User Testing with Kids

Learn from Your Users and Perfect Your Product.

*Testing leads to failure, and failure leads to understanding.*
—Burt Rutan, American aerospace engineer

User testing doesn’t necessarily come at the end of the development process. You can test an idea at the very beginning with lo-fi prototypes, even paper prototypes. And you should test along the way any time you think it would be beneficial, for example, to test a specific functionality or interaction before moving forward with it. For sure though, it’s something you want to do before releasing to the market.

Also in this case, children are different from adults, and testing effectively with them requires to work according to their needs in order to make the best out of the testing sessions and get useful insights. It’s easy to understand that doing user research with a 26-year-old and a 36-year-old is exactly the same in the way you conduct the tests. They might be in different age groups on a marketing standpoint, but usability-wise, they are two adults with a similar level of cognitive and motor skills. The thing is completely different with two kids with the same age gap. Conducting a research with a 3-year-old is a
completely different business than doing so with a 13-year-old. You'll be probably bored to death by reading this again, but let me reiterate one more time that even a 2-year difference means the world in children's development.

There are several things to take into account when doing user research with children, and in this chapter we'll try to cover the best practices for conducting user testing with them.

**Recruiting**

The age of the participants is a pretty obvious variable to consider; it needs to match the target age your product is made for. And, unless your product is specifically targeting one gender, you should also have a good mix of males and females.

When recruiting for user testing with children, it’s a good idea to have a few more participants than you would normally have when testing with adults. There are a couple of reasons for this:

- When conducting tests with children, you have to deal with two people for each participant: the children and a parent/caregiver. This doubles the chances that someone might have a problem and doesn’t show up.

- Sometimes children, especially the younger ones, can be shy having to talk with strangers, being asked questions, and so on. You can try all the tricks in the book (and we’ll see some of them here), but sometimes there is nothing that works and you have to just let them go.

Besides the number of participants, variety in personality is also crucial. Of course you can’t know them personally, but asking the parents if their child is more of an introvert kind of child, or more open, less or more talkative, or if maybe they tend to become more chatty when being together with a friend, and so on, can be useful to understand how to approach the kid and also to get a wider sample of reactions and responses to the product.

Don’t forget the consent from the parents. Having to deal with minors, it’s important to have all the necessary paperwork in order. Depending on the country (and the company) where you’re conducting the test, the requirements might change, so be sure to comply with your local laws and regulations.
Environments

A welcoming environment is the first step to put participants at ease. Depending on your needs and possibilities, you can either

- Set up a room in your company or testing facility specifically dedicated to user testing with children.
- Find a public space, like a school or library, to use as testing lab.

The main difference here is that with a dedicated testing place you can have a better infrastructure, with different camera angles, two-way mirrors, and so on. The public space has the advantage of usually being a cheaper option, and if your participants are regularly going to that place (maybe it's their school or local public library), it offers the big advantage of being a familiar place, where feeling comfortable will be much easier for them.

In any case, this place must be designed with a children-centered approach. So the decorations have to be children-friendly, with colorful posters and other adornments. It's important to keep a good balance, between being warm and friendly to kids, but not too distracting. Try to avoid toys or other sources of potential distractions, unless the aim of the test is about playing with toys, of course. A window is good, but if the view offers too many stimuli, it's better to have participants not facing it.

Furniture has to be child centered as well, so chairs and tables should be of appropriate size for the age you're testing. Overall it's a good idea to make it feel a bit like a classroom, to instill the idea of proper behaviors.

Don’t forget that you're part of the environment as well! So your appearance is also essential to make participants feel comfortable. Don’t overdress, avoid formal attires (I shouldn’t even need to mention lab coats. Please don’t!), casual but professional outfits are the best choice. Another idea is to wear T-shirts or pins or stickers with popular characters among the kids of the age of your participants; it’s a great icebreaker.

The whole point is to avoid making the children feel like they are being tested or feel like they're going to the doctor. Make it clear at the very beginning that the kids are there to teach you something, and not the other way around.

Parents’ Presence

Getting parents’ trust is important because children are more likely to participate and feel comfortable if they understand their parent or guardian trusts you. Sometimes, especially with younger children (2 to 4 years old), having the parent in the room can help to make them feel safe, but for other
kids, having a parent present during the test could be detrimental, because of fear of being judged for giving a wrong answer (of course there are no wrong answers, but kids might perceive this as a possibility—try to avoid this at all costs). It’s impossible to know what’s better before actually trying, and all kids are different, so start with the parent out of the room, if the child allows it, and see how it goes. Read the body language; a kid that constantly looks at the door where the parent left is a clear sign that having her/him in the room could be a good choice.

