

Neurodiversity and Universal Design for Learning Guide

2026



Acknowledgments



This guidebook represents the collaborative efforts of educators, designers, researchers, evaluators, facilitators, and youth co-designers.

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Funding

This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation under Grant No. 2313850. Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

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NUDL Origin Story

Back in 2023, three museums and our research partners started a project that we nicknamed NUDL*: An acronym for Neurodiversity and Universal Design for Learning."

*NUDL is pronounced "noodle" as in pasta.



Our mission was to understand how museum activities could be designed to support belongingness for neurodivergent people.

Over the next two years, the three museums each met with groups of autistic youth...

We used engineering, design, and maker activities as a testbed for experimenting with new approaches.

We critiqued and redesigned activities, tested new versions with visitors, and worked with researchers and evaluators to investigate what worked and what didn't.

The information in this guidebook is a roadmap to help staff in other places take action based on what we learned. Even without as much funding or time to experiment, you can make interactive educational experiences more inclusive and accessible for people who learn in many different ways.

We hope this guidebook will give you a place to start and ideas to try. Join us!

Use this Guidebook to...

- Learn about neurodiversity and Universal Design for Learning
- Make hands-on programs, exhibits, and activities more accessible and engaging for more people
- Find starting points for making changes within your time and budget
- Decide how to get feedback from neurodivergent learners or organizations



What you'll find:

- Universal Design for Learning strategies you can adapt and apply
- Tools you can copy and mark up



What you won't find:

- Long summaries of our research findings
- Instructions to replicate our activities exactly

Things to keep in mind:

You're awesome for thinking about this with us!

Your own experiences and expertise are important. Think of this book as a new lens or helpful reminder to build on what you know.

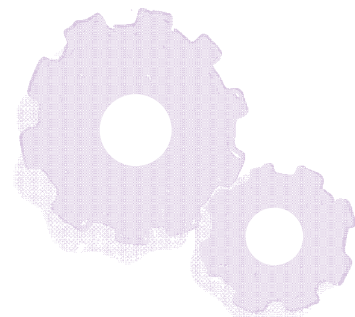
Different perspectives are always valuable (including yours, whether you're neurodivergent or not).

You don't have to know EVERYTHING to do SOMETHING. Small changes can make a big difference.

Try some stuff, see what happens, and try again. Accessibility is an ongoing process and we're all still learning.

Remember: Even one small change matters.

"I think that even if it's on a small scale of just changing one museum in one city, in one state, it still tips a little domino in a larger scale of accessibility improvements everywhere."
— Co-designer



How to Use This Guidebook

Feel free to skip around

Use the colors on the edge of the page to find what you're interested in.



Background information

About our project, this guidebook, and key terms.



What you can change

Practical tips that you can integrate into your activities.



How to iterate

Getting started with iterative design cycles, including steps of the process and what to look for.



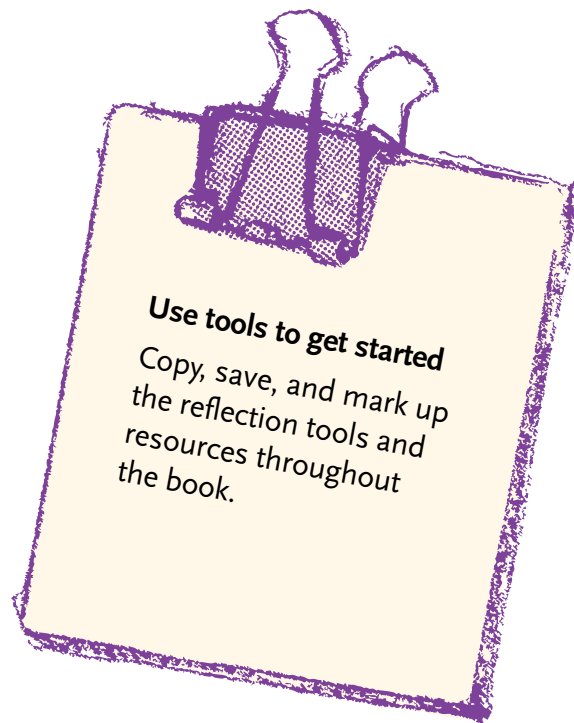
How to co-design

Tips for designing activities in partnership with neurodivergent people.



Next steps

Resources and tools for learning more and continuing the process at your institution.



Brainstorm ideas to try

Icons in each section show the parts of your activities that you might change, with examples of what changes might look like.



Material Environment

The setup of the space and the stuff people interact with.



Activity Design

The goals and structure of the activity, what people do.



Facilitation

When and how staff support the learning experience.



Social Interactions

Opportunities for people to decide whether and how to interact with others.

What is Neurodiversity?

“Neurodiversity” and “neurodiverse” describe the diversity that exists among all people in how we perceive and experience the world.

Neurotypical refers to behaviors or ways of thinking that are usually accepted as “typical” by society.

Neurodivergent and Neurodivergence describe various ways of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and interacting that fall outside of societal norms or expectations.

A quick note on terminology:

As we write this guide, these are the terms preferred by many neurodivergent people and their advocates, but language evolves! Our intention is to highlight that there are many ways of being human, and that all deserve a place in educational spaces.

The neurodiversity movement grew out of the broader disability movement.

Disability scholars and advocates have argued that everyday environments are often designed in ways that prevent people with sensory, physical, and developmental differences from fully participating. Supporting equal access for all means removing these barriers, and providing individual supports as needed. The neurodiversity movement applies the same theory to differences in how people think, feel, and experience the world. Scholars who study neurodiversity argue that all brains are unique, and that this diversity is integral to people’s identities and valuable to society, in the same way that biodiversity is essential to a thriving ecosystem.

Many lived experiences are included under the neurodiversity umbrella.

Neurodivergences include autism, (which affects approximately 1 in 31 children in the USA) ADHD (affecting 1 in 9 children), and dyslexia (affecting somewhere between 1 in 5 and 1 in 7 children), and many other conditions such as sensory processing disorders, motor control disorders, and mental health conditions. Because many people face financial and structural barriers to obtaining diagnoses, these numbers are likely underestimates.

Experiences of neurodivergence are multifaceted and unique to each individual.

Researchers and practitioners used to describe autism as a “spectrum” ranging from lower to higher support needs. While this terminology is still used, many advocates have begun thinking about neurodiversity as a constellation of many characteristics, each of which can vary in intensity.



Many neurodivergent people tend to **mask**, meaning that they hide or compensate for their neurodivergent traits to avoid negative reactions or judgment from others.

This means that a lot of people in your setting might experience one or more forms of neurodivergence but may not have formal diagnoses or may not feel safe expressing their neurodivergent traits.

Diagnoses are not required!

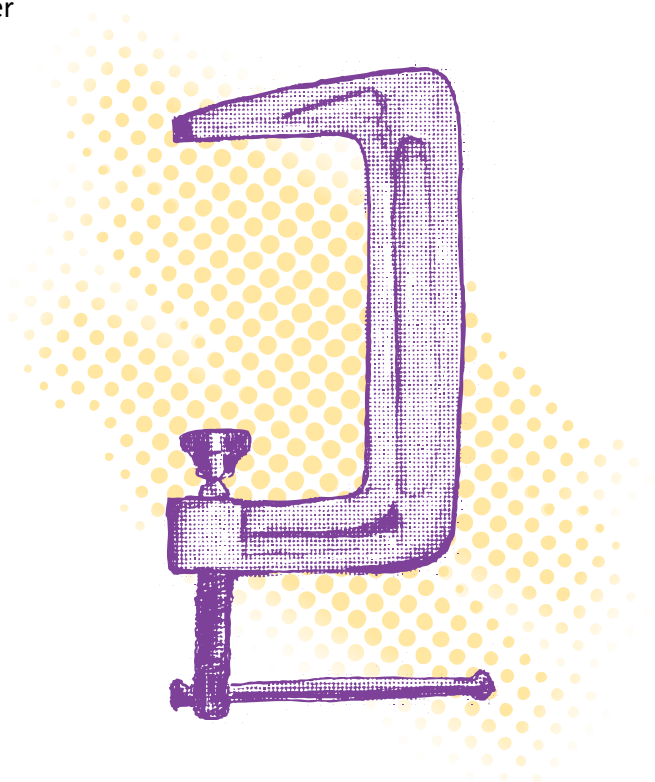
Being neurodivergent is a self-chosen identity, not a medical condition, which is both empowering and a bit confusing. Some people seek out formal diagnoses of specific conditions (like ADHD or dyslexia) in order to access medication or accommodations at work or school, but many people choose to self-identify as neurodivergent after doing their own research. This can be because they face barriers to obtaining a diagnosis, or because they prefer to explore their identities and support needs outside of the medical system. Both are valid!

Not everyone wants to be labeled neurodivergent.

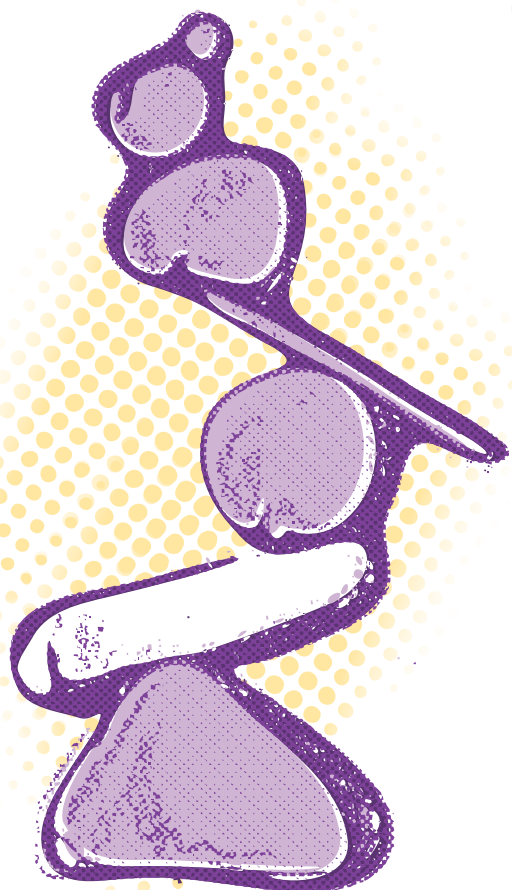
Even those with formal diagnoses may not use the term neurodivergent to describe themselves. Some advocates reject the term because it reinforces the idea that there are “normal” ways of existing in the world, which ignores the diversity of values and behaviors across many cultures. Other people prefer not to disclose their status until building trust or making sure that they are safe “unmasking.”

A co-designer perfectly describes **masking** (as well as his dedication to the program despite the realities of working with small children):

“Last session, some kid just decided to cough all over my setup. Some things like that, those stress me out. I could still function, and I may seem happy and still be able to work around it, but inside I’m a bit tired and I get overstimulated.”



