

*The Little Book of*

# **Design Research Ethics**

**IDEO**

The Little Book of  
Design Research Ethics  
by IDEO

2<sup>nd</sup> Edition ©2024

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*The Little Book of*

# Design Research Ethics

*Second Edition*

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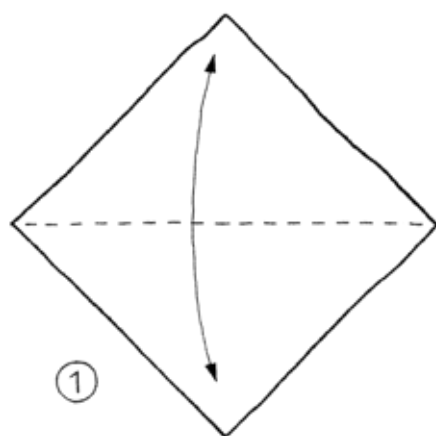
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# Welcome to an Ongoing Conversation

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*This isn't the first book like this. In 2015, IDEO published the first edition of The Little Book of Design Research Ethics. It was written to provide design teams at IDEO and beyond with guidelines for ethical design research and to lay the groundwork for its evolution. Now, more than eight years later, we've updated the book with what we've learned since its initial publication.*

In this second edition, we will continue to provide a common starting place for crucial conversations about ethics in design research. We have also added sections that reflect our growth and learning. Our work requires us to navigate the real, messy, human substance of design research while maintaining care for matters of ethics, legality, and safety. It is our intention to embody the utmost care for our generous research participants, the design teams that build relationships with these participants, and the clients with whom we engage in creative partnership.

We acknowledge our position as a global design consultancy – one that holds power and status and collaborates with Fortune 500 companies, government entities, and nonprofits. We are also people of conscience. We offer our expertise in human-centered design alongside our humility as lifelong learners. We are designers, makers,

teachers, technologists, researchers – but never purely objective observers. We know this.

We are human beings with distinct identities, experiences, and power dynamics that influence our ability to understand other individuals and groups. Ethical design research helps us acknowledge these fuller contexts to create work that honors and includes experiences across all individuals and groups – including and especially those that have been historically overlooked.

We believe a better future is for everyone to design. And it is this little book's biggest aspiration to create ethical design research that leads us there.

Let's go!

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We'd like to especially thank Jane Fulton Suri, IDEO Partner Emeritus and IDEO's first Human Factors Researcher, for her leadership in the 2015 edition of this book and her encouragement for a second edition.

**“Ethical design research is about the quality of relationships. Our goal is to manifest trust in individuals; to build communities of trust; to form trusting relationships with the people we’re designing for and alongside.”**

*– Jane Fulton Suri*

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# A Little About This Little Book

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This book starts by laying a foundation with five principles and guidelines for activating these principles throughout the design research process. The first half of the book shares *Principles* applicable to anyone interested in design research and ethical practices, and the second half shows these *Principles in Action* at IDEO – and it is primarily oriented toward IDEO design teams. We share this with others as a helpful guide and to support transparent sharing of our practices, but we do know it goes into “the weeds,” and recognize not everyone needs such detail.

The principles – respect, responsibility, honesty, inclusion, and evolution – are persistent and fundamental. They are the basis of ethical design research. They underlie the ability to form trusting relationships with research participants and communities and to continue to build trust in IDEO, our design process, and our researchers. The first edition of *The Little Book of Design Research Ethics* drew on the work of ethicists and those fluent in academic and professional research contexts, and was based on

the sound principles developed there. This second edition continues that work and adds inclusion and evolution as principles to reflect our commitment to multiple perspectives and ongoing learning.

The principles in action guide us throughout a project – planning our search for insight, recruiting and building relationships with participants, conducting activities across both physical and digital worlds, communicating what we’ve learned, and safekeeping all gathered materials. Although these guidelines are not exhaustive, and will not address all possible situations, we’ve aimed to provide meaningful and practical recommendations.

To illustrate the principles in practice, we have included a collection of real stories from IDEO projects as examples of challenges we’ve faced and the lessons we’ve learned. We want to share the ways we continue to learn, so design research can always be evolving to meet the world’s changing needs.

## *An important note about what this book is not:*

**It does not provide legal advice.** In general, we'd expect to hold our ethical behavior to a higher standard than the law requires, but there are local laws that apply to this work. For example, there are laws regarding individuals' data protection, interactions with children, health and medical information, and, in some countries, information regarding an individual's sexual orientation or religious or political beliefs.

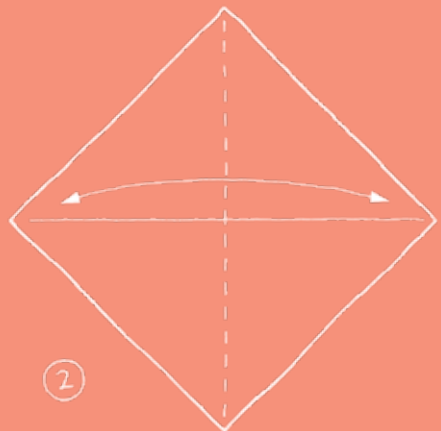
**It does not offer best practices for cultures and geographies beyond the U.S.** This book largely reflects the legal and ethical contexts of the United States around things like consent forms and compensation. Please consult with local experts, researchers, and/or recruiting agencies. At IDEO we are supported by our legal team, our team of design researchers, and design research operations specialists throughout our process.