If the parent or guardian is in the room, let the kid see where they’ll be sitting, but then have the child face in another direction, to avoid her/him constantly searching for the parents’ approval and to avoid the adult to influence the child with nods or other voluntary or involuntary messages.

It’s essential to instruct the adult about being a silent observer. If the kid asks for the parent’s help, you and the parent should explain that the child is the expert, the one teaching, and you just want to learn to encourage the child to try on her/his own.

Parents can also support in explaining the task or interpret the answers. Besides being a useful asset, it’s a way to make them feel involved and gain their trust. But again, it’s important they don’t sway the responses in any way.

Friendship Pairs

Something I’ve noticed that works pretty well, especially with 6–8-year-old children, is the involvement of a friend (or sibling of a similar age). Working in a pair with a friend helps shy children to open up and speak their mind. It helps relieving the stress of having to deal with an adult stranger alone, and this sort of mini-brainstorming is an occasion to exchange opinions and hear from more than one kid at a time. The way they interact together with the product is also interesting, because it could spark ideas on new functionalities for teamwork and group play. What’s important in this case is to avoid conflicts over who should use the device. Set turns and keep both kids involved so that no one is getting bored by watching the other playing.

The Prototype

Children are, by nature, more explorative than adults, so they’re more likely to tap or click on anything just to see what happens. While a paper prototype could be good to explore specific playing scenarios at the very early stage of the concept, I’m a big believer in high-fidelity prototypes when it’s time to really put your ideas to test.

The fidelity of the prototype should be as close to reality as possible, especially on the visual design. Adults can work on wireframe prototypes, if testing the
visual design is not really our focus. A gray sharped-corner button that says “Sign up” is not so different from a more polished and beautified version of the same component, for a grown-up, if testing a sign-up flow is what we want to do. For a kid it could make all the difference. So prototyping interactions with their visual design is the only way to really get the right insights from your user testing with children.

The more flows, interactions, and screens you can include in the prototype the better. This would avoid the risk of the session getting stuck because of getting on a broken path.

A prototype though, even if hi-fi, is usually far from a finished product and not all flows and functionalities might have been designed and prototyped, and, while adults tend to stay more on track with the task, kids are more likely to tap on random things that might “break” the prototype. It’s a good idea, then, to have a reset hidden somewhere (it could be a gesture, hard for kids to perform accidentally), to quickly go back to the initial state.

Asking the Questions

The first thing you want to make clear (also to the parents or guardians) is that it is not the child being tested, but the product. Let the kids know that they are there to help you and teach you how things work. Empower them by making them feel they are the expert, you are there to learn.

Before starting the session, it is best to have some icebreakers. Earlier in this chapter, I suggested wearing something with popular characters on, to spark a conversation about something they like (or dislike). That’s one thing; you can also ask some general questions about what are their favorite games, or apps, what they like about them, if they use them alone or with friends or siblings, and so on. These open questions are easy for them to answer to and, at the same time, might offer some good insights.

You need to stick to very concrete and pragmatic questions. Don’t be too abstract, as we discussed in Chapter 7; for children up to 11 years old (this is of course slightly different from child to child), it is still hard to think that way.

There are a couple of other things you need to clarify before starting the tasks:

- It’s OK if they don’t know how to do something or how to answer a question. They can seek for your support at any time.
- They are free to express themselves without fear of hurting anyone’s feelings. If they don’t like something, it’s OK to say so.
The progression of the tasks’ difficulty should be upward—starting with the easier tasks to help the children build confidence, then moving on to more complex ones at the end of the session. It’s OK if the first couple of tasks are very basic and maybe not even part of your focus for that test. What’s important is to ease in the participant. All tasks should be realistic in their complexity, but that should come with the concept. If you can’t test a functionality because it feels too complex, it shouldn’t be part of your product to begin with.

The language you use should be appropriate to the age of the children you’re testing with. By “appropriate” I don’t mean without swear words, that should be implied. I mean easy enough to understand for children of the age of your testers, while not being patronizing at the same time. This should be done both when providing written instructions, for older kids, and when giving instructions verbally, for nonreaders.

Children can easily be distracted and take another direction from the path you planned for your test. While this could be time consuming, compared to testing with adults, it’s also important to let them explore (as much as the prototype allows that). You might discover things you didn’t expect.