Belongingness



Our goal in this project was to embody the values of the neurodiversity movement by welcoming, valuing, and supporting diverse ways of thinking and learning. We used previous research on belongingness and Universal Design for Learning to guide us.

Belongingness is the basic human need for acceptance and respect. It's not just feeling connected to others, although that's one part of it. It's also about feeling at home in a particular place, feeling like you can be yourself, and feeling a connection to your interests, identities, or communities.

Neurodivergent people often pick up cues that learning environments aren't designed for them, which amplifies feelings of not fitting in. How the space is set up, how people are expected to participate, or how information is communicated can all imply that certain ways of interacting are expected or ideal, even if this isn't intended. Neurodivergent people might respond by masking or trying to adjust to what others expect — which takes a ton of energy away from the rest of the experience — or they may disengage entirely if this isn't possible. Either way, it's a bad learning experience.

Universal Design for Learning

We grounded this project in an assumption that if our world was designed in a way that expected and supported multiple ways of learning, everyone would benefit — whether they identify as neurodivergent or not.

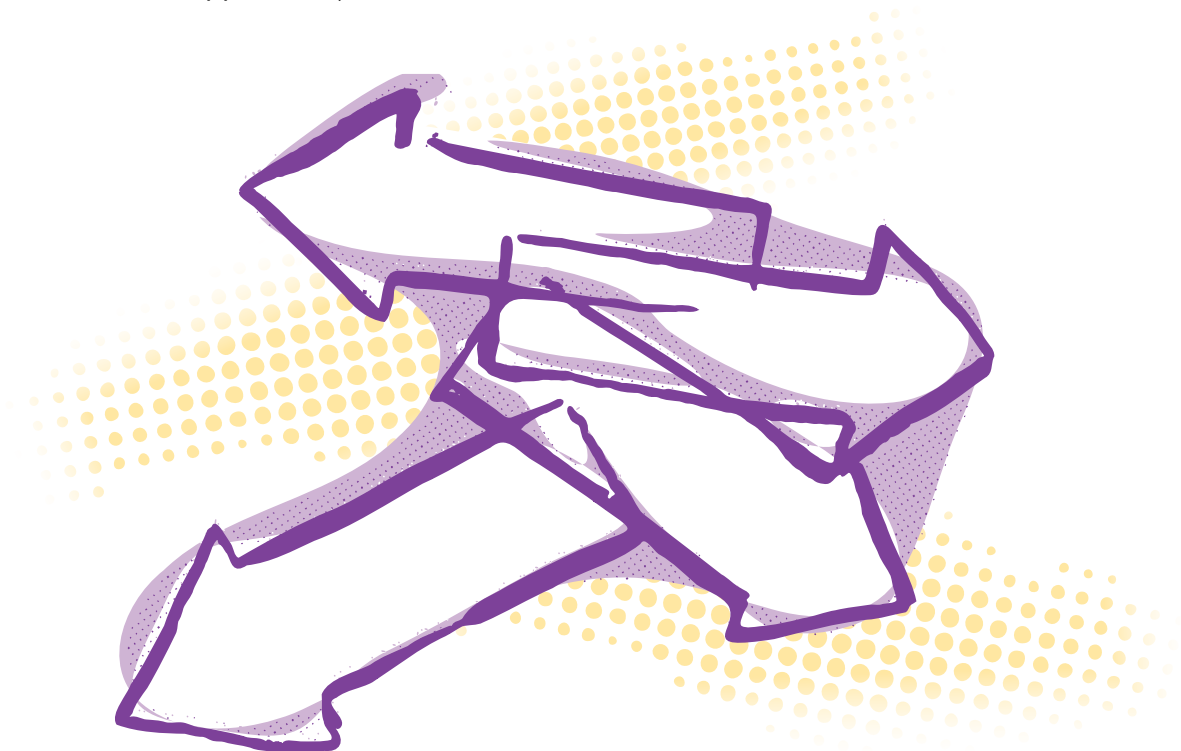
For more information about UDL (and there is a LOT if you really want to get into it), visit, udlguidelines.cast.org

This is the basis of **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**.

UDL is a framework that focuses on anticipating variability in learners' needs and removing barriers to learning by providing multiple options for engaging with learning activities, representing information, and expressing ideas or taking action.

Rather than designing for an “average” learner (who doesn't really exist), UDL asks educators to assume that all learners will have different interests, needs, attention levels, ways of communicating, ways of approaching a problem, and levels of tolerance for uncertainty or frustration.

By building in supports for many ways of learning, we hoped to support belongingness for neurodivergent people within our regular activities and programs. Rather than creating separate experiences that were designed only for autistic people, we wanted to redesign our activities to support everyone in our museums.



Design Terminology

Design cycle

We used design cycles to develop and refine new activities in this project. The design cycle is a process for identifying a problem, brainstorming possible solutions, testing ideas, and using feedback to make improvements in an iterative or ongoing way.

Check out page 33 for more info!

Co-design

We used a co-design process to work with autistic youth in this project. There are many types of co-design, but in general it refers to the practice of including the people you're hoping to serve in the development, design, and improvement of a product. It's more than getting feedback — it's a collaboration throughout the design process.

UDL uses co-design specifically with people who are “on the margins” (or excluded in particular ways) to identify barriers and challenges that they face. This is an important strategy within the disability rights movement. You may have heard the phrase, “nothing about us without us.”

In our project, youth and museum staff worked together to critique activities, brainstorm improvements, develop inclusive options, and improve activities based on visitor feedback.

Check out page 45 for recommendations for co-designing with neurodivergent people!

Engineering design

This project focused on creating hands-on engineering design activities. Engineering design can refer to a non-linear process for solving problems (like the design cycle) or a set of skills, practices, and mindsets that engineers and designers use (like using tools, brainstorming possibilities, building a design, improving a design based on feedback, etc). Each of our museums interpreted engineering design in slightly different ways, and our research looked at many engineering design practices. We were especially interested in activities that helped learners use tools and materials, build prototypes or designs, and make changes or improvements.

Important note:

Although we tested engineering design activities in museums, the lessons we learned can apply to students in school settings or to other kinds of learning experiences in other types of organizations.

Tools:

Reflect on Neurodiversity and Belongingness

Take a moment to think about your own learning preferences and needs.

What's your ideal learning environment?

Think of a place where you feel inspired, curious, focused, or supported.

What is it like? What makes it work well for you? What supports or strategies do you find helpful?

Use the box below to write, draw, make lists, etc. to record your thoughts.



A large rectangular area filled with a light purple dotted grid, intended for writing or drawing.

Think about...

What aspects of the physical space help you learn or make you feel at home?

What supports do you rely on?
What options do you appreciate having?

Are there other people around? How do you prefer to interact with them?

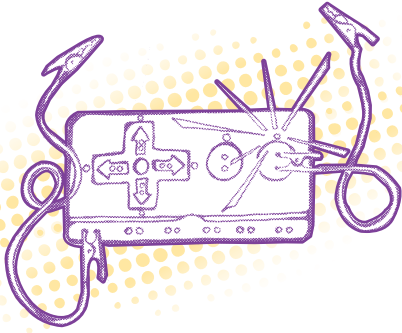
What sounds are there? How does that impact the way the space feels?

When do you like to have guidance or help, and how do you prefer to receive it?

How do your preferences change from day to day, or depending on the kind of task you're doing?

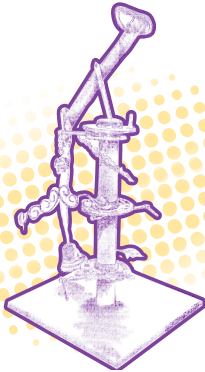
Activities We Developed

Co-design teams explored ways to embrace neurodiversity by developing and improving these four activities.



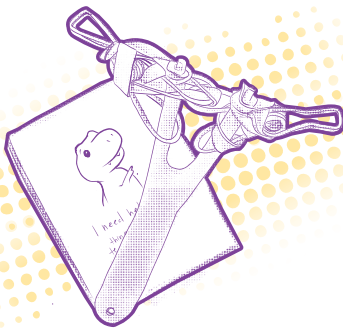
Makey Makey Video Game Controllers

Museum visitors explore the components of circuits in a variety of formats, and engineer video game controllers with Makey Makeys, circuit boards that can be controlled by any conductive material. Co-designers in our project were facilitators of this activity. They designed controllers for visitors to try as examples, and helped visitors explore circuits and make their own controllers.



Balance Sculptures

Visitors work individually or as a team to engineer a scrap metal sculpture, using balance to hold parts of the sculpture together. Facilitators in this activity introduced balance sculptures as a type of temporary art, or art that lasts for only a moment before it's gone, inviting visitors to create their own and think of other examples.



Help Wanted

Visitors use familiar or repurposed materials to design a contraption or tool to solve a problem faced by someone in a fictional community. The “clients” include a range of real and fantastical characters, and visitors are encouraged to use labels to either draw their designs or describe their solutions, leaving their invention ideas behind as inspiration for others.



Chain Reaction

Visitors explore the potential of everyday objects by creating chains of cause-and-effect relationships to activate a final goal. Objects include wooden ramps, balls of different sizes and weights, sports equipment, kitchen items, toys, VHS tapes, and other found objects. Some objects are mounted on wooden blocks to make them easier to use, and facilitators help visitors connect and troubleshoot their creations.

Activity Development and Research Process

This page shows the general steps of the process that each co-design team followed as they worked on activities together.

Decide on an activity to create or redesign

Museum staff and youth co-designers spent a few months exploring existing activities at our museums. Then each group chose activities to create or redesign based on their interests.

