

Designing for child rights by design

How can digital innovators and providers design for children's rights? Sonia Livingstone and Kruakae Pothong interviewed Shuli Gilutz about the Children's Design Guide, for the Digital Futures Commission's work stream on guidance for innovators, building on our recent work on Child Rights Impact Assessment.

Sonia: We understand that you have been figuring out what is meant by “child rights by design,” including why it is so important and how it can be better promoted. We are trying to figure out what is needed in the regulatory framework that makes innovators think: I need to understand children's rights.

Shuli: I think that's critical. Those who already think about children's rights will go and read the design guidelines – they're intrinsically motivated designers who want to make a difference. But they are the minority, right? The majority just do what they need to do and so they will go by the regulations.

Kruakae: When it comes to the regulatory requirements, instead of thinking, we'll start off with the design part, they seem to focus more on possible legal penalties. Any appreciation for rights in digital service provision seems to come from the fear narrative rather than a broader or more creative interest.

Shuli: Exactly. Rights should be 360! When you think about rights it should be for everything you do. It could allow you to do new things. It should protect you. It should be your tools. It's what enables children to grow and to fulfil everything they can and that's an amazing framework. But when you say *digital* and child rights, the association for many people is just: what are they *doing* to the children? It's very one-sided.



“ACM Interaction Design and Children conference 2018” by IDI at NTNU

Sonia: We've taken UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) article 3(1), the best interests of the child, as our mission statement. That raises the difficult question about balancing rights. How do you advise designers about balancing protection or empowerment and expression?

Shuli: It depends on the company and what they're designing. We have to think, what is the user's experience going to be like?

Some of my colleagues wanted to put in the guidelines that learning and play should be open-ended. Others didn't. This is about pedagogy and it's a cultural difference.

Sonia: That's a really interesting point. One of the articles of the UNCRC is that children should have the right to develop to their fullest potential. But what is that? And what is our vision of the adult that might result? As you suggest, people haven't agreed throughout history on the purposes of education.

Shuli: Exactly. You have opposing views. There's the Finnish model, but then there's the Korean and Singapore model, which is just the opposite: huge classes and YouTube star teachers versus small classes and teachers with less training but hug their kids. The children also have to live in that culture afterwards. Consider also why the US didn't ratify the UNCRC? Because in some ways it didn't fit their culture.

Sonia: I gather that one reason is that the US prioritises parent rights over child rights. Which is interesting in relation to digital products and services because the children's market is really addressed to parents, since parents are the ones who pay.

Shuli: When you work with companies that are aiming for the American market, they are absolutely selling for parents, not for kids. They always say to me: this is a product for children but parents are our customers.

Sonia: Thinking further about the market, something I often hear said is that we can't expect the start-ups to change because they're too new and small and don't have the resources to understand the regulations. We have to lead from the big companies. But then they say, we can't get the big companies to change; they're doing the lobbying against regulation. So, where do we focus the call for change?

Shuli: That's why we address designers rather than CEOs. We'd rather talk to the person in the process that could add that button for a child: click here if you feel unsafe.

Ultimately, I think both start-ups and the big companies will be interested. I work more with start-ups more than the big companies. They will hire a legal person to make sure they are complying with regulation. They also want to appeal to parents, and to be the good guys.

Sonia: Somewhere in between the regulations and the designers lies the world of standards and guidelines. Is that an important space to make an intervention in? Do designers turn to the standards, or don't they know they exist?

Shuli: If they can look to something to get a how-to, they would like that. It saves them time and energy. With our guidelines, designers don't always fully understand how to apply them to their specific design. Also, they may not know what, say, 'developmentally appropriate' is. They're not going to get a PhD in child development. That's why I say, just do user research and then you'll find out.

Sonia: How much is user research actually done?

Shuli: At first, they resist. Then after, they're amazed that they can actually hear what children say and that it's surprising. But often start-ups are afraid of user research because what if the users tell them their idea is not worthy?

Kruakae: If I may ask about [the child rights guidance](#), how do you motivate designers to pay attention and then implement it?

Shuli: We get it to designers mainly through events and social media, and people are very excited and they read it and they want to use it. Now we are working on making this a kit designer can just take and use. It's a work in progress, with volunteers worldwide.

[Shuli Gilutz](#) specialises in user research, assessment, strategy, and design, of interactive environments for children. She works both in industry and academia, teaching, guiding, and conducting research, in a variety of user experience (UX) settings, as well as a strategic consultant for the development of children's digital experiences. She is a global speaker on children & digital media, age-appropriate UX; usability, play and learning. Read more about her work on the Children's Design Guide [here](#).



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