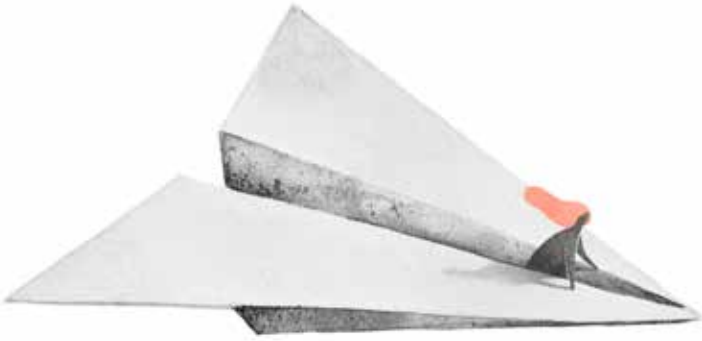


# Principles

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Respect  
Responsibility  
Honesty  
Inclusion  
Evolution





# Respect

*We honor participants and their expertise, prioritizing their safety, agency, and needs.*

## WHAT IT IS

We believe in the inherent capacities, creativity, and expertise of all people – including our research participants. We show respect to the information and data they share by listening deeply, clarifying our understanding, and taking diligent, confidential notes to help honor holistic stories and points of view.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Respect for our research participants – their time, stories, perspectives, and history – is critical to immersion and collaboration. Centering respect in relationships helps minimize extractive interactions with people and their stories.



# Responsibility

*We uphold the self-determined interests of our participants.*

## WHAT IT IS

We seek ongoing and informed consent from participants and are responsible stewards of their data and information. We are mindful of any potential risks to participants at all phases of the design process, and we actively work to prevent, mitigate, and, when necessary, hold ourselves accountable for repairing any harms.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Responsible research is rooted in trust and consent. Informed consent allows participants to determine how they would like to be involved in the design process and holds the design team accountable to upholding those wishes. It helps create more honest and authentic engagement between the design team and participants.



# Honesty

*We're truthful, clear, and timely in communication.*

## WHAT IT IS

We are transparent with participants about who we are, our goals, and our approaches. We communicate early and often, providing opportunities for questions and clarification. When we don't have answers or must keep information confidential, we are honest about our limitations. We represent what we learn from our research accurately, including gaps in our knowledge.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Without honesty, there is no trust. Honesty sets the foundation for our relationships with participants and clients. Participants need truthful information to make informed decisions about their roles in our research, and clients need an accurate understanding of our research findings to assess the potential impact of our designs.



## Inclusion

*We seek out, include, and deeply value the voices and experiences of people who are often unheard or ignored.*

### WHAT IT IS

We seek out the perspectives of those who have marginalized facets of their identities (BIPOC, disabled, low-income, LGBTQIA+, etc.) in our research – without tokenizing their experiences or expecting them to represent an entire group to which they belong. We strive to enable inclusive participation in research by, for example, interviewing in participants' preferred language, meeting folks in their preferred or safe space, or providing reimbursement for childcare. At IDEO, we make considered decisions about which researchers are

assigned to which project, taking care with identities and power dynamics that might influence psychological safety for researchers or their participants.

### WHY IT MATTERS

If we don't include these perspectives, we risk reproducing or worsening existing inequity. It is our responsibility to include people who have been unheard or ignored as we work toward creating a future that belongs to and is shaped by everyone.



## Evolution

*We'll continue to learn from the challenges we meet, and as we grow — and the world around us changes — our ethical guidance will evolve.*

### WHAT IT IS

We commit to an ongoing dialogue about ethical practices in design research. At IDEO, we invite our designers to continuously shape this work by carving out time for reflection, asking tough questions and critically engaging with the content in this book and on our projects.

### WHY IT MATTERS

As new laws, new technologies, and new communities emerge, we must continually evolve our practices to meet the changing world. When we commit to learning and changing, we make space for our collective and continued growth.

## *Our Six Ethical Commitments*

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In the rest of this book, we'll examine how IDEO enacts these principles of ethical design through each phase of our process. Read on for an in-depth Practitioner's Guide, something we use to give more detailed guidance to our own teams. (So ... if you're an IDEOer, nope, you're not done yet – keep reading!)

If this is where your reading ends, thank you. But before you go, please finish this page to learn about our six ethical commitments – what we believe always needs to be true when conducting ethical design research.

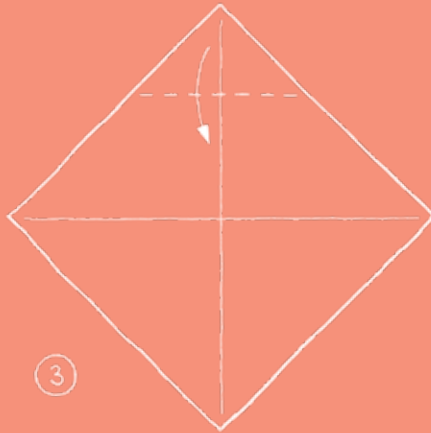
REGARDLESS OF THE SITUATION, **WE ALWAYS:**

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- 1. Tell the truth.*
- 2. Honor our commitments to participants.*
- 3. Collect only what we need.*
- 4. Use what we collect for only its intended purpose.*
- 5. Protect participants' privacy.*
- 6. Express gratitude and provide compensation.*

# Principles in Action

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1. Planning and Preparation
2. Recruitment and Engagement
3. Gathering Information
4. Using and Sharing
5. Closing the Loop



# 1 Planning and Preparation

*Ethical and thoughtful research outcomes require adequate planning and preparation. This phase creates a high-level guide for crafting research activities that will inform and inspire. At this early stage, applying the principles of respect, responsibility, honesty, inclusion, and evolution lays the foundation for how research will influence design.*

*“The past is a resource. We’re not trying to predict a future; we’re trying to honor all of the living histories that prepare us to discern, what do we want to take forward?”*

– Jenina, Design Research, IDEO

## HONOR HISTORICAL CONTEXT

We want to start our work with an informed mindset. Yes, innovation requires us to keep our minds open to possible solutions, but it is ethical and responsible to come to complex challenges having done the necessary homework and bringing deep expertise to our teams.