Collaborative design cycles

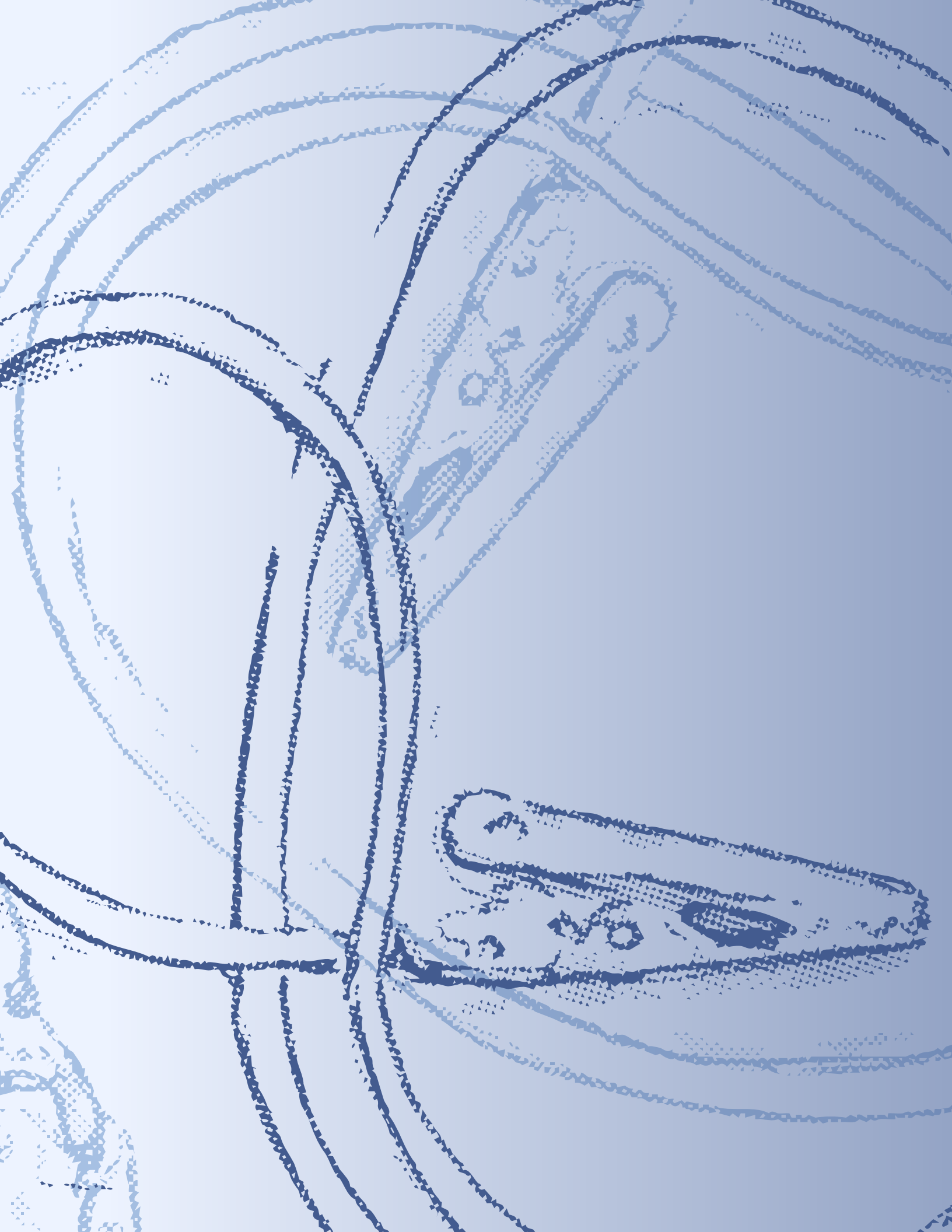
Co-designers collaborated with museum staff to improve multiple aspects of the activities to make them more accessible and engaging — including the signage, materials, facilitation strategies, and the layout of the physical space. (See pages 33 – 34 for more info about the steps of our design cycles.)

Repeated testing and iteration

We tested out our activities with both neurodivergent and neurotypical visitors, and researchers gathered information about how our design decisions affected visitors' experiences. Based on our observations and visitor feedback, we decided what to keep and what additional changes to make. We iterated each activity at least three times before finalizing the designs.

Compiled Recommendations

At multiple points throughout the process, the project team synthesized co-designers' recommendations across the three museum sites, compiling similar strategies that supported engagement and helped more people participate in our activities.





What You Can Change

This section breaks down the recommendations we developed with co-designers after spending two years testing out different approaches. You'll find practical strategies that you can immediately apply in your programs, activities, or environments.

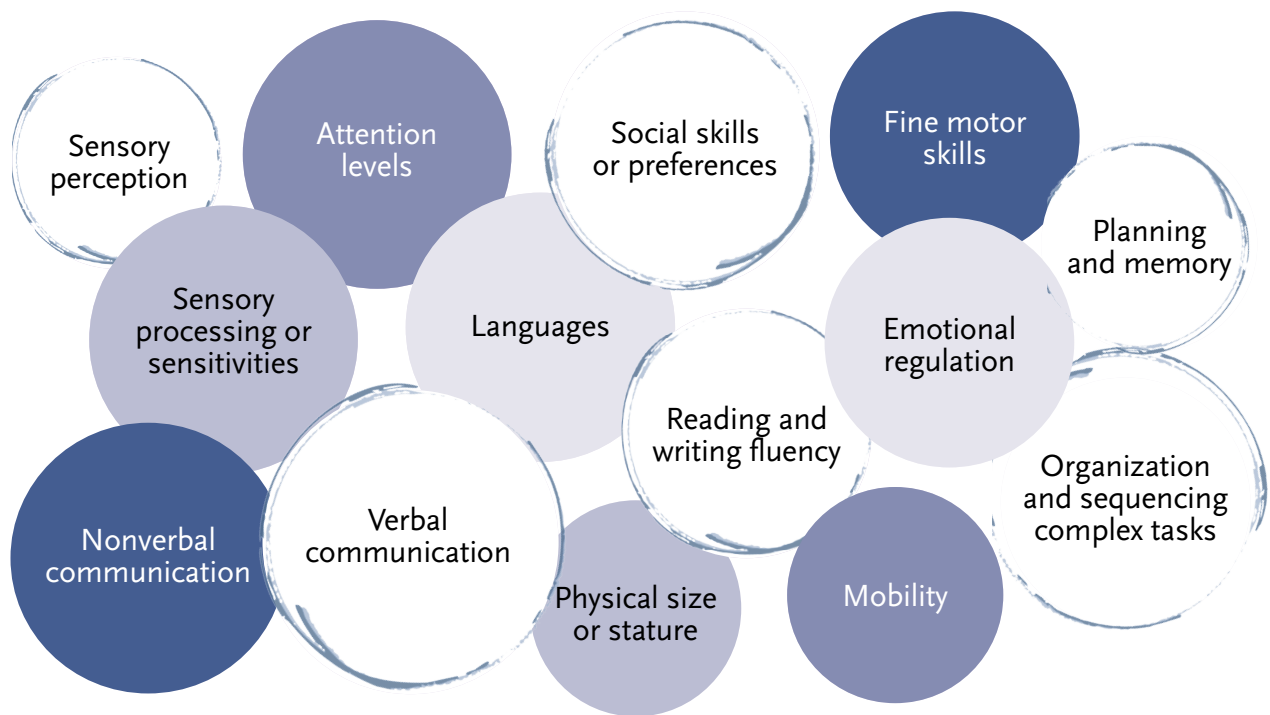
Strategies for...

Supporting Belongingness

When you don't feel like you fit in, it's hard to focus on anything else, no matter how nice an activity might be. Focusing on belongingness first can make all other parts of the activity feel more accessible and engaging.

Be proactive: Anticipate diversity

Think about how both learners and staff might vary along each of the dimensions listed below, how that might affect their experiences, and what options might support them.



Describe differences as expected and valued

It's never fun to feel like you're being judged for being different. Think about how to communicate to visitors and staff that they might see people learning and interacting in many different ways. Setting this expectation from the start can go a long way to making neurodivergent learners feel more comfortable being themselves.

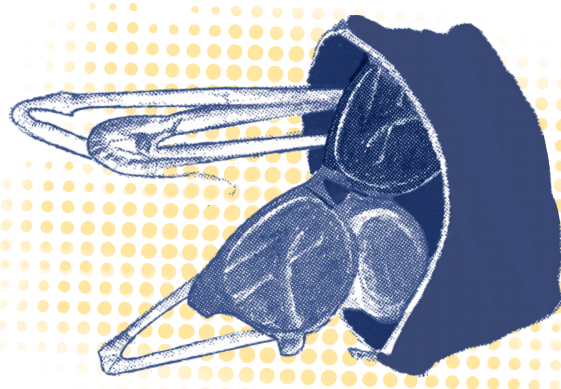
Tip:

Neurodivergent facilitators can help model different ways of learning. For neurodivergent visitors, it can be powerful to see someone like themselves in a leadership role.

A co-designer highlights the importance of belonging and of being in community with other autistic individuals: *"I was having a hard time coping with being neurodivergent, feeling like I was alone through everything. And I know that I'm not alone through things because there's many other students who go through the same process."*

Make accommodations available to all and encourage everyone to adjust their environments

Don't assume people will know what options are available or feel comfortable taking advantage of accommodations on their own. The more explicit your invitations, the better!



Some things to keep in mind...

Remind visitors to be mindful of others

"Not only is a quiet area important to me, but I think it's the enforcement of the rule, because I cannot count how many times I've gone to a so-called quiet area and then had people talking at full volumes and children kicking with no one redirecting them or anything."

— Co-designer

Learners aren't blank slates

People's past experiences in educational spaces might have been pretty inaccessible and frustrating, which can make it hard to be vulnerable and try similar things again. Fostering belongingness can mean working to counteract previous experiences and helping people feel safe enough to try something.

Strategies for...

Communicating Goals and Expectations

Activities in museums can be kind of weird (let's be honest). Neurodivergent people have probably experienced situations where it was unclear what was expected of them, and it can be frustrating or scary to feel like they are guessing about what they are "supposed" to do. UDL involves making the goals of learning activities very clear from the start, so that learners can find their own ways of engaging.

Use visuals and words to communicate what an activity is about and what learners will do



Where to Put Signage

Place in an area where people can read the sign before they choose to enter the space. More detailed information about the activity can be either around the activity space, or at tables/stations.

Provide Additional Information

Include a visual glossary for any tools and materials, including adaptive tools that you provide.

Use examples from the activity to show what's possible



Material Environment

Show a variety of in-progress and finished examples to demonstrate different ways to approach the same activity. If you need to curate examples, choose projects that have different levels of complexity, and highlight different ideas or solutions.



Activity Design

If all of your examples look pretty much the same, rethink the goals of the activity or the range of materials you offer to open up more possibilities and help spark more ideas for other visitors.

Make safety guidelines explicit when working with unfamiliar tools or materials



Material Environment

Make sure the space provides conspicuous visual warnings about important safety guidelines using signs or by blocking off areas.



Facilitation

Introduce new tools using low-pressure and structured guidance, like letting learners hold a tool that is turned off, or asking them to watch someone else use it to see the steps involved.

Show where and how to get help if needed



Material Environment and Facilitation

Use visuals to tell/show visitors who they can ask for help, and give examples of what kinds of things staff can help with (like getting started, replenishing supplies, or helping troubleshoot if you run into problems). For example, signage with an image of a staff person and sample language for approaching them can be very helpful.

Strategies for...

