



CASE STUDY

The 2025 Well-Being by Design Fellows participated in a four-month professional development program for designers and producers of interactive kids' technology and media. They met online to workshop their current projects, network with other fellows, and gain insights from research and industry leaders as they worked to incorporate principles of well-being into their designs. We are delighted to share highlights from each fellow's experience.

## Kyrsten Novak



Kyrsten Novak is a senior user researcher specializing in children's digital experiences. With a background in human factors and developmental psychology, she has shaped technology products for young users at major tech companies. Her work spans education, health technologies, and family-focused products. Currently, Kyrsten leads research initiatives at Amazon Kids, focusing on devices and services for children ages 3-12 and their families.



**PRODUCT:** Well-being in Children's UX: Evolving Heuristics for Digital Products

**TARGET:** For researchers and designers building and evaluating products used by kids ages 3-12.

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User Experience (UX) Practitioners use heuristic evaluation frameworks to uncover design issues within user interfaces. Widely used and acceptable frameworks, such as Nielsen Norman Group's 10 Usability Heuristics, Basic Principles for Interface Design by "Tog" Tognazzini, and User Interface (UI) Tenets and Traps by Medlock and Herbst, are well-integrated in the experience design industry. However, child-centered product researchers, designers, and developers wonder:

*"If these are usability violations for adults, do they apply to children's products as well?"*

While some child-centered guides exist, such as Nielsen Norman Group's Children's UX: Usability Issues in Designing for Young People and various others for e-learning and gaming, they don't match the comprehensive scope of established heuristic evaluation general audience (GA) frameworks. These GA frameworks, combined with the Responsible Innovation in Technology for Children (RITEC) and child-and-youth participatory design, offer an ideal foundation for developing a new framework for child-centered user interfaces.

By integrating well-established usability principles with RITEC well-being components along with the perspectives of children and youth, we can better evaluate digital experiences for children, ultimately leading to products that better serve their unique social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and overall well-being needs.



### WHAT COMPONENTS OF WELL-BEING DOES MY PRODUCT ADDRESS? HOW?

The future state of a child-centered heuristic framework intentionally integrates developmentally appropriate guidelines. For example, emotional development is a critical developmental need. The RITEC framework suggests that digital experiences should allow children to experience and recognize a range of emotions, and offer opportunities to learn to regulate those emotions. When discussing ‘what makes a good product?’ one youth design participant suggested that it’s important to “have areas to reduce overstimulation” and that creators can do this by offering “breaks or music”. Both kids and developmental experts identify the importance of incorporating opportunities to support skill growth for emotional regulation, signifying that this is a key component for a child-centered heuristic evaluation framework.

GA heuristics include “**match between the system and the real world**” as a clear principle for UI design, suggesting that designs incorporate words, phrases, and concepts familiar to the user, rather than internal jargon. While this should certainly carry over to a child-centered framework, we should expand our focus to integrate concepts that promote “competence” and growth for children. Since kids live imaginatively, matching the system to the real world may look a bit different for kids than it does for adults, and should be measured appropriately. Youth participants mentioned the importance of storytelling in an experience, and said that a “lack of storytelling,” “lack of color,” and “hard stops” makes for a bad product for kids. When comparing these insights to a child’s “real world,” we can understand why they are so important: kids thrive with narration, color is magical, and countdowns are powerful.



*Meeting all of the incredible fellows and guest speakers was a highlight from the fellowship. It’s inspiring to be surrounded by such a wonderful community of individuals dedicated to improving kids’ tech products.*



### HOW CAN MY PRODUCT BETTER ADDRESS CHILDREN’S WELL-BEING?

- + **Continued Research & Innovation:** The fellowship demonstrated the industry’s need for a fresh resource. After this program, I will continue to invest in the full development of this framework to ensure an accessible guideline is available to UX professionals (regardless of whether they have child-development subject matter expertise)
- + **Integration of the RITEC Framework:** The need to expand child-centered heuristics criteria to assess children’s autonomy, competence, and emotional regulation in interface design is evident. Integrating this criteria into a framework will provide practitioners with a common sense of child-centered metrics for interface design. Continuing to evaluate how and why additional RITEC framework components should or should not be included is a necessary next step as well.
- + **Industry-Wide Impact:** Create synergy between UX, child development, and product design fields through industry and academic events in fields such as Human Computer Interaction, Human Systems Engineering, and User Experience.



### LOOKING AHEAD

- + The Well-Being by Design fellowship has supported the foundation of child-centered heuristic evaluation framework, and I will continue to develop this for industry practitioners after this fellowship program.
- + Amazon Kids is leveraging the RITEC framework through its UX research initiatives to enhance UX workshops and user studies that help drive product and service innovations.
- + I will share progress on the child-centered heuristic framework and the RITEC framework at an upcoming Arizona State University seminar on multi-generational research, ensuring these principles reach the next generation of practitioners.



### CHAMPIONING A CHILD-CENTERED APPROACH

- + **For UX Practitioners:** This work begins to bridge the gap between traditional usability metrics and children's developmental needs. It provides concrete tools for evaluating digital experiences from a child's perspective, enabling more informed design decisions. As we implement these heuristics in real-world scenarios, we're developing best practices for integrating well-being considerations into established UX workflows and heuristics specifically for child-centered products.
- + **For Companies and Leadership:** By incorporating these principles into design sprints and formal review processes, we can proactively address potential issues and create more child-friendly and child-centered products. This approach not only mitigates risks but also opens new opportunities for innovation in the children's tech world.
- + **For Education and Future Designers:** Introducing these nuances and frameworks at the university level, we're shaping the next generation of UX professionals to consider children's well-being from the outset of their careers. This educational integration ensures that child-centered design principles become fundamental to UX practice, gradually raising the standard for children's digital experiences across the entire technology sector.



Joan Ganz Cooney Center

For more information about the Well-Being by Design Fellowship program, please visit [joanganzcooneycenter.org/fellowship2025](https://joanganzcooneycenter.org/fellowship2025)