### WHY IT MATTERS

Sometimes the topics we tackle are so rich and complex, we need to work alongside experts who have been immersed in the topic for years to be able to design responsibly and ethically. Without learning from historical context and honoring those with deep expertise, our designs can lead to unintended consequences and cause harm.

## KEEP THE ENTIRE TEAM ACCURATELY INFORMED

Ensure that the team – made up of IDEO team members, contractors, and clients – is fully aware of how we conduct the research and protect the information gathered. The entire team needs to be clear about the rules around confidentiality and sharing information. In particular, our clients must understand exactly what can be shared with them, and what stays within IDEO. Team members and clients more familiar with traditional market research approaches might have different assumptions about how we engage and learn from research participants. We recommend sharing this book with your clients when they are embedded with the IDEO team during research, or if you believe it

will be helpful in explaining how we approach research participants and the information they generously provide.

### **WHY IT MATTERS**

IDEO's ability to get to ethical and thoughtful research outcomes depends on building trust by speaking clearly and consistently and ensuring the team respects and protects our participants throughout the process. This also equips our clients to represent the work within their own organization, building confidence by sharing information in a way that preserves the integrity of our process and practices.

### **ESTABLISH TEAM NORMS AND ROLES FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF RESEARCH**

There are many ways to engage research participants, such as remote or in-person 1:1 interviews, co-design activities, intercepts, gathering feedback on prototypes, surveys, video diaries, and field observations. Each mode of engagement requires a team's thoughtful consideration of how its members can show up respectfully. The identity markers of the people conducting the research (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, cultural background, spoken languages), and how these relate to the identity of the research participant(s) and the topic being studied, are important parts of this equation. For example, during a project with a social impact organization, we were mindful about how white and white-passing team members showed up in all-Black spaces, and opted for BIPOC team members to lead interviews at all times.

In terms of the number of researchers present, experience suggests two observers (one to conduct the activity and one to take notes) is generally best, and three is a practical maximum, for both in-person and online spaces like Zoom. If more than two observers are needed, we ask participants if the larger number is acceptable. If there's pressure for more, it's worth considering alternative methods.

### **WHY IT MATTERS**

For most participants, it's easier to concentrate and relax with fewer people in a conversation. Limiting the number of observers allows us a deeper connection with participants to gain higher-quality learning, leading to more valuable insights for our projects and clients. Without the right conditions, people can feel uncomfortable and judged, and respond in ways not genuine to them.

## **SEEK SUPPORT TO CLARIFY ETHICAL AMBIGUITY**

Ethical questions will arise. Don't pretend to have all the answers – be honest with yourself and your own limitations. Instead, seek support from within the IDEO community, specifically our seasoned design researchers and/or legal counsel.

### **WHY IT MATTERS**

Ethics questions are often complicated, so it's important to work together and align around best practices. IDEO has a strong and thriving community with a broad range of research experience. We are stronger and have better chances of responding to challenges thoughtfully when we tap into our collective wisdom.

## **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AS WE BEGIN TO PLAN AND PREPARE:**

Are we setting appropriate expectations for our team, clients, and research participants?

When is the best time to share who we are, what we're doing, and the intended outcome of people's participation?

Are our planned activities considerate of people's time and needs?

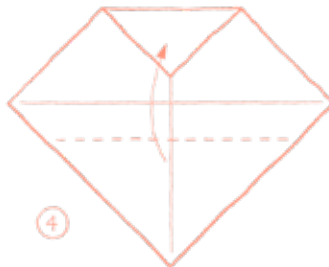
Story Time

## A More-Informed Start

During the first weeks of a project about growing the digital community of an activewear brand, our team consulted a women's history professor with expertise in sports and gender.

We learned about the history of women's participation in sports, dating all the way back to the Olympics in ancient Greece. Learning more about this historical context and the challenges women have faced over time inspired confidence in the power and importance of community in making athletics-adjacent spaces more inclusive.

As we prepared to hold space for a group of research participants to co-design new ways for women to create authentic communities around their movement practices, we were guided by what we had learned. Our background research clued us in about different mindsets of co-designers across ages, races, sexualities, and experiences with participation in sports and movement. We learned about Title IX,\* the double standards between male and female athletes, the evolution of body image and the media, and recent conversations about gender expression in sports. Knowing the history allowed us to recruit more inclusively and enter into a more thoughtful and nuanced dialogue with co-designers.



– Tracy, Design Research, IDEO

\*A law that prohibits discrimination based on sex in educational programs or activities.

## Recruitment and Engagement

*Once we determine our research goals, we identify the people we'll engage. We carefully decide our "who," how best to connect with them, and how to design a relationship with reciprocity and care. At this stage, our principles inform how we initiate relationships with participants, centering trust from the very beginning. Through recruitment and engagement practices that intentionally include individuals and groups who have been historically overlooked or marginalized, we lay the foundation for design that incorporates diverse perspectives.*

*"Imagine a research experience that is so transformative and inspiring that financial compensation is just an added bonus, not the primary attracting factor. An experience that motivates people to participate and share opportunities with their community."*

— Shelli, Design Research, IDEO

### RESPECT EVERYONE'S TIME

When we use screener surveys and phone calls to assess whether people are the right fit for our projects, we respect participants' time and privacy by gathering only the minimum information we need. We keep our commitments, avoid canceling or rescheduling research sessions, and only select and schedule participants with whom we're committing to doing research.