Building Autonomy

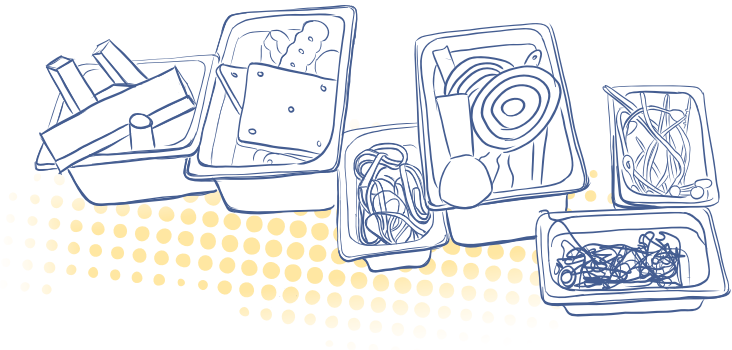
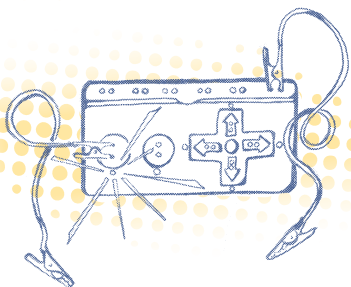
UDL emphasizes providing multiple options for how learners can approach an activity, but it's also important to make options interesting and understandable so that learners feel invited to make choices about their learning experiences.

Provide multiple entry points and ways of approaching the activity

For example:

One of our activities used Makey Makeys as video game controllers. This activity built in many options:

- Introductory circuit activities, which let visitors explore circuits at their own pace and in different ways
- Pre-built Makey Makey controllers to try with either single or multi-player games to see how the technology works
- A wide range of materials to build your own controller for one of the games
- Signage with information to allow for individual exploration



Sort, organize, and display materials to make them appealing to explore

For example:

In our Balance Sculptures activity, visitors could use repurposed metal objects (like plates, bolts, keys) and connectors (like wires, rubber bands, clamps) to make their own work of art. We sorted materials into bins based on their uses: bases, sculpture parts, or attachment methods.

Tip:

Provide instructions (and a visual) on how to use supplies for the activity if it might not be intuitive (for example: how to twist a rubber band or use alligator clips).

Encourage people to make choices about their learning experiences



Facilitation

Providing either/or options can help make the options clear and provide language visitors can use to make choices. For example: “Do you want to play with a controller that’s already built, or make your own?”



Activity Design

Make options part of the activity:

- Provide cards with optional challenges, design prompts, or ideas that visitors can choose from.
- Create separate activity stations with different but related activities.
- Offer an appealing array of materials to choose from.

Balance providing suggestions and leaving room for experimentation



Facilitation

Facilitators can participate in the activity next to visitors to model one way of approaching the activity.



Material Environment

Show examples of what other visitors have built, or use images from everyday life to spark ideas without giving just one solution.



Activity Design

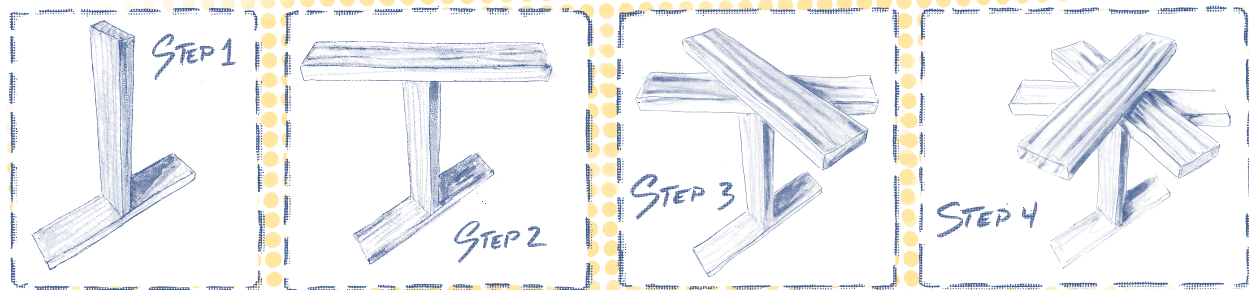
Allowing visitors to work alongside other visitors or staff can inspire creativity and encourage people to build on one another’s ideas.



Strategies for...

Sustaining Engagement

For neurodivergent learners, differences in executive functions (like planning, decision-making, and sequencing tasks) make it especially important for activities to be designed in ways that help learners persist and feel motivated at each step, particularly for complex or multi-step activities.



Break up complex tasks into smaller steps, and make each step easy to follow



Material Environment

The setup of the space can help learners think about one step of an activity at a time. Rearranging furniture and/or setting up clearly labeled stations are low-cost ways of breaking up a multi-step activity.

For example:

In the Balance Sculptures activity, co-designers rearranged the tables to create separate areas for gathering supplies and for building. This deepened families' engagement in both parts of the activity.

Provide structure for engaging with others in different ways



Social Interactions

Brainstorm different ways of doing the activity: as an individual project, a collaborative effort, or a competition (though we recommend making competitions optional rather than required). Facilitators can use these to adjust the activity for individual groups.



Material Environment

Create spaces for working solo, with others in your group, near others, or observing from a distance before jumping in — let people choose what works for them. Many neurodivergent people appreciate “parallel play” where they can work next to but not directly with someone else.

Connect to learners’ interests, real-world contexts, or STEM concepts

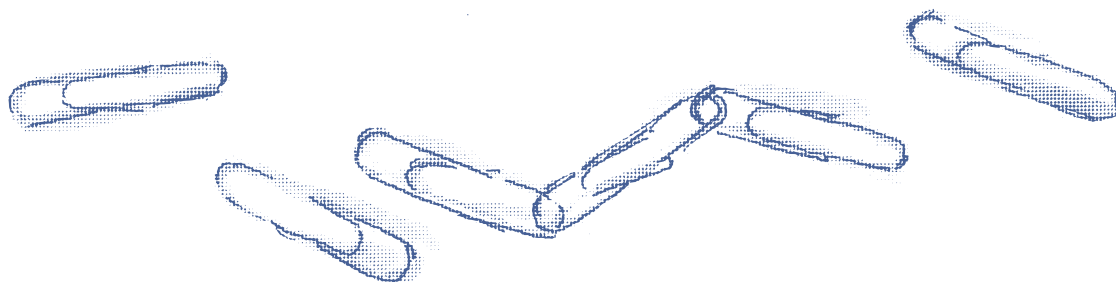


Facilitation

Facilitators are vital for making these personal connections! Some visitors might be happy exploring the activity without any context, but others might want to know more of the whys and hows, or might have a special interest that they can connect to.

For example:

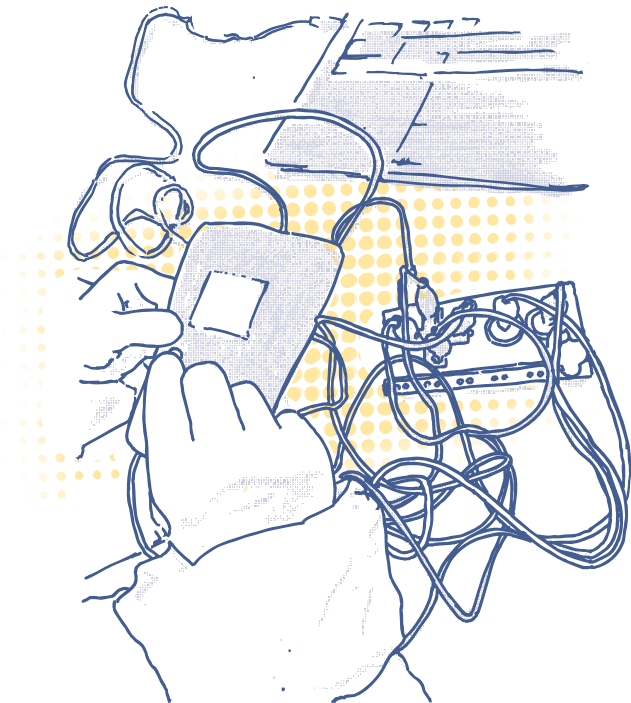
Our Help Wanted activity invited visitors to invent something to help different “clients,” both fantastical (a mermaid) or realistic (a chef). Having many options let visitors find a client they connected with on a personal level.



Offer scaffolded challenges and support to meet learners where they are

For example:

In the Help Wanted activity, some of the problems that visitors could choose from were more concrete and straightforward to solve (a dragon with an itchy back) and others were more abstract (a mermaid who wants to make more friends) but included details to help learners find a starting point (she likes playing board games).



Activity Design

If you offer suggested challenges or design prompts, include some options that have clear starting points or more straightforward solutions, and others that are more complex or detailed.



Activity Design

Provide opportunities for learners to explore individual concepts, parts of the activity, or get comfortable with tools/materials before or during the activity.

Encourage iteration or trying again in a new way



Facilitation

Personalized support from facilitators can be critical if learners experience failure or frustration. Help visitors persist by noticing what happened and thinking about what they want to change. Some prompts to try: “Did that work the way you wanted it to?” “Which parts aren’t doing what you wanted?”



Social Interactions

Caregivers are valuable co-facilitators. If your activity is for multi-generational groups, provide adults with examples of questions or information they could share with their children, or have facilitators model the activity for caregivers and children together.



Strategies for...

Reflecting and Transitioning

Reflecting at the end of an activity is important for making sense of what you did and understanding yourself and how you learn. For neurodivergent people, transitioning from one activity to the next can also be challenging. Being intentional about how you wrap up activities can help make the entire experience feel more satisfying and empowering.

Encourage learners to reflect on what they did before moving on



Facilitation

Inviting learners to take a moment to describe what they did or what they made can invite learners to reflect on the parts of the experience that were meaningful for them. Offer flexible ways for this to happen by: telling someone about what you made; by drawing or writing; or by taking a photo, video, or voice memo.

For example:

In our Help Wanted activity, facilitators gave visitors cards with space to describe their design ideas (using drawing and/or writing) and asked them to leave their creations on a display shelf. We saw many families working together to add details (such as children telling their caregivers what to write).

Display and share what learners make or do



Material Environment

Create a display area with photographs, videos, or physical examples of learners' projects. Adding to the display can help visitors be ok with leaving their creations behind if necessary. (*Bonus:* It provides authentic examples for other groups to use as inspiration.)



Facilitation and Social Interactions

Think about other ways to celebrate learners' work (offering to take a photo on their own device to remember the moment, or help them package their work to take home).

