

Designing for Kids: Creating for Playing, Learning, and Growing

Krystyna Castella (2019)

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Krystyna Castella—author, designer, and professor of industrial design and business at California’s ArtCenter College of Design—offers an admirable and comprehensive roadmap in *Designing for Kids*. Drawing on insights from experts across a range of disciplines, she argues that “understanding the developmental and cultural needs of children and teens helps designers make more informed decisions” (p. 1). She advocates for a deep understanding of the various stages of child development and children’s everyday experiences in relation to parenting styles, gender, generational divides, economic constraints, safety, sustainability and cultural expressions.

Designing for Kids offers a crash course for answering myriad questions about child development and childhood today. Here are only a few: How do colors and materials influence children’s preferences and choices? What legal issues arise in children’s markets? What’s the best way of engaging kids in design processes? What does play-testing or co-design look like? How do kids and adults experience their built environments differently? What kinds of environments help children learn? How can designers help advocate for the rights of children to play?

With over 150 full-color images, varied layout and content, this book will appeal to a wide range of readers. The text is divided into three broad sections, the first being “The Design Process,” which provides designers with a veritable toolkit of research strategies and methodological approaches. The following section, “Child Development,” explores physical, emotional and cognitive changes young people (infants, toddlers, younger children, older children and adolescents) experience as they grow up. “Childhood Today,” the final section, explores children’s everyday experiences, using a sociological lens. Chapter 9, “Children’s Media and Technology,” offers a constructive contribution to current debates about child-friendly design. It highlights the rise of social media and internet communications, which are indelibly changing young people’s lives. Understanding how these new technologies will continue to alter the landscape of childhood is crucial for designers now and into the future.

With the inclusion of small case studies, nearly 100 interviews (with advocates, researchers, industry experts and designers), plus design prompts and discussion questions, the book offers plenty of takeaways for practitioners.

Throughout, a key message is the importance of involving children themselves in design processes. This participation can manifest in several ways, depending on a project’s nature. Designers can involve children in a non-intrusive manner by

merely unobtrusively observing their behavior while they play, for example, or can work with them directly, through play-testing or even co-design. Not only does the participation of children help designers make better-informed decisions, but under the right circumstances, children can find this type of participation engaging and empowering. Young people can be inventive, uninhibited, and unpredictable (even unforgiving), as Castella tells her readers (p. 8). Designers are to be mindful that their projects celebrate young people's capacity to learn and grow, as well as teach the adults in their lives about serious fun, humor and play.

The importance of incorporating knowledge from outside one's own expertise is another key lesson of the book. It is challenging to be well-versed in environmental design, materials, design and safety standards, child development and psychology, educational outcomes, interactive media, plus business and marketing. Designers can certainly consult with experts, however—including children, themselves.

While *Designing for Kids* is an excellent resource, there are some curious limitations. The first chapter reaches some 120 pages in length, followed by eight chapters, each less than half that size—an odd structure. That first chapter bundles together various research and design subjects, which could easily have been separated. The book also seems to end somewhat abruptly. A concluding chapter could have helped the collection draw to a close more smoothly and perhaps even featured questions to help guide professional practice and research going forward. These observations aside, *Designing for Kids* is extensive and thorough. Fortunately, the index provides a quick way to search for and access topics.

Overall, *Designing for Kids* is a valuable and versatile resource spanning the design of products (toys and games) and the design of spaces children inhabit (home spaces, community places, playgrounds, educational spaces, and spaces for "edutainment"). Industrial designers, interior designers, architects, landscape architects and urban planners—all will find useful insights. Both accessible and readable, *Designing for Kids* will also help many others (parents, teachers, early childhood educators, and anyone working with children) understand how they can be part of providing more safe, inclusive, child-friendly spaces.

Review by Matt Gowdar and Rae St. Clair Bridgman

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