### WHY IT MATTERS

When we ask for people's time and private information – filling out a screener, doing a research prep call, or emailing back and forth – and don't ultimately invite them to participate in research, we are disrespecting their time. Further, they might be less motivated to participate in the future. These interactions can create feelings of rejection, harming our relationship with the individual and our reputations

as researchers. Only reach out to participants once your team is clear on what you are asking of them and what you can share with them about your work.

### **USE MULTIPLE AVENUES AND GENEROUS TIMELINES**

When we recruit research participants, we are building a relationship. Finding and connecting with people takes time, requiring care in how we advertise our projects, how we initially inform participants about our goals and approaches, and how we communicate our recruitment decisions. Sometimes there aren't clear paths for connecting directly with participants, and we need to find alternate ways to meet. Using multiple recruiting channels early on will help us learn faster, pivot, and connect with the right people within a timeline.

#### **WHY IT MATTERS**

Moving too quickly can create a sense of urgency that may undermine participants' ability to make careful decisions about their role, making it difficult to build trust. With insufficient time or a limited number of recruitment avenues, we might only reach those who are most readily available. This puts us at risk of biasing our findings.

### **SEEK COMMUNITY EXPERTISE**

Understanding cultural nuance requires expertise or lived experience. Sometimes we need to connect with communities that are meaningfully unfamiliar to our research teams. In these situations, we seek out – and appropriately compensate and credit – local experts to help recruit participants, inform research questions and methods, and gather and interpret information. In communities that don't have substantial reason to trust us or our process, connecting with one person and carefully building a strong relationship may enable access to participants who know and trust them.

#### **WHY IT MATTERS**

Without direct cultural expertise, we're likely to miss important details that inform and inspire our design decisions. For example, direct translations of other languages in the absence of a cultural expert often fail to fully convey meaning. Channels of communication and systems and institutions might vary widely across cultures, demanding different methods for recruitment and engagement. Community experts are crucial partners in research. When we invest in long-term relationships with them spanning many projects and years, the richness of our research greatly increases.

### **PROVIDE CLEAR EXPLANATIONS**

Research should always feel open, welcoming, and forthcoming. We want to help participants make informed choices about what they share with us. We must tell them as early as possible – to the best of our knowledge – what the research is for and how their information will be used, shared, and protected by IDEO.

#### **WHY IT MATTERS**

The nature of our work means we can't always reveal certain basic elements of the study at the start of the research, but we reveal as much as possible by the end. We are honest about what we aren't able to share with participants, dispelling any sense we're hiding something and providing them with the greatest possible degree of decision-making autonomy.

### **SEEK PERMISSION, NOT FORGIVENESS**

When we work with participants, we ask for consent and encourage them to let us know their limits. Participants should always enter freely into our research, and should never feel pressured. Asking for consent as early as possible is important, and any interactions with a participant before they've formally opted-in to research should require minimal investment on their part.

#### **WHY IT MATTERS**

Because we are often guests in our participants' world – a privilege easily revoked – we want them to feel empowered, appreciated, and respected at all times. Our clients have chosen to work with us because they believe IDEO's human-centered philosophy can improve their organizations and help their customers. When we act with politeness and respect, we show that philosophy in action.

### **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AS WE RECRUIT RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS:**

What perspectives are not included in our research? How might we connect with people who bring those perspectives to our work?

Might the participant's participation harm them in any way in the future?

Might there be conflicts of interest with the client?

Are we setting appropriate expectations?

Are our research methods and activities considerate of people's time and needs?

Are our research and recruiting methods sufficiently accessible?

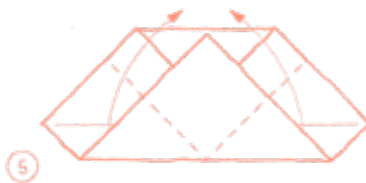
Story Time

## Voting Made More Accessible

Over the course of nearly ten years, IDEO worked to develop a new voting machine for one of the nation's largest voting jurisdictions. A key outcome of this important project was that the machine be accessible to everyone.

Before this collaboration, the machines used were ones developed in 1968. There were many populations underserved by these machines – people with a range of motor needs, language abilities, mobilities, literacy levels, neurodiversity, and housing stability. For the project to be successful, we'd need to engage and recruit all of these populations.

Across many phases of this project, IDEO collaborated closely with research participants in an ongoing way. For example, our team worked with local nonprofit organizations dedicated to supporting individuals with disabilities, testing our prototypes with people with a wide range of physical and cognitive needs.



– Dee, Design Research, IDEO alum



Special Section

# Research with Kids

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At IDEO, some of our projects rely on the expertise of kids. While the same ethical principles apply to this research, it also means considering the unique needs of young people under 18 and our responsibility to care for them.

## CONSIDER CAPACITY

Kids' developing minds function in wonderfully different ways, often yielding compelling insight. These different cognitive capacities also create challenges for informed consent. Younger people may have greater difficulty than adults in understanding the goals of our research and how their information will be used. We seek to honestly and respectfully communicate with children, preserving their agency in the research process as much as possible while recognizing their different capacities. In addition to obtaining informed written consent from caregivers, we obtain verbal assent from children before we initiate research activities. We use developmentally appropriate language to explain to children what we'll do and how research activities help us to design.

## SHARE CONSERVATIVELY

Because children do not have full capacity to consent, we're especially cautious about how we use and share their information. As in our research with adults, we protect kids' privacy and raw data. Even when their caregivers are open to sharing more widely, we default to maintaining anonymity.

We don't know how children may feel later about a decision to share their information.

## OFFER OPTIONS

Prioritizing the boundaries of children and their caregivers, and recognizing the unique closeness of parent-child relationships, we provide choices about how families participate in research. For example, for both remote and in-person research, we let families know that parents have the option to remain in the room with their child throughout the session. While many families are comfortable with their child participating solo, we make sure to never communicate our preference one way or another.