Suggest activities to try next based on learners' interests



Activity Design

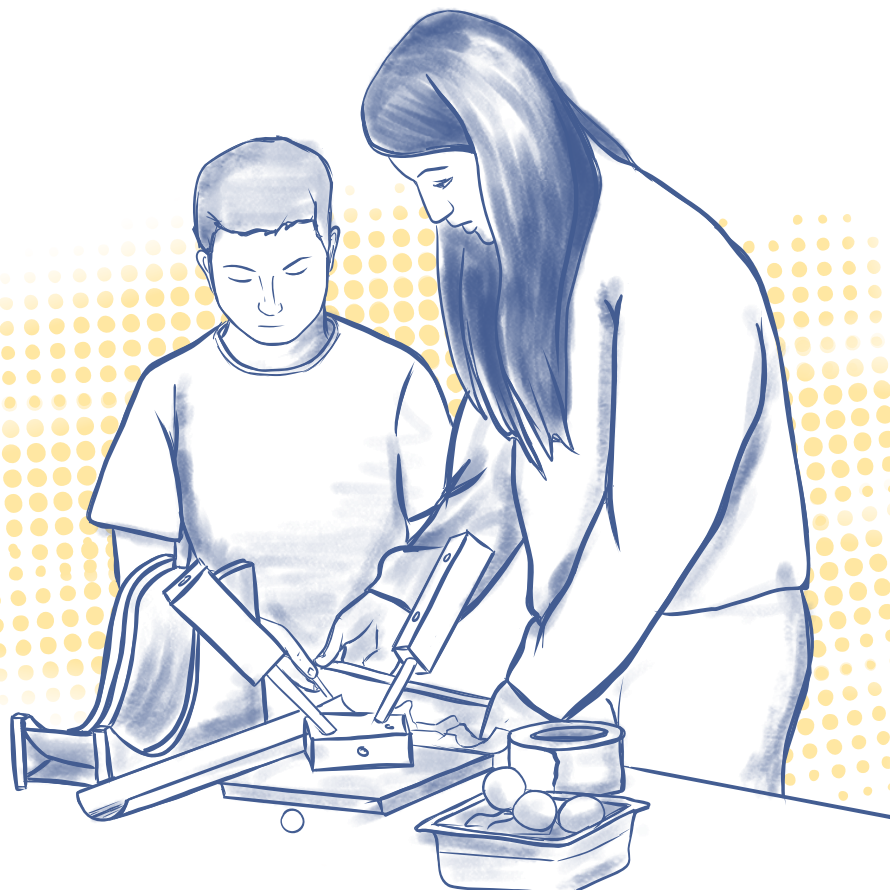
Share resources that people can use to continue learning or do similar activities at home. Focus on free resources that are user-friendly for both neurodivergent people and any caregivers, and materials that have multiple modalities (text, video, audio, photos).



Material Environment and Facilitation

Are there other related activities at your institution? Future programs? Other exhibit areas?

Let people know with signage, printed information, or conversations!

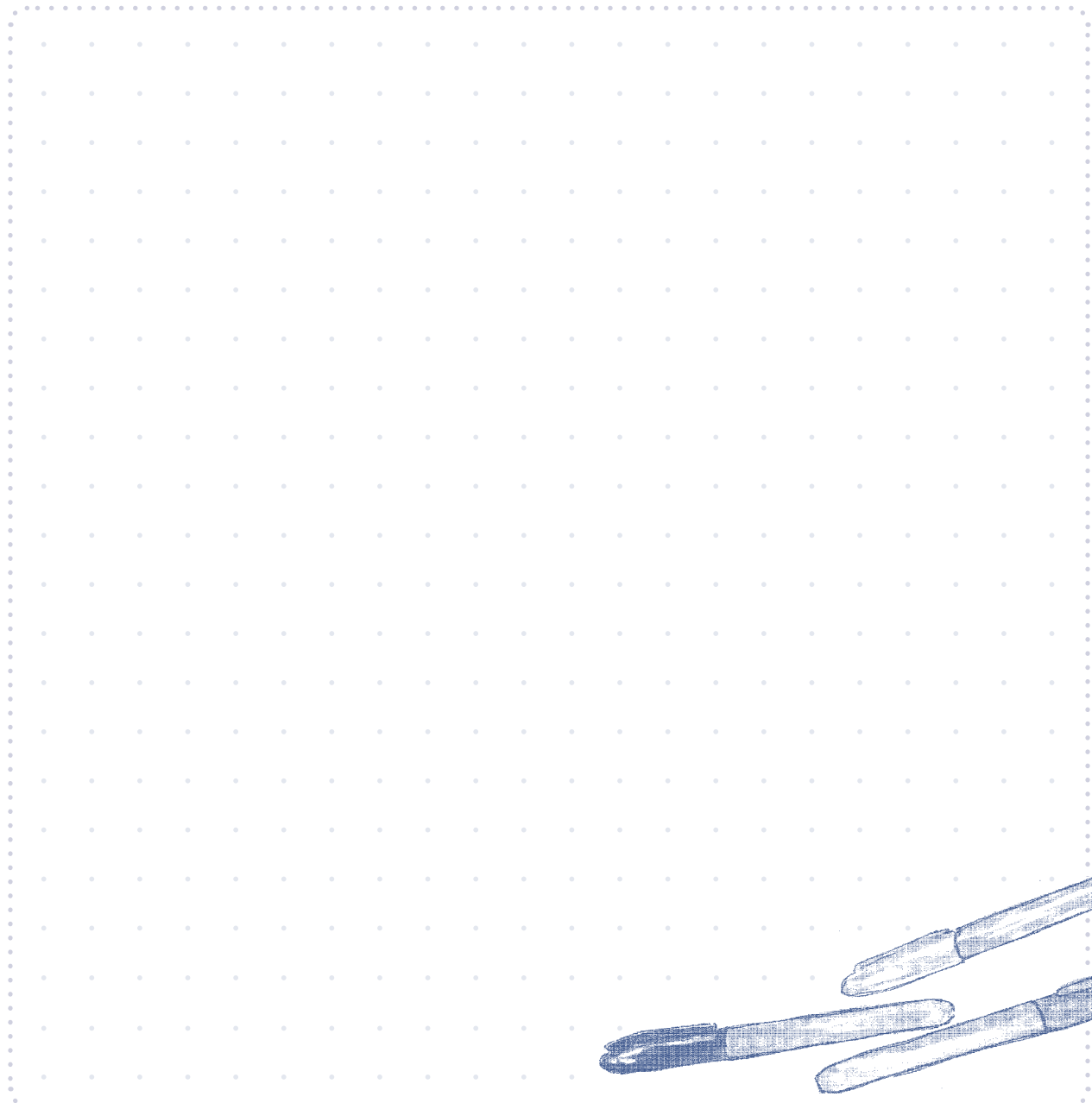


Tools:

Make a Plan

Write or draw:

What kinds of experiences do you want to improve at your institution?
What ideas from the previous pages could you implement right away?
What might these strategies look like for you?



Think about...

Use these prompts to think about one activity at your institution. Which parts of the experience could you strengthen?

Foster belongingness and agency

How do you show that diverse ways of thinking are expected and welcomed?

Communicating goals and expectations

How does the experience help people understand what they can do and how to begin?

Building autonomy

What options do people have for how they can engage in the experience?

Sustaining engagement

How does the experience support persistence and deeper engagement?

Reflecting and transitioning

How does the experience help people reflect and share their work or keep learning?

What can you change? Choose options that are doable for you!
See the resources on pages 57 – 61 for more ideas!

Physical environment and materials:

- ☐ Setup/arrangement of space
- ☐ Design of signage
- ☐ Type of materials
- ☐ Variety of materials

Design of activities:

- ☐ Diversity of entry points
- ☐ Diversity of possible goals
- ☐ Pacing/timing
- ☐ Breaking up steps or process
- ☐ At-home resources

Facilitation:

- ☐ Introductions to tools/materials
- ☐ Connections to real-world ideas/concepts
- ☐ How options are shared
- ☐ Individual support for persistence

Structure for social interactions:

- ☐ Options for working solo
- ☐ Options for working collaboratively
- ☐ Options for parallel play/side-by-side
- ☐ Support and info for caregivers





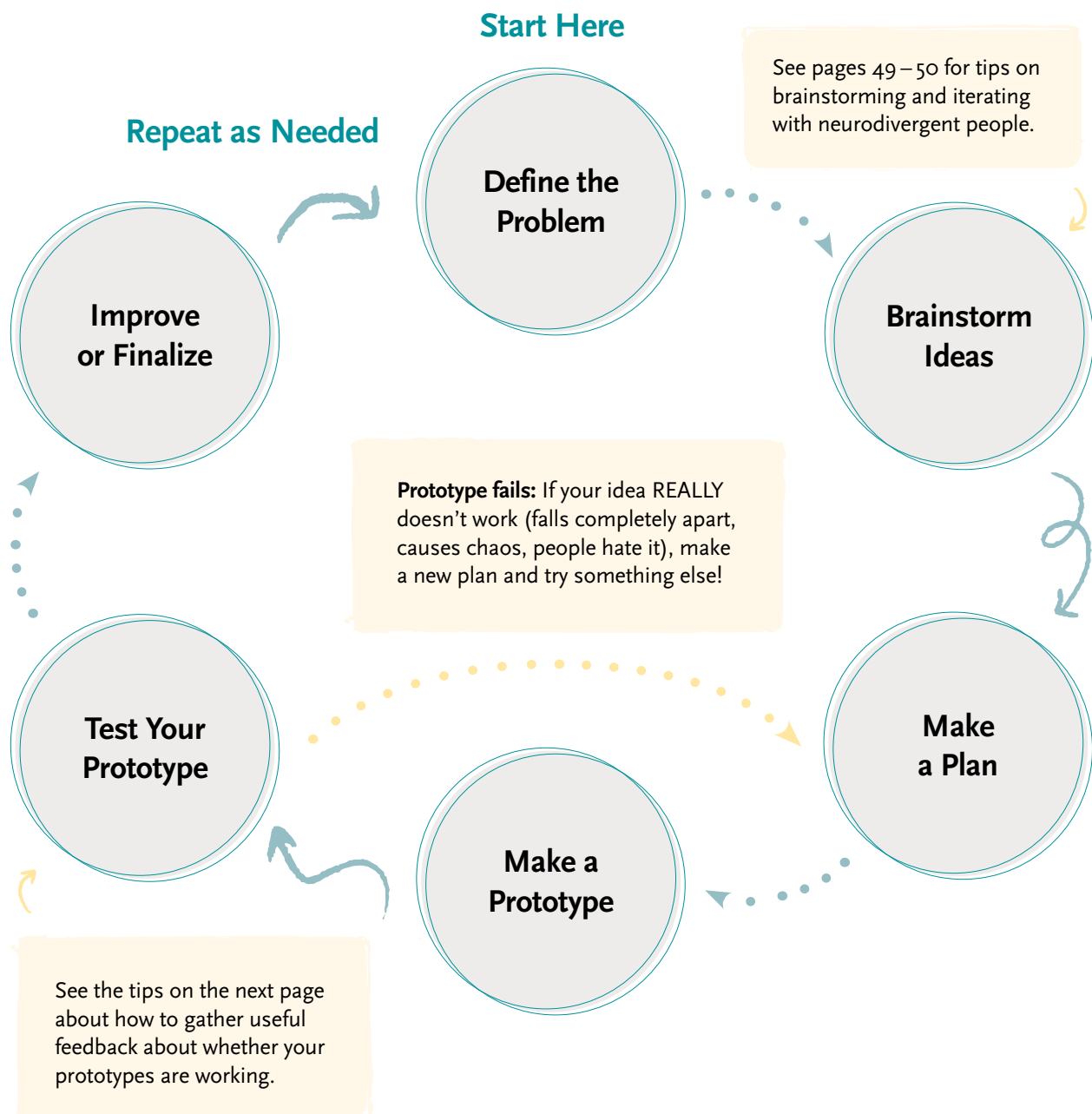
How to Iterate

Once you've made a plan about what you could change, testing out changes and seeing what happens is the next step in making your experiences more accessible and inclusive. Getting this kind of feedback can help you check your assumptions about what will be helpful to neurodivergent people, and adjust your strategies or explore different kinds of supports. Whether you have a lot of time and resources or just a little, this section will give you practical suggestions for engaging in iterative design cycles.