**Duration**

It’s wise to always account for more time when testing with children, compared to testing with adults. As mentioned previously, kids are easier to be distracted and take their own way while doing a task. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, be sure to allocate a longer testing time.

The duration of each session should not be over one hour for each participant, to avoid losing their interest. Consider also having one or two breaks during the session, and I advise proposing a bathroom break right before actually starting the test (after some ice-breaking talk); this could prevent a source of distraction and unplanned interruptions later.

It’s always a good idea to explain how the session will work, breaking it down to the activities you’re going to do together, what device you’ll use, what kind of questions and tasks they’ll be asked, and so on. Having an idea of what to expect is another way to put your participant at ease and avoid them to feel anxious.

**Feedback**

Here’s another key difference of user research with children and with grown-ups. When working with adults, you want to be as neutral as possible in your feedback and reactions. There is no right or wrong answer; the participants
are testing the product, not being tested, so they are the ones telling what they feel is right or wrong with the product. There is no stick and no carrot.

While this last statement is still true for user tests with kids, your participants might need to smell a carrot to get motivation and gain confidence. Positive feedback is essential but has to be given carefully. You don’t want to sway the participant to any direction in particular, so try to find ways to give a positive response without influencing her/his decisions. Try things like “Thanks for teaching me that!”, “That’s really interesting!”, or “You’re being really helpful!”. Reward the participants’ behavior, not their decisions. Positive feedback like this is a way to make children more confident and willing to speak.

Getting the Answers

Sometimes, it can be hard to understand what kids mean. Younger ones still have a limited vocabulary and their ability to articulate ideas is also lacking. There are a few strategies you can try to put in place to alleviate this problem. First of all, video recording the sessions can be helpful to review them later to listen to the answers again (multiple times, if necessary), but also to notice more subtle reactions in the participants’ body language. If you do so, remember to clearly declare it in the consent the parents will have to sign, including references to all the necessary privacy policies.

It also helps if you can have someone else present to take notes while you focus on the kid. Giving all your attention to the child, without interruptions to annotate the answers, will benefit both the relationship you’ll establish with the participant and the quality of the notes, given that someone else will take care of it.

One great strategy to facilitate answers from younger children is using a visual aid to express feelings. This is very similar to those posters we often find at a doctor’s office, with different face expressions associated to pain levels (hopefully your product won’t be causing those same agonizing reactions). It can be a piece of paper on which the kid can point at the expression that better represents their feeling (Figure 9-1), or they could be stickers that the child can place somewhere, to make it more fun (if you already have a character designed for your product or brand, you can use it for this purpose; see Chapter 8).
Lastly, if a parent is present (see the “Parents’ Presence” section earlier in this chapter), you can ask to chime in to help facilitate the answer, minding that the parent shouldn’t suggest anything, just encourage and interpret the answer, if needed.

**Industry Insight: Interview with Martina Dell’Acqua**

Martina Dell’Acqua is a game designer focusing on products for children. She’s Head of Product at Colto, a company specialized in educational games for children, partnering with big media companies such as Nickelodeon and Highlights.

**Rubens: How do you handle recruiting? Is there anything else, besides the age, that you look for when recruiting participants to test one of your products?**

Martina: Age is a key requirement for us but it is not the only one. I remember when we started 5 years ago; back then, it was extremely important knowing if the kids we were testing were using a mobile device. There were a lot of kids that were not used to these devices and it was fundamental for us to test both groups. Nowadays, it is extremely rare to find children that have never used a device. However, we still consider it important to test our apps with kids that don’t have a strong previous digital experience to understand if our product is intuitive enough.

**R: In your opinion, what’s the best way to approach kids when they come for a user test? What’s your secret to put them at ease and make them feel comfortable and safe? Can you share any tips and tricks?**
M: Opening and giving the app straight away to the kids give useless results. They freeze with their wide eyes open and stare at you. “What should I do?” they seem to ask.

My suggestion is to try to “break” this image of you as “the adult” and become “the friend.” What I usually do is to just take my own device and start playing different games to spark their interest. Then, I start talking with them about favorite apps and TV shows to put them at ease. After a while, I ask them to try this new “app”, the one I have wanted them to try since the beginning!

R: How important is the testing environment? What’s the best setup in your opinion?

M: The environment is probably the most significant thing during a test with kids. Not the environment as “the building” per se, but the entire experience that you are having your test in. It is important to recreate the comfortable atmosphere in which they will use your app. In my experience, we tested in both schools and during playdate in our office. It is obvious to say the latter is a much easier way of testing it, kids are more relaxed and confident during a playdate that feels more like home. In order to achieve such atmosphere, in addition to digital products we like to have some physical games products that kids are familiar with, so they can use them and play together to build up their confidence and improve the overall experience.