## APPLICATIONS TO OTHER POPULATIONS

Considerations for working with kids can be extended to any other population – each person is unique and deserves our special attention. In particular, there are other groups we work with that may have different capacities. For example, research with healthcare patients often involves working with participants who span the spectrum of neurodiversity. Differences in cognitive capacity amongst patients can present challenges in the informed consent process. While it's important we learn from the communities we design with and for, it's equally vital that we seek expertise in these scenarios. Such research takes extra time and resources, and this additional preparation should be scoped into the project.

# 3 Gathering Information

*We learn from our participants by observing and engaging actively with them – in the real world and the virtual one. At this stage of research, we are considering the whole person and the context in which they live – valuing their actions, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings, as well as their limits.*

*“I say ‘thank you’ so many times!  
When meeting someone in research,  
this wave of gratitude passes through me.”*

– Murphy, Design Research, IDEO

## INTRODUCE THE TEAM ACCURATELY

When we make personal introductions, we are honest about who we are and our objectives. If we are concerned about introducing participant bias by sharing the client’s identity upfront, we ask the participant for permission to wait until the end of the session. If we cannot disclose the client’s identity, we are honest about that information in the recruitment and confirmation process.

### WHY IT MATTERS

Our participants have the right to make informed decisions about who they allow to study them. By representing the team accurately, we offer transparency that builds confidence and trust, which can lead to more authentic interactions.

## CONFIRM CONSENT

Informed consent is an ongoing process, not a single event. Even if the participant has signed a consent form and has agreed to terms in advance, we start

conversations by reconfirming consent. Each time we introduce a new element of gathering information (a recording, a photograph, a video, or something else), we reconfirm this consent and explain again the terms of use of those elements.

### WHY IT MATTERS

Even though participants may have agreed to certain terms in advance, they should feel welcome to ask questions, change their minds, or adjust the terms of their consent after they have started the process. While this may lead to disappointing outcomes for the team (perhaps you thought you would take photos of the participant, but now they no longer feel comfortable), no outcome is more important than the participant feeling respected and heard.

## LISTEN, DON'T ADVISE

Participants should always feel like their perspective is valid.

### ***Exploring “found” data online***

The vast amount of information people now leave behind online provides new opportunities for learning. A compelling current approach involves scraping and analyzing posts from social media websites and other online platforms to inform insights. Standards and laws for using such information are constantly evolving, making it especially important to proceed carefully.

Basic recommendations for gathering and using social media and other “found” online data include:

- Stay informed about laws. The legality of scraping data varies across platforms and geographic locations. Check the policies of the given platform and consult your legal team when uncertain.
- Preserve anonymity and privacy. Regardless of the audience, always separate usernames from posts when sharing findings. Do not share posts outside of IDEO and the client team. Posting something online doesn’t imply consent for sharing identifiable information in other contexts.
- Consider whose voices are included (and left out). Constraints on access to digital platforms and cultural factors influence who participates and how they express themselves online.
- Return to the principles. Given ethical standards for social media analysis are evolving, returning to our fundamental ethical principles may help guide decisions where rules have not been written.

Our research is about gaining people’s perspectives, not about offering advice, opinions, or corrections. This awareness is especially important in projects that directly study or unintentionally surface health information. We do not have the expertise or authority to advise participants about approaches to treating or managing their health.

If you see something troubling during your research, please seek advice from your research team or legal team, or work with a team counselor to process your experience.

### ***WHY IT MATTERS***

As design professionals, we are not experts in areas that may arise during research (such as medical conditions or legal issues). If we offer advice that belongs in the domain of other experts and professionals, we may end up doing more harm than good. Additionally, offering our own opinion or advice will influence participants during observations, muddying results and making them less valuable.

## **DON'T MAKE PROMISES YOU CAN'T KEEP**

We avoid setting unrealistic expectations. For instance, prototypes, concepts, or conversations can mislead people into believing something not-yet-produced already exists. A clear explanation – either before or after the engagement – can help avoid situations in which participants feel cheated by the outcome.

### **WHY IT MATTERS**

Disappointment can erode participants' trust and create lasting negative impressions. Participants may also need the proposed solution presented in research. Deceiving them could delay their progress toward gaining alternative services or products that can help them now.

## **TAKE ONLY THE INFORMATION YOU NEED**

Today's technology – video, audio, photography, social media, and other digital resources – makes it possible to gather vast amounts of contextual information about a given participant, sometimes even without their knowledge. Even if they consented to this collection, it's our responsibility to use restraint. We strive to stay focused, gathering and using no more information than is necessary to support the project's design challenge.

### **WHY IT MATTERS**

Taking only what we need builds a trusting relationship with our research participants, which helps create more authentic and valuable insights.

## **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:**

Are we showing up honestly and authentically while prioritizing the unique needs of each participant?

Are we actively confirming consent with each participant during key moments of research?

If something troubling surfaces during a research activity, are we consulting the greater research community and/or our legal team (while maintaining confidentiality)?

Are we upholding the integrity of our craft by listening and not advising?

Story Time

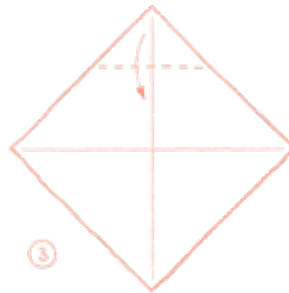
## More Care in Communications

We worked to develop an app for children with a specific cognitive disability that would help them develop speaking and writing skills at an early age. The tool was especially focused on children around the world who do not go to school if they have a cognitive disability – which is the reality in many countries. The researchers did some of their work outside of the US and not in English, using a translator and on-the-ground research support.