What is Iterative Design?

How Do I Get Started?

Even if you don't consider yourself a designer, you may be using design cycles already. The design cycle is a process for solving problems, testing ideas, and making iterative, gradual improvements. Taking time for each step of the process can help you think more creatively and intentionally as you make changes to your activities and environments.



Define the problem — In the last section, you started defining what you want to improve. Now get specific: What's not working? How do you know? Who is most affected? Which specific parts of the experience need to be adjusted or redesigned?

Brainstorm ideas — Think big and broad. How many different options are there for solving this problem? Try to push past your first idea, or get input from other people who might have other perspectives. Use the ideas in the last section to help you brainstorm around different parts of the experience.

Make a plan — Now it's time to get practical. Out of all the options you came up with, what do you have the power to change? Which options are most feasible within your time and budget? Start with the easiest things to adjust, and layer more changes when you can.

Make a prototype — Prototypes are rough versions of an idea that you can change easily. They should use low cost materials (think: cardboard and marker) or things you can test quickly to see what works and what doesn't before you invest in sturdier materials, final designs, or detailed training for staff.

Test your prototype — The next step is testing your ideas so that you can see what works and what doesn't. You can start by testing prototypes in somewhat "controlled" circumstances (maybe with fellow staff members, or at quieter times of day) to help you catch initial issues quickly. Then test them in more typical circumstances or with broader audiences.

Improve or finalize — Ideally, your testing will highlight things you can fix or improve further. Repeat the cycle: Reflect on what happened and think of new solutions or adjustments to your design, and then test again! You can finalize parts of the activity that are working well while making changes to other areas (for example, if your signage is working well, but you still want to tweak facilitation strategies).

Getting Feedback

There are many different ways of testing ideas and gathering feedback. There's no single best way, but here are some considerations to help you decide what will be helpful and doable at your institution.

Consider who's in the room (and who isn't)

The feedback you get depends on who you ask. There are multiple options, and you may want to recruit multiple different audiences to get different kinds of feedback. Think about which audiences might challenge your assumptions or raise issues that you might not have considered before.

Staff and volunteers at your institution, or other colleagues (especially those who are neurodivergent). Staff have different perspectives than visitors, but this can be a great way to get initial feedback and share experiences and expertise.

Visitors during neurodiversity-friendly programs or events. Testing in these settings can help you make sure that you're getting enough feedback from neurodivergent people, and can help build relationships with regular visitors.

Day-to-day visitors to your institution. Many of your visitors will be neurodivergent on any given day. Testing outside of special programs can help you get feedback from broader neurodiverse audiences with many different needs and ways of learning.

Local organizations serving neurodivergent people. Reach out to schools, clubs, workforce training programs, and support organizations who work with neurodivergent people

Neurodivergent co-designers. You can also recruit neurodivergent youth and adults to collaborate with you over longer periods of time to help you brainstorm and test new ideas.

Tips for building relationships with local organizations

- Consider reaching out to a few organizations that work with different populations (autism, dyslexia, ADHD, etc.) to get feedback from people with a range of identities and support needs.
- Look for local branches of national organizations, like the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), job placement or training programs, and schools in your state or city.
- Talk to staff at partner organizations to get their input on how you can welcome the learners they serve.
- Share lots of information about what to expect, including any accessibility issues that you can't change (like loud or bright spaces) and how you will help.
- Provide free admission and consider offering a meal or other incentives as a thank you.

Recruiting co-designers FAQ

If you're thinking about exploring co-design, here are some answers that might help you decide if it's right for you.

- *Do I have to do co-design?* Definitely not! It is one way to get input from neurodivergent people, but not the only way.
- *Who can be a co-designer?* We recommend paying co-designers for their time and expertise, so it's best to involve teens and adults who are eligible to work.
- *What would I need to budget for?* Include co-designers' time at an hourly wage, snacks for meetings, writing and drawing materials, fidgets and other sensory supplies.
- *How much time is needed?* We had co-design sessions once or twice per month, for 1 – 3 hours each session. Each activity took about 6 months to develop and test.
- *How many people should we recruit?* Groups of 3 – 8 are ideal to make sure you have a variety of perspectives and lived experiences. More than this can be challenging to manage!
- *How should we share information?* We shared information about the opportunity with our networks and partners, and held virtual info sessions for youth and their caregivers to give more detail and answer questions.

What to pay attention to

When prototyping, your goal is to understand what is working well and what can be improved. You can find out by gathering different kinds of information, and it's helpful combine multiple approaches and give visitors options to share their feedback in whatever way they prefer. This section describes the methods we used when testing activities with museum visitors.

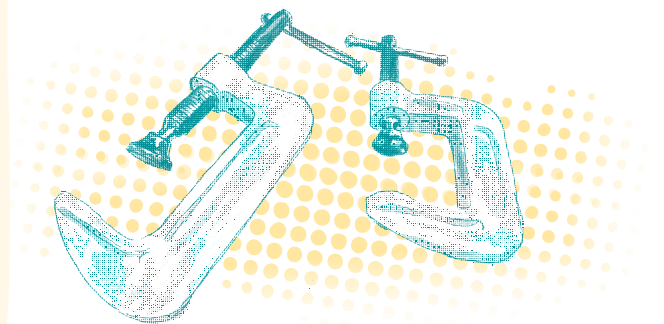
Observations

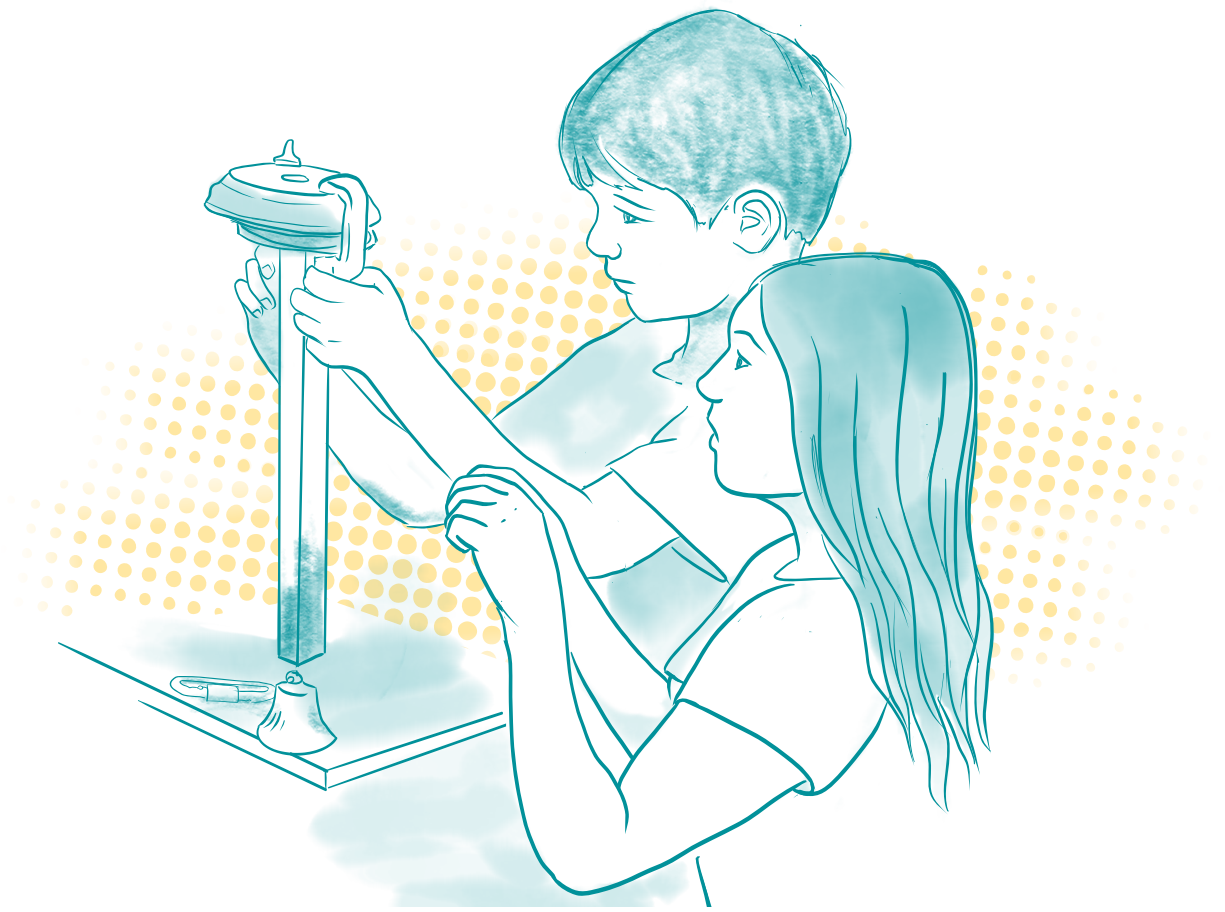
You can observe from the sidelines or while sitting next to visitors as they engage in the activity. Whichever you choose, there is no way to observe everything that will be happening! Focus on a few specific questions and keep in mind that not all aspects of learning will be visible..

- Is everyone able to participate? If not, what are the barriers and who is being left out?
- Which parts of the activity are visitors engaging in, and how?
- Are visitors using, noticing, or reacting to the things that you changed/improved? If so, how? If not, can you tell why?

Tip:

Define what “engagement” means for you. Your existing frameworks or learning goals can provide a touchpoint for judging whether all visitors are able to engage in the experience. For example, because we developed engineering design activities in this project, we observed whether visitors explored a problem, imagined possibilities, built something, and/or made changes to their designs. Be open to expanding or reframing what engagement means and looks like based on the lived experiences of your audiences or partners.





Interviews

Interviews can be quick, informal conversations of five minutes or less. Use open-ended questions and photos or other visual aids whenever you can to get more useful feedback.

Instead of...	Ask
Do you like this activity?	Which part of this activity was most interesting to you?
Did you have fun?	What made it fun for you?
Do you have any feedback?	Which parts were confusing or frustrating? What's one thing that would have made your experience better?

Surveys

Surveys can ask similar questions to interviews, and some visitors may prefer sharing feedback in writing. But keep surveys SHORT — they should take no more than five minutes to do. Ratings and multiple choice questions are quicker to answer and less demanding than open-ended questions. If you'd like free-response feedback, limit surveys to 2 – 3 open-ended questions, maximum. If you use multiple choice questions, always include an “other” option with space to write.