R: And what about parents? How do you make them feel comfortable about their kid being involved in user testing?

M: I used not to interact much with parents. Recently, however, we begin to involve them much more in the user testing itself. We need to understand how much they are involved in their children’s play and how. Of course, kids are the main users but the parents are important actors as well. They are the ones who buy the games, but most importantly they are often the ones interacting and playing with the kids. Making them part of the test results in making them much more comfortable with seeing their kid playing with the app.

R: Sometimes children, especially the younger ones, can have a hard time expressing their ideas or feelings about a product. What’s your advice to help them in this situation?

M: It is very complex to understand what kids like and want. We usually rely more on nonverbal communication. Direct questions rarely work as kids tend to try to give “the right answer.” As a workaround, during the years we came up with different questions that are easier for kids to understand and provide a more realistic answer. For example, “Do you like this game?” becomes “Do you want me to open another app?”. “Describe this game” becomes “What would you tell your friend about this game?”.
R: When testing with adults, we normally avoid giving any kind of feedback, positive or negative. While it’s true that there are no right or wrong answers during a test, I believe it’s also important to give some positive feedback to the participant, when working with kids. How can we give positive feedback and build their confidence without influencing the outcome of the test?

M: As you say, there is no right or wrong during a test, so the goal of the researcher should be “to break the fear of making a mistake.” And this is true for adults but also it is especially true for children. In this case, what we like to do is to constantly give encouraging feedback no matter what they do, to push their confidence and let them “be” what they truly are. And, depending on the situation, trying to analyze the kids’ actions without constantly staring at them and making them feel under pressure.

R: I know that you recently did some remote user testing with kids (due to COVID-19 social distancing), which is quite unusual. What are the biggest differences compared to testing in person? How are kids responding to this kind of testing environment? Any tips to share on this?

M: Remote testing was something I didn’t believe was going to work. I am happy to say I was very wrong. It worked very well and it even opened up a new testing perspective. The kids were always at home with their parents and extremely confident and relaxed. All the effort to make them “feel like home” wasn’t necessary, and we were able to see them play in the environment where they usually play! In some cases, parents were too involved in their kids’ testing, but after a few “virtual playdates” we became experts in managing both parents and kids!

It worked so well that we decided to keep doing remote testing in the future. However, it is important to underline that this is not a substitute for in-person testing but it is an effective add-on.

Chapter Recap

- User testing is different with kids and adults.
- Even a small age gap can be significant when doing user research with children.
- Recruit more participants than the ones you think you’ll need.
- Try to have a variety in personalities, introverts and extroverts.
- Parent’s consent is mandatory.
• Set up a welcoming child-centered environment, either in a school or public library or a testing facility.
• Make the environment friendly, but not too distracting.
• Dress professionally, but casually. Overdressing might be intimidating.
• Try to include some popular characters in your outfit. It works as an icebreaker.
• Get the trust of the parents. Explain what the test is about (which is not about their child) and how it will work.
• For younger kids (2 to 4 years old), the parent or guardian could be in the room if this put the child at ease.
• The parent in the room should be a silent observer, away from the participant’s line of sight.
• Ask for parents to intervene when support and encouragement is needed, but pay attention they don’t influence the kid’s choices.
• Some kids benefit from working in pairs with a close friend.
• When working in pairs, establish the turns so that there are no fights over using the device.
• High-fidelity prototypes are the best options with children.
• Children tend to explore and tap on everything. Include a quick way to reset the prototype.
• Let participants know they are not being tested, the product is. They are the teachers.
• Start with easy questions and tasks to build confidence in the tester.
• Keep questions concrete and use an age-appropriate language. Don’t use technical or difficult words.
• Let them know it’s OK to not know an answer or how to complete a task.
• No one’s feelings will be hurt by negative comments.
• Allow for a little exploration outside the task boundaries (if the prototype allows it).
• Sessions should last a maximum of one hour.
• Account for a longer time for user research than when testing with adults.
• Plan for a toilet break right at the beginning and include one or two breaks during the session.
• Explain what the test will be like.
• Provide generic but positive feedback. No “poker face,” like in testing with adults.
• If kids have a hard time expressing their feelings, try to use a visual scale with emoji-like pictograms or illustrations.
• If possible, focus on the participant only, while someone else takes care of annotating.
• Video recording sessions could be helpful to review answers and body language.