Although we explained to families that the team was working on an app that didn't yet exist, the prototypes were very convincing. Families were excited about the new tool and wanted to know when it would be launched. The IDEO team was excited, too – they felt good about helping families that needed this kind of design. The designs were expected to be in development by the end of the year, and the IDEO team reiterated this to eager families. It is also possible that some of the subtleties of the messages were lost in translation.

Unfortunately, startup development cycles are unpredictable. Despite the great designs ready for development, the project paused at the end of the year because of a funding gap. The app did eventually come to market – a few years later and a few years too late for the children the team interviewed.

It's a good cautionary tale. We should only promise what is in our control, and not make promises on behalf of our clients that we aren't in a position to keep.



– Rachel, Design Research, IDEO

Special Section

# Co-Design at IDEO

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*“Co-design is not just about the ‘what.’ It is about the ‘how.’ It calls us to show up in new ways — centering people and communities and leaning into complexity with grace, humility, and intentionality.”*

- Alysha, Founder/CEO, With Space Between, IDEO alum

At IDEO, we’ve been inspired by the co-design pioneered by community design organizations and practitioners around the world, but these approaches are not always appropriate for IDEO to use. For example, when our client is a large company, it may not be suitable to do long-term co-design with communities of customers if profits generated are not going directly back to that community.

That said, there are many instances when co-design or participatory methods are entirely welcome in IDEO’s work. For example, when IDEO designed a new voting machine, and when we designed a new app to distribute food with efficiency and dignity, we used co-design methods.

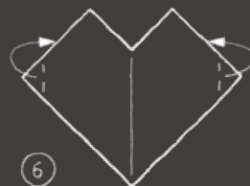
Participatory methods and co-design approaches both shift power from designers toward research participants, but they differ in the extent to which participants and communities outside of IDEO lead and steward the work.

**Participatory methods** may look like creating a customer cohort or council to gather inputs and provide feedback on an ongoing basis, or hosting co-creation

workshops/design critiques where the research participants can work alongside designers to refine design approaches.

**Co-design approaches** are more rigorous, and long-term. We may collaborate with members of the community to socialize our designs with their friends, family, and network without IDEO present. We may also temporarily hire or work with people impacted by design outcomes as part of our extended design team. Compared to participatory methods, co-design approaches more comprehensively shift power to participants and communities.

This work is emergent and nuanced. Looking ahead, IDEO is on a journey of deepening co-design and community-led design practices across projects, portfolios, and the organization.



# 4 Using and Sharing

*As we make sense of the information we've gathered – synthesizing observations, analyzing data, and sharing insights – our principles guide how we communicate about our participants and interpret their voices and experiences. Upholding a trusting relationship at this stage means being selective in the information we share and centering accuracy in how we represent it.*

*“A story can sway decisions, elicit strong emotions, and make understanding click into place, sometimes all at once. The power of storytelling to bring research synthesis to life creates a great responsibility for researchers to use and share data in a credible and dependable way.”*

– Marta, Design Research, IDEO

## TALK ABOUT THEM LIKE THEY'RE IN THE ROOM

Regardless of the setting, we always discuss our research participants and share their stories respectfully. Whether in synthesis sessions with your design team or storytelling about our research with external audiences, this means speaking about participants as whole people – not just as the information they provide. Put simply, if you know they wouldn't feel comfortable, valued, or accurately represented, pause and find a different way to communicate.

## WHY IT MATTERS

The way we talk about participants after they've left the room or clicked out of a survey reflects our values and may influence our subsequent choices and behaviors. Consistent and unwavering

respect in how we speak about participants helps us to remember the whole people behind our insights and to ultimately make human-centered decisions.

## HONESTLY REPRESENT WHAT YOU LEARN

Our deliverables frequently use people's individual stories and comments to explain our high-level insights and findings. When analyzing information at scale, we may report aggregates that can obscure individual voices in favor of representing the average. In either scenario, it's important not to distort information or overlook differences to fit a given framework or approach. This might mean telling less simple but more accurate stories, or calling attention to information from participants that conflicts with the dominant findings.

## **Safeguarding health information**

When health information arises in our research, IDEO complies with HIPAA regulations, even when working with clients or in territories where such regulations are not in effect. This means that health information must never be connected to the identity of the research participant. While some of our projects directly focus on learning about health conditions, others surface health information unintentionally. For example, in concept testing a new toy, we may end up learning about a child's disability, or in designing a new athletic recovery product, we might learn about participants' histories with chronic pain, injuries, and mental health.

Whether information about a participant's health surfaces in a planned or unintentional way, it's crucial we keep health information separate from the participant's identity. We can share the story, but it should never be connected with their name (even first name), photograph, or any other information that could identify them. As our work becomes increasingly facilitated by digital tools and platforms, we must always vet whether new tools are HIPAA-compliant.

### **WHY IT MATTERS**

We are advocates for people's authentic needs. Representing our participants' needs truthfully helps us design the most appropriate solutions. An evidence-based assessment of those needs respects the contributions of participants and means we and our clients can better appraise the potential impact of a given design solution.

### **RECOGNIZE THE LIMITATIONS OF OUR KNOWLEDGE**

While we're tasked with making inferences based on what we see, feel, hear, and discern, we understand participants are the experts in their own experiences and opinions. In arriving at insights or drawing conclusions from data, we acknowledge boundaries in our understanding of who our research participants are, the contexts of their lives, and the reasons behind their choices. This means being honest with ourselves and our clients about the potential limitations of our research

and remaining open to revising our conclusions and changing course in the face of new information.