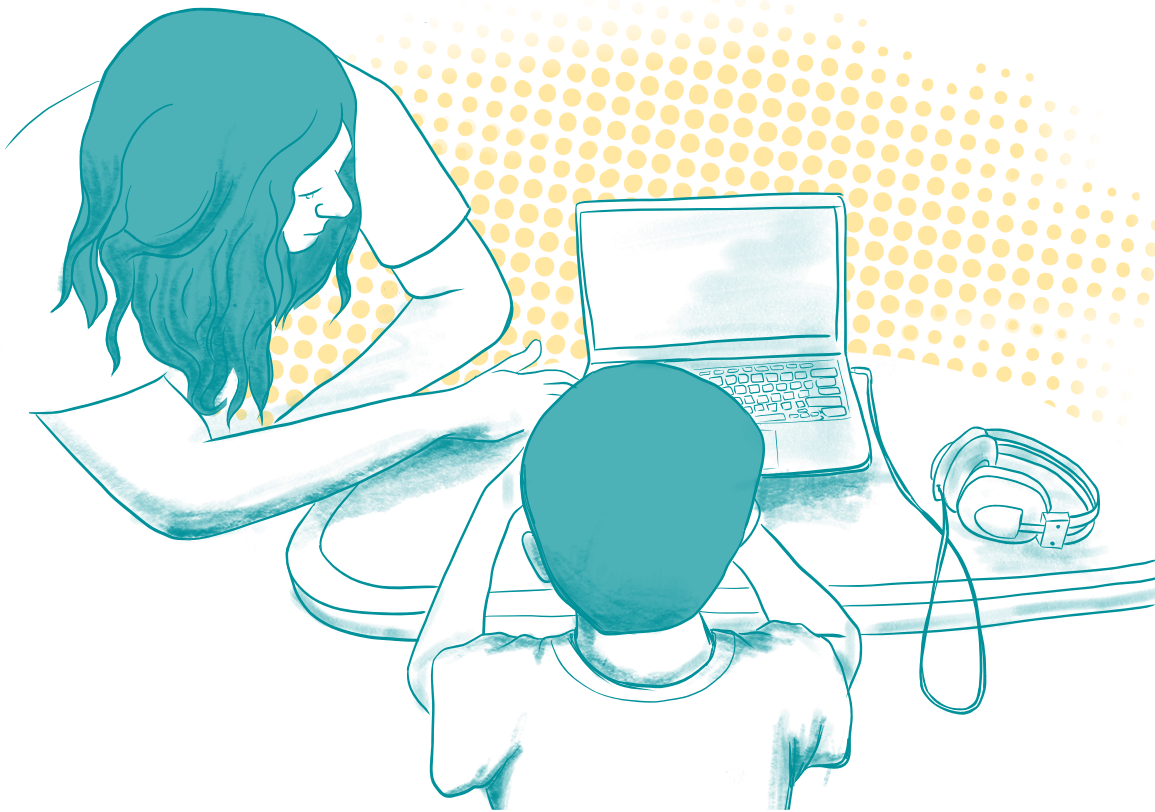


Tips for getting useful survey responses:

- Be explicit about whose perspective you are interested in and who should fill it out (Are the questions written with a caregiver in mind? Youth? The whole group together?)
- If you use rating scale questions, label every single response option, not just the end points of the scale, to make it easier to interpret and answer.
- Use plain language rather than jargon (“learning differences like autism or ADHD” instead of “neurodivergent”).
- Make demographic questions optional.
- Have a staff person share a link and invite visitors to use their own devices so they have access to accessibility features they typically use.
- Offer to read surveys aloud and write down answers for visitors if they prefer.

Discussions with Staff

Facilitators and other staff will have important observations and stories about how visitors responded to the activity. It's also important to consider whether activities are accessible and supportive for facilitators as they interact with visitors (Are the materials a nightmare to manage? Are facilitators answering the same questions repeatedly? Are safety concerns causing stress and distraction?)



Other Options

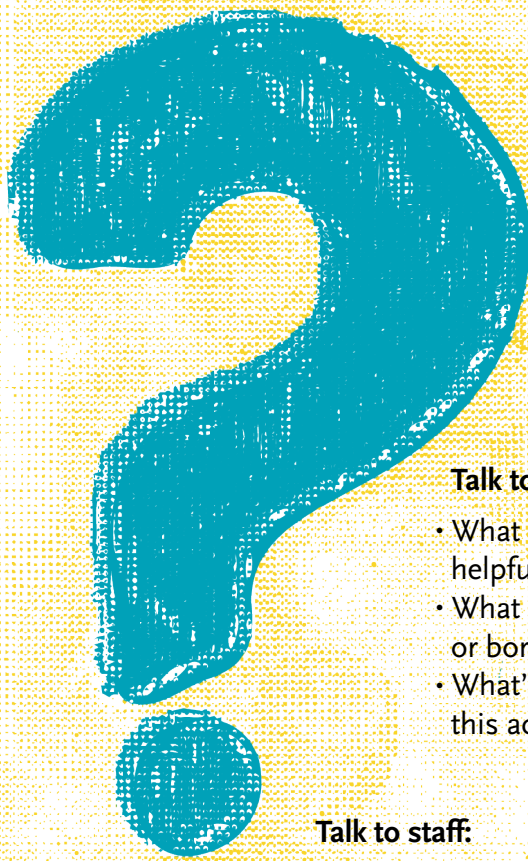
We didn't use the methods below in this project, but they can be great options in your toolkit.

- **Focus groups:** Find a group of 5 – 6 people with similar identities or experiences and ask them all a set of 3 – 4 questions.
- **Drawings:** Ask visitors to draw in response to a prompt or question, and talk to them afterwards about key ideas in their drawing.
- **Photographs:** Ask visitors to take photos of something that helped them and something that could be improved, and have a conversation about what they wanted their images to show.

Tools:

Prototyping Guide

Use the template on the opposite page to guide your notetaking, either while visitors are engaging in the activity, or to capture reflections at the end of the day.



Observe:

- How do people figure out how to get started?
- Can people participate in different ways?
- What parts of the activity help people connect to their interests or work through challenges?
- How do people wrap up the activity at the end?

Talk to visitors:

- What parts of the activity were interesting, helpful, or fun for you, and why?
- What parts were confusing, frustrating, or boring for you, and why?
- What's one way we could make this activity better?

Talk to staff:

- How was this activity facilitated?
- What did you notice about how visitors were using the materials, or how they were interacting with each other?
- What help or support did visitors need?
- What suggestions do you have to improve this activity?

Notetaking Template

First Iteration:

Activity or experience to improve:

Changes to test right away:

How do you think these changes will help?:

Who to test this prototype with:

Follow-up Iterations:

What changes to keep:

Additional changes to make:

How do you think these additional changes will help?:

Who else to test the prototype with:



The background is a solid orange color with faint, hand-drawn scribbles in a slightly darker shade of orange. These scribbles are organic and flowing, resembling pencil or chalk marks on a textured surface. They are scattered across the page, with some forming loops and others being more linear. The overall effect is artistic and creative, complementing the theme of design.

How to Co-Design

Co-design involves working with a specific audience (in this case, neurodivergent people) throughout the process of identifying problems, generating ideas, and iterating solutions. This section is about how to create welcoming and engaging spaces for deep collaborations with neurodivergent youth or adults.

Trust and Belongingness in Co-design Teams

The same parts of the learning experience that are important for visitors are important for co-designers too. Youth and adults who join your team will need clear communication about goals of your work, autonomy in how they participate, and support persisting through each step of the design process (which might be unfamiliar and somewhat overwhelming). Throughout it all, building a foundation of belongingness goes a long way to creating a safe and accessible space for sharing ideas openly and being creative together. Here are some key strategies to keep in mind as you establish a co-design team.

Create accessible and welcoming spaces for learning

Work together to choose, rearrange, and decorate or personalize meeting spaces, and offer co-designers materials to regulate their own sensory and learning experiences (snacks, fidgets, headphones, notebooks, ipads, laptops, etc). Encourage learners to take needed breaks and use accommodations.

For example:

At NYSCI, we asked co-designers to help us make our meeting room more comfortable and inspiring for everyone. Co-designers came up with a list of items and room setups that would make the space better, and staff gathered some supplies. We spent the first hour of the next session collaboratively decorating the space.

We set up artificial plants, fairy lights, a speaker for quiet music, and rearranged the tables so all the co-designers could work together and still listen for directions from facilitators. The room stayed this way throughout the remainder of the co-design sessions, and museum staff who used the space at other times also said that they enjoyed the new setup!



Create community agreements or norms to guide how you'll work together

Examples from our groups:

- How you share is up to you
- Respect others' personal space
- All communication accepted
- Stimming is ok
- Disagree respectfully
- Rules can have exceptions

Offer multiple ways of participating and sharing ideas

- by writing, drawing, or talking out loud
- on a white board, in a personal notebook, tablet, or laptop
- to the whole group, with a partner, or one-on-one with a staff person

Talk about learning styles and preferences

Set expectations that your group welcomes diverse ways of thinking. Some discussion prompts to try: What is your ideal learning environment like? Think of an example of a learning experience that felt supportive, and one that was challenging for you. What made a difference in those moments?

For example:

At Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh, the co-design team used a stoplight metaphor to talk about experiences or activities that we each found inviting or fun (green light), activities that were very stressful, unpleasant, or intimidating (red light), and activities that were in between — a little bit scary but doable with some support (yellow light). This helped the group talk about their own preferences and needs, and how to support visitors through unfamiliar experiences.

Make collaborative roles and responsibilities clear

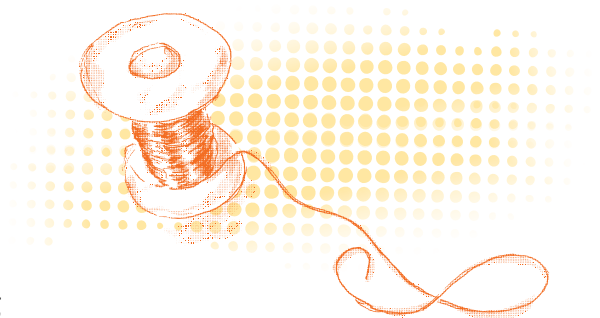
Treat co-designers as fellow members of your design team. Pay them for their time, and give them badges, shirts, or other gear that shows they work at the museum, and space to leave supplies.

Provide structure and consistency

Establish regular routines for your sessions (including time for snacks and breaks, and repeatable structures for discussions). Share agendas, discussion questions, and visual schedules in advance before each session so co-designers know what to expect.

Build familiarity with new activities and environments

Spend time exploring your institution and engaging in activities as learners. The examples will highlight your educational approaches and help co-designers practice sharing feedback and discussing parts of activities that could be adjusted.



