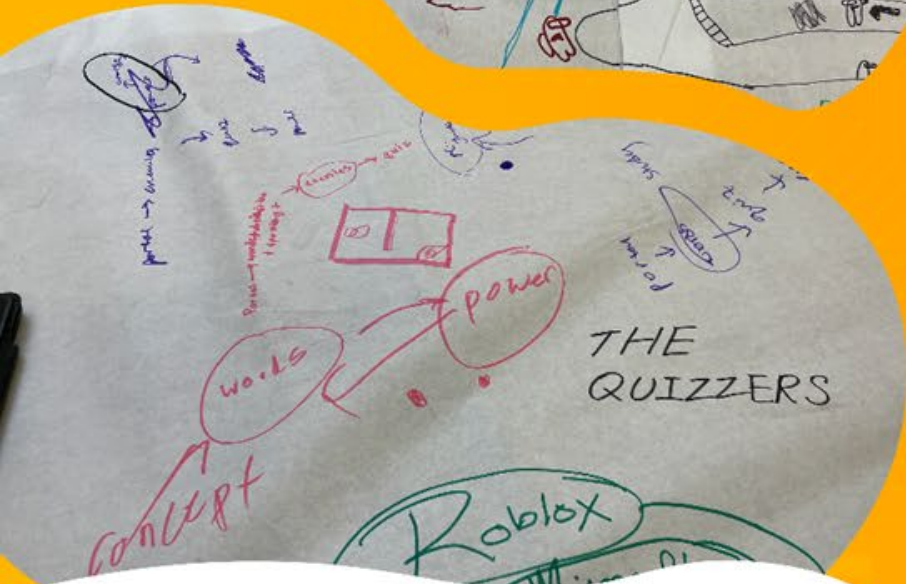
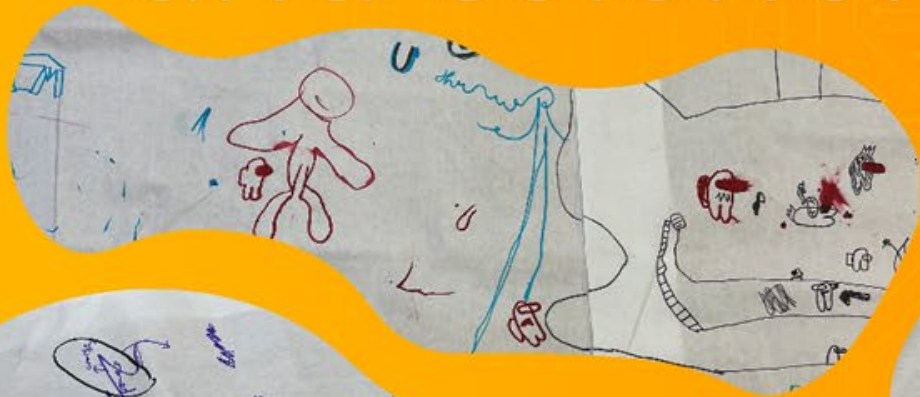
You'll probably sit on the floor  
and answer a Question of the Day



# You'll likely break out the crafts



# You might need giant paper and colorful pens



# You'll be inspired as you design together



# Sandbox for Literacy Innovations (SLI)

**Three-year expansion of our Sandbox product lab to help build literacy tools that kids want to use—and that work because they are:**

- High-quality
- Evidence-based
- Engaging for diverse learners



# Why literacy? Why now?

- **National challenge** – Fewer than 33% of U.S. 4th graders read at or above proficient level (NAEP 2024), continued decline post-COVID
- **Research shift** – renewed focus on the science of literacy, not just phonics, but also oral language, comprehension, writing, and motivation
- **Digital opportunity** – edtech is ubiquitous in classrooms, and digital media is everywhere at home; we can meet children where they are
- **The gap** – most edtech is unloved by kids and/or misaligned with learning science; there's a critical need for better tools that are both evidence-based and engaging

# Our first six SLI partners



# Designing for digital well-being

- Well-designed digital experiences *can* support children’s emotional, social, and creative development
- We help developers create products that:
  - Promote agency, connection, and creativity
  - Support belonging, joy, and emotional resilience
  - Reflect children’s experiences and identities
- With UNICEF and LEGO, we steward a growing “community of practice” focused on supporting children’s well-being in digital play



# “Well-Being by Design” initiatives

## Well-Being by Design Fellowship



WELL-BEING BY DESIGN FELLOWSHIP 2025

### Announcing the 2025 Fellows

 Jen Chiou	 Mariana Diaz-Wionczek	 Phoebe Jiang	 Madlyn Larson	 Kyrsten Novak
 Danny Pimentel	 Noelle Posadas Shang	 Maried Rivera Nieves	 Rubin Soodak	 Sunny Williams

## Young Futures Funding Challenge

# Here Comes The Fun!

A SIM Funding Challenge to Reimagine Digital Play for Youth Wellbeing



SESAME WORKSHOP  
Jean Casey Creative Center

pivotal

YOUNG FUTURES

BEEN CROWN  
exchange

MIANTIC

# AI changes the tools, not the principles

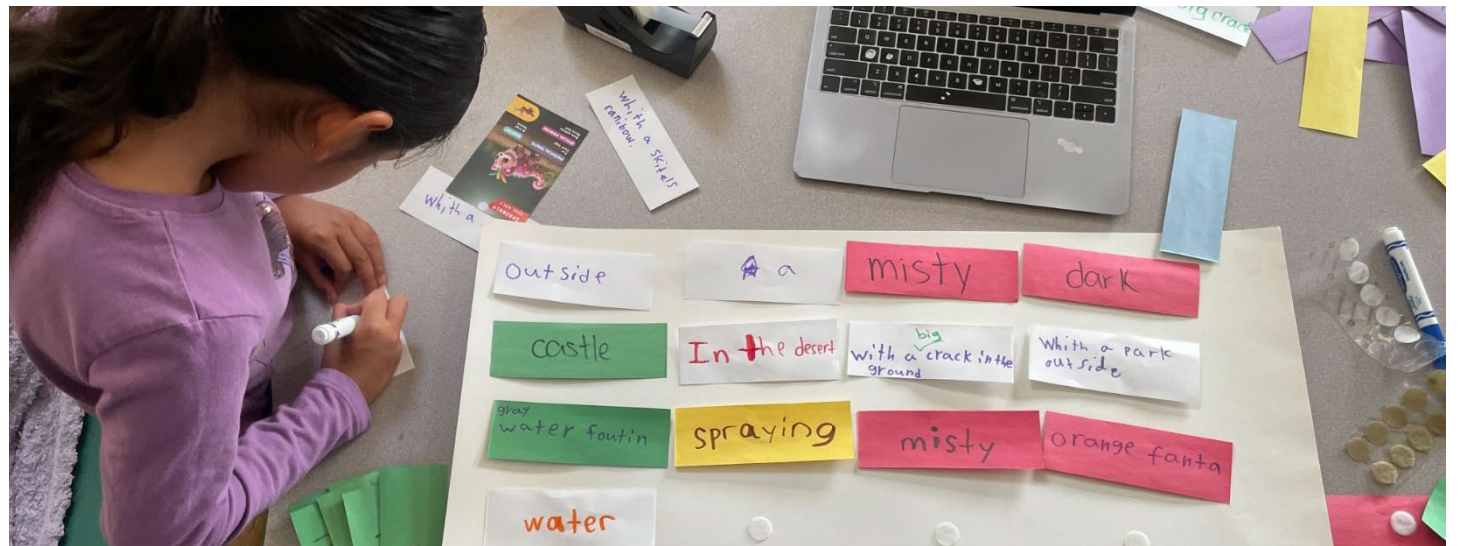
- Children still need play, connection, creativity, and agency, no matter the technology
- Our existing design frameworks (participatory methods, well-being by design) remain essential
- AI must be developmentally appropriate, culturally grounded, and family-inclusive
- New technology ≠ new childhood; it's still about relationships, discovery, and joy

# What might “playful AI” look like?

- How might AI support storytelling and reflection in children’s own voices?
- Can AI model empathy or scaffold emotional conversations?
- How do we embed child safety and caregiver partnership in AI-powered tools?
- We’re partnering with developers via the Sandbox and the Fellowship to explore AI’s role in literacy and emotional expression



“I want to make more images with AI and make AI smarter”  
– girl, age 7





**Thank you!**