### **WHY IT MATTERS**

Assuming expertise in the experiences of participants perpetuates power imbalances in the research relationship and can lead to flawed design solutions. By remaining open to being wrong, we continue to learn and are able to revise and correct our designs in ways that avoid harm and generate greater benefits for society.

### **PROTECT PARTICIPANTS' PRIVACY**

Unless we have direct written permission from a participant, we keep their personal information between IDEO and our client team. And even within these teams, we share only the minimum information necessary to communicate our findings. Some forms of private information are less obvious than others. For example, we wouldn't share a participant's email address.



Equally, we wouldn't share an unedited social media post they'd written or allow their license plate number to appear in a video.

Measures to help manage this may include using pseudonyms, separating participant likenesses from their comments, changing identifying details in stories to preserve anonymity, or paraphrasing posts from social media accounts to protect traceability. Further, we keep participant privacy part of the conversation, revisiting our agreements and rules with our client throughout a project and carefully vetting our deliverables for confidentiality.

### **WHY IT MATTERS**

For people to trust us and be comfortable sharing their experiences and opinions, we must maintain our reputation for respecting and protecting personal information. Moreover, sharing identifying information about participants can potentially affect their reputation, relationships, or opportunities.

It's an ethical imperative to safeguard and selectively share information from any participants, but protecting medical and mental health information is also a legal requirement. Refer to the special section for more information about this type of information.

### **PROTECT RAW DATA**

We don't generally deliver raw data (e.g., the recordings of the interviews) in entirety. We may share snippets of recordings in deliverable presentations. Anything beyond this must be discussed with someone from IDEO legal in advance of the project and be reflected in our consent forms, communication with participants, and client agreements.

### **WHY IT MATTERS**

Beyond ethical concerns, there are also several reasons why we protect raw data: 1) We obtain limited consent to use personal information in the recordings from our participants to the extent necessary to do the work and evaluate the deliverables. We do not get consent to allow our clients to use the personal information indefinitely. This allows people to feel comfortable and answer questions completely and candidly. 2) There are legal limitations and risks associated with sharing personal information, and any workarounds need to be addressed before the project starts. This includes any additional steps needed and the time the team will need to dedicate to changes in our process. 3) IDEO's expertise is to distill insights and learnings out of the research materials. IDEO's key value is in the design recommendations, not data collection alone.

### **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:**

Are we honoring participants' dignity by speaking about them and their experiences as though they're in the room with us?

Are we quoting accurately, without stretching words or meaning?

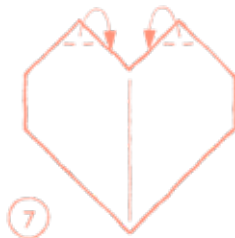
Are we doing all that we can to protect the privacy of our participants, taking into account the specific context of how their data will be represented?

Story Time

## Leaving Space for Silent Voices

When working with our clients to develop a vision for the future of a large gathering space, we designed and distributed a survey to learn about the needs of community members. While the survey would help us learn from a larger number of people, we were also aware that some groups might be less comfortable contributing data to a survey that would ultimately flow to client stakeholders. For example, we recognized that community members that face discrimination might not want to share their identities and experiences in an environment where their identities and rights are not respected by everyone in the community.

And without hearing the voices of all identities, we couldn't assume that their perspectives would align with those of people in the position to share more openly. This awareness of who might not have participated in our research influenced our design principles. Rather than recommending a final static vision based on our limited understanding, we recommended designing a space that was adaptive and could evolve as new perspectives emerged.



– Emily, Data Science, IDEO

# 5 Closing the Loop

*After we've wrapped up a phase of research or finished a project, our principles guide how we maintain relationships with the people who informed and inspired our work. Following up with participants after research ends – even in small ways – is a chance to show respect and build trust. It's also a chance to practice reciprocity by showing participants their impact on the work.*

*“Even when we can't share much due to confidentiality, we can do small but impactful things: be transparent about how much we can (and can't) share about a project, send a personalized thank-you note after the research session, and stay in touch when there are updates we're able to share more broadly.”*

– Leah, Design Research, IDEO

## SHOW GRATITUDE

We could not do the work we do without our research participants. In addition to providing compensation, we go out of our way to ensure participants know how grateful we are for their time and contribution. This might look like personalized thank-you notes, hand-written cards signed by the team, or calling out something specific that really stuck with you from their session, like a quote or story you will carry with you.

### WHY IT MATTERS

After a project is complete, it's important for designers to go back and recognize the source of their inspiration. Cultivating these ongoing relationships also encourages people who participate in research to potentially collaborate again in the future.

## SHARE CREDIT

We look for every opportunity to acknowledge and recognize participants who contributed to project work. This goes beyond naming the number of people we spoke with, and getting as specific as possible (without violating confidentiality) about who inspired the ideas/designs we share with our clients.

### WHY IT MATTERS

Ideas come from somewhere. History is littered with members of the global majority left unrecognized for their inventions, labor, and works of art. IDEO is moving toward a liberated future where design is part of the solution to rectify overlooked contributions – and that starts with naming when great ideas come directly from our research participants and sharing credit with them.

## **FOLLOW UP WITH PARTICIPANTS**

Sometimes our clients put our work on the shelf. While we can't always control what is done with our work, we aren't good stewards of data or accountable to participants' needs if we just let what they told us sit on ice. If communities help bring excellent ideas to life that really could and should be implemented by communities themselves, we can put some of those ideas back in the hands of community members. This isn't always possible, depending on the client and the nature of our legal agreement with them. But if it is possible, we aim to share back the great ideas directly with the people who provided the input to inform them.

## **WHY IT MATTERS**

When research participants help us generate great ideas and those ideas can help those participants – and our client confirms that sharing these ideas back is within our legal agreements – we have a moral imperative to do so. The arc of change on our design projects can be long. Sometimes we are crafting innovations that won't hit the market for years. If there's something we can share with our research participants in real time, we should.