Tip:

Plan agendas in advance, but have backup plans and multiple options for each activity, in case energy wanes, more accommodations are needed, or co-designers complete activities faster than planned

Structure and Support for Design Cycles

Flexible and supportive environments are critical, but co-design also needs structure and guidance to keep the design process from feeling confusing, abstract, or overwhelming. The strategies below helped us support design thinking mindsets in our co-design teams — encouraging youth to view feedback and revision as a necessary and positive part of the process.

Break down the process

Each meeting should focus on one part of the design cycle at a time (for example, brainstorming ideas, building a prototype, or reviewing feedback).

Use examples and modeling to spark ideas

As your groups plan prototypes, it can help to see examples of similar activities, including existing signage, the materials that are available, and the ways facilitators tend to be involved. Starting from something concrete can help kickstart brainstorming about specific alternatives or additions.

Activate critical thinking

We found that sometimes co-designers needed intentional support to think beyond first impressions and explore multiple possibilities. It was helpful to repeat co-design discussions with different prompts, pose lots of “why” and “how else” questions, and encourage co-designers to build on each others’ ideas.

Tip:

Use the aspects of activities you can change to help prompt more ideas for initial designs or revisions. What could you adjust about the physical space or materials? Could you change the goals or structure of the activity? How might the activity be facilitated, and how might people interact?



For example:

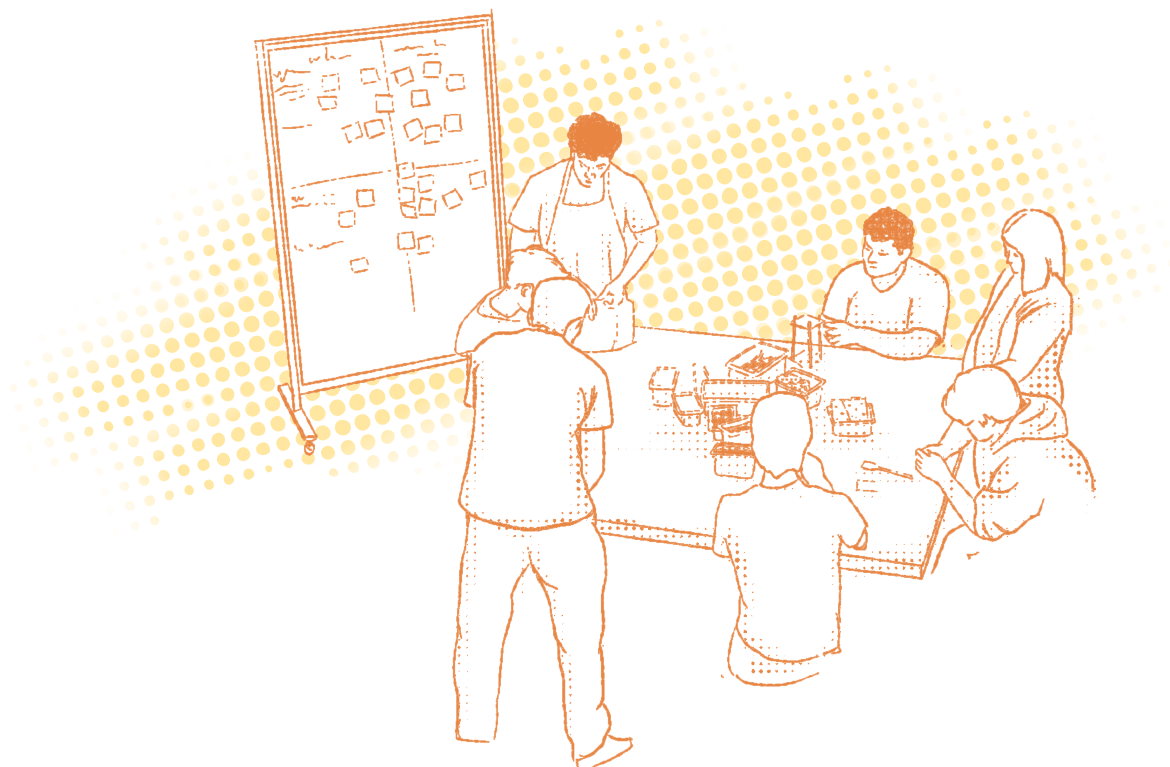
When developing Chain Reaction (an activity involving Rube Goldberg machines), co-designers and museum staff did multiple rounds of brainstorming about different kinds of materials — things that spin, tilt, fall, make noise, etc. This got us thinking more creatively about the kinds of materials we could add to the activity (like shoes, umbrellas, drums, and electronic toys).

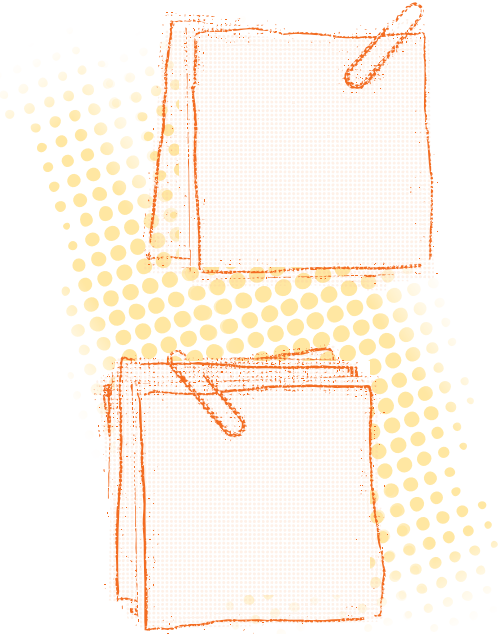
Establish routines for giving and receiving feedback

Although change can't happen without feedback, it can be challenging to hear critiques of your ideas, or to frame feedback in constructive ways. It's important to build familiar routines for sharing constructive feedback. We used a plus/delta table like the one on page 42 to capture what co-designers liked about museum activities, and what they wanted to change or improve. We reinforced this process every time we tested an activity or prototype.

For example:

At Explora, we regularly used plus/delta tables as co-designers worked through the iterative controller-building process. We also used them to reflect together when we tested our activities with families at the museum. Co-designers noted what they wanted to change based on how museum visitors engaged with their controllers and the additional circuit activities we set up as introductions to the activity. This routine helped co-designers identify what activities supported or detracted from visitors' experiences.





Create time and structure to reflect on iterations

Sharing feedback is one thing, processing what it means and making a decision is something else. After gathering feedback, ask co-designers to spend time reflecting on what stands out to them, or ideas they would like to keep thinking about. You can return to these possibilities next time you meet.

Build in time for multiple iteration cycles

It's critical to see how designs change to appreciate how important testing and feedback really are to creating accessible designs. Make sure you have enough time for at least 3 cycles of testing and revision to reinforce design thinking mindsets. Repeat the process again with another activity if you're able!

Encourage social connections and collaboration

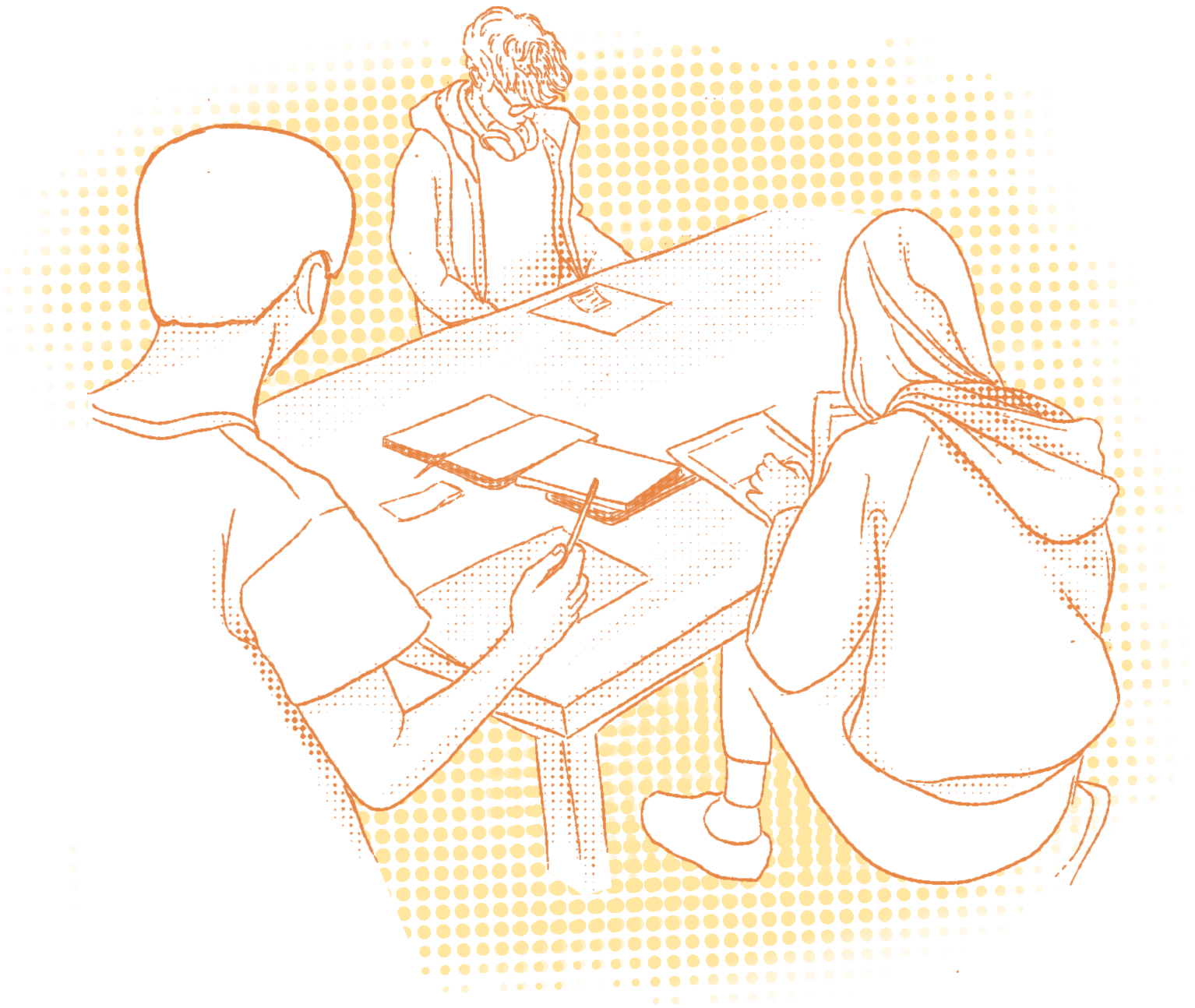
Our co-designers formed friendships during the project and often wanted to work together. They also appreciated being able to connect with and help visitors as we tested prototypes. Provide optional opportunities like this to work collaboratively or co-facilitate.

