WELL-BEING BY DESIGN FELLOWSHIP 2026

CASE STUDY

The 2026 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.

Kati Baker

Kati Baker is a Video Game Developer and Designer at Social Cipher who has been creating games since her first game jam in 2016. She is a programmer by trade and has spent part of her professional career working in STEM Education for NASA and 4-H. She is a big believer in continuing to learn, no matter what.

social cipher

PRODUCT: Social Cipher
TARGET AGE: Middle and High School-aged youth

Social Cipher is a company that supports neurodivergent youth through Social Emotional Learning, or SEL content, to build self-confidence and self-advocacy skills.

→ **SOCIALCIPHER.COM**

Social Cipher makes social and emotional learning games for middle and high schoolers. Currently, our game has 3 different modes: story/platforming, creative building, and tower defense. Our games center neurodivergent experiences with social situations, gives players agency to choose, and doesn't talk down to them.

For the Well-Being by Design Fellowship, we brought a prototype of a new type of gameplay to teach social and emotional skills in classrooms and therapy centers. The central theme of this prototype is "keeping up with others to belong." In the game, the player creates a character and then follows Ava, an autistic Space Navigator attending her first convention with friends. The goal is to help her navigate the space and spend her time wisely.

With this new mode of play we wanted to create a game that was more accessible for both students and teachers: for teachers, that means providing more bite-size chunks of curriculum and gameplay time to discuss, and for students, offering one-button controls and mechanics for gamers and non-gamers.

WHAT COMPONENTS OF WELL-BEING DOES MY PROJECT ADDRESS?

+ The new story mode module encourages **autonomy** from the RITEC framework by allowing youth to engage with a game at their own pace and focus on the elements they enjoy. Specifically, players control the narrative through their dialogue choices, leading to multiple story endings. They can also explore different locations within the world at their own pace and/or skip parts of exploration altogether. Narrative freedom is extremely important, as it provides youth an opportunity to build the SEL skills we want them to acquire as well as tracking the SEL skills they naturally lean into using.

+ Another dimension our game focuses on is **emotions**, because we intentionally put the player in social situations that have lasting effects. The goal of play is to experience character development and have strategies for emotional regulation modeled while providing exposure to a variety of SEL skills. We do this by creating careful narrative design alongside art to highlight characters' range of emotions that occur in a given social situation. Finally, we provide space in our game for the player to practice that regulation in future situations in the game.

+ A final dimension we prioritize is **relationships**. In social situations throughout the game, we allow players to choose from branching dialogue options, with characters responding based on their choices. This allows players to better understand how the words they use and their actions affect others.

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

+ After many design discussions, we decided to include player stats, or attributes, as part of the new prototype game experience. For example, friends ask the player to hang out with them rather than do what the player originally wanted to do. Each option for the player is tied to a specific attribute, tracked, and then modified when chosen. It provides real-time feedback to the player on their choices and builds a connection with them about the importance of their choices. This reinforces **competence**, **emotion**, and **relationships** by allowing players to see exactly which narrative choices shape the reactions in their relationships with other characters and the world.

+ We want to provide more ways for our players to be **creative**, which can sometimes be challenging when providing a specific narrative or social situation to players. By interweaving a card game into the narrative, we think we can provide a space for greater creativity beyond selecting branching dialogue options. The card game has lenticular design, allowing players to create a wide array of strategies for success.

+ While our game provides a lot of exposure to those with different backgrounds, identities, and levels of neurodivergence, the player often plays as the same protagonist which limits their ability to truly explore **identities**. With our new gameplay mode, players will be able to change protagonist based on the topic and focus, allowing them to experience different identities.

REFLECTION

+ The fellowship inspired multiple changes we're making to our internal process of design. Specifically, being aware of the differences between making a game for fun versus making a game for an educational audience. While we were aware of this to some extent already, it was reinforced and highlighted again. Being exposed to different perspectives from other Fellows with very different use cases combined with the resources provided helped me to think in new ways going into our pre-production design process for the story module game, which was scheduled just as the Fellowship wrapped up.

+ Co-design with kids as early as possible to identify and iterate on the strongest ideas. The important piece of co-design I've learned throughout this fellowship is that it's not about incorporating every detail that's expressed by youth but rather looking at the larger picture of what they are excited about and how to translate it into usable pieces. It's an interesting mix of part guide, part collaborator in providing language, constraints, and context for what, why, and how something is made.

+ Watch rather than listen sometimes - self-reported play has bias and misses things that watching a youth play can't account for. It can be helpful to record playtests for anyone who tries our prototype whether that's internal or external and reviewing with the design team, because self-reports on playtesting are not very reliable among both adults and youth. Playtesting is research and should be regarded as such.

LOOKING AHEAD

I'm now requiring everyone on my team to evaluate how they think our game is meeting each component of the RITEC framework. The goal was to spend time aligning the team's focus and intentions around the RITEC-8 to ensure the design moved forward with a clear focus on the dimensions that are most important to us. Results were varied and jump-started some good discussions on game's strengths and weaknesses when it comes to well-being. The varied results stemmed predominantly from each person's role on the team. Developers and designers viewed the framework differently than classroom teachers or other consultants.

> *One of the highlights from working with the Youth Design Team was the feedback that tools for divergent audiences should not "force us into a mold." Rather than design a game that forces a "correct path" or response to social situations, our game should provide multiple pathways for players to express themselves, highlighting a variety of SEL strategies to incorporate them. Hearing this confirmed by the Youth Design Team reinforced our team's design process.*

+ I hope the impact of our game for youth is that they find the content of the new gameplay mode relatable and maybe even a little cool. In addition, I hope our game can help youth to realize they have a choice in how they present themselves, how they should be treated, and develop good coping strategies that are lifelong skills.

+ For teachers, we want to provide as much support as possible, knowing they may not have much video game exposure or understanding of how mechanics and systems interact with each other. In this, we try to use cohesive terminology when we speak with teachers. At a high level, we want to provide ways for teachers/facilitators to get data quickly and easily see where students are in the game to assess how to support or guide them, if needed.

+ I would love to see more tools similar to RITEC developed to provide a jumping off point to create those formal, internal processes for designing learning games for well-being. Having someone to liaison between design and education, much like a science communicator, is essential to the design being seamlessly communicated across the entire team.

SESAME WORKSHOP

Joan Ganz Cooney Center

For more information about the Well-Being by Design Fellowship program, please visit joanganzcooneycenter.org/fellowship2026