## **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:**

Are we appropriately crediting those who should be acknowledged?

Have we done all we can to leave the participants and communities we've worked with better than we found them?

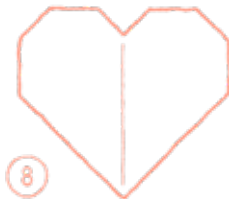
Whenever possible, are we sharing back the work we're able to with participants? What is our plan for sharing back, and how will we hold ourselves accountable to this?

Story Time

## Circling Back with Short-Term Support

Our client was developing a tool to help parents talk to their kids about being safe online. To inform our design, we remotely interviewed kids and their parents. We solicited their feedback on concepts – like games and educational materials – that could support these potentially awkward conversations. Here, closing the loop felt especially important given the sensitive subject matter. Talking about pain points and needs related to child online safety can be anxiety-provoking. Opening up this topic can heighten parents' sense of urgency around keeping their children safe, and we knew that our design might take years to be produced.

To express our gratitude, and to emphasize their impact on our work, we wanted to offer short-term support. We created a physical prototype of a parent-child activity card deck that we mailed with a thank-you letter to the homes of our participants. While this solution was incomplete, it bridged a divide between our virtual interviews and the daily lives of our participants. We found an imperfect but meaningful way to deliver back to families a tangible expression of their expert design input.



– Esha, Design Research, IDEO

Special Section

# Caring for Yourself and for Teams

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During research, teams are exposed to a wide variety of experiences. Different design challenges can evoke various emotions depending on the team member's background. Moreover, fast-paced and intensive projects can be taxing on both the individual and the team.

To be in the best position to care for research participants, we have to take care of ourselves. Many of the guidelines for cultivating trust with participants should be applied to our team members.

During the development of this edition, researchers at IDEO surfaced some practices used to address team care needs on projects:

- **Raising awareness of personal experience.** We aspire to surface and honor team members' experiences and personal connections with the project content and to understand each person's orientation toward the work.
- **Planning for processing of challenges.** We aspire to set expectations and schedule time for how the team will debrief difficult scenarios and process the experience of the project on a regular basis.
- **Creating space for downtime.** We aspire to encourage and honor individual needs for rest and work-life balance, especially during project travel.
- **Seeking expert support.** We aspire to recognize when the need for care is beyond the skill level of the team or is not appropriate to be held by a team member. We ask for help from those with expertise, including project guides, outside facilitators, and therapists.

We recognize that our practice as researchers needs to further evolve to prioritize the care and well-being of our designers in order to allow them to show up fully for participants. Our community is engaged in ongoing discussions about more ways to support teams.

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# Closing Thoughts

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In this new edition of *The Little Book of Design Research Ethics*, our updates reflect a desire to further center care in our relationships with participants, to get more specific about important topics – like recruitment, co-design, and closing the loop with participants – and to bring forward growing awareness and understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion in design research.

We know that navigating ethical questions can be challenging, that we aren't always certain, and that standards for new approaches such as social media analysis and the use of AI are still developing. In these scenarios, where rules and standards have yet to be written or our collective wisdom is evolving, ethical principles can help guide us.

While honoring the principles of respect, responsibility, and honesty from the first edition, we've added the principle of inclusion to reflect our commitment to elevating the perspectives of people who are often unheard or ignored. We have included the principle of evolution to reflect our commitment to remaining open to change, making corrections, and learning more as necessary.

We hope the guidance in this book, and the conversations it stimulates, helps bring us into more trusting and reciprocal relationships with research participants, clients, and communities. We'll keep learning, remaining honest about when we need to change, and embracing new wisdom.

**“This is not a static situation, and we will continue learning. We need to keep sensitive and creative about our approach, and to invite the community – IDEO, our clients, and our research participants – to inform how we evolve.”**

*– Jane Fulton Suri*



## Thank you to our IDEO community

Thank you to the thousands of research participants, co-designers, and collaborators who have come in contact with our teams and our work. You've touched us as individuals and shaped what we've made. For your ideas, experiences, guidance, and wisdom – we thank you.

Thank you to the clients who have trusted us to represent their aspirations and interests during research. You have given us great questions and even greater purpose.

We have limitless gratitude for the hundreds of people who have worked at IDEO and IDEO.org and have taken part in and evolved our design research practices. Thank you for your dedication to upholding the integrity of the craft and the authenticity of our research participants.

Special thanks to Alysha English, Lauren Ito, and Ovetta Sampson for paving the path to our emerging co-design practices.

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## Thank you to our editors, reviewers, and content creators

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Dr. Talya Brettler provided guidance about research focused on health conditions or patients. Jeremy Sallin gave legal counsel. Dr. Lisa Lehmann inspired us through a conversation about bioethics.

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## Acknowledgment and inspiration

At IDEO, we often talk about the value of seeking inspiration. We don't do our work alone – we learn from the world and from history. We are grateful to the community organizers, nonprofit organizations, academics, and designers who have long done the work of developing inclusive and participatory research methods and co-design methods. They are many in numbers and mighty in force, and we feel thankful to be inspired by them and their legacy.



## About IDEO

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IDEO is a global design company. As early leaders in design thinking for over 40 years, we create positive impact by taking a human- and planet-centered approach, by applying creative mindsets and skills, and by teaching others to do the same. As problem solvers, we develop strategy and design digital and tangible products, services, brands, and experiences for business, social, and governmental sectors. As teachers, we help individuals, teams, and organizations see the future and cultivate the confidence and capabilities they need to step into it with optimism, bravery, and creativity. We believe a better future is for all of us to design, and we are committed to doing so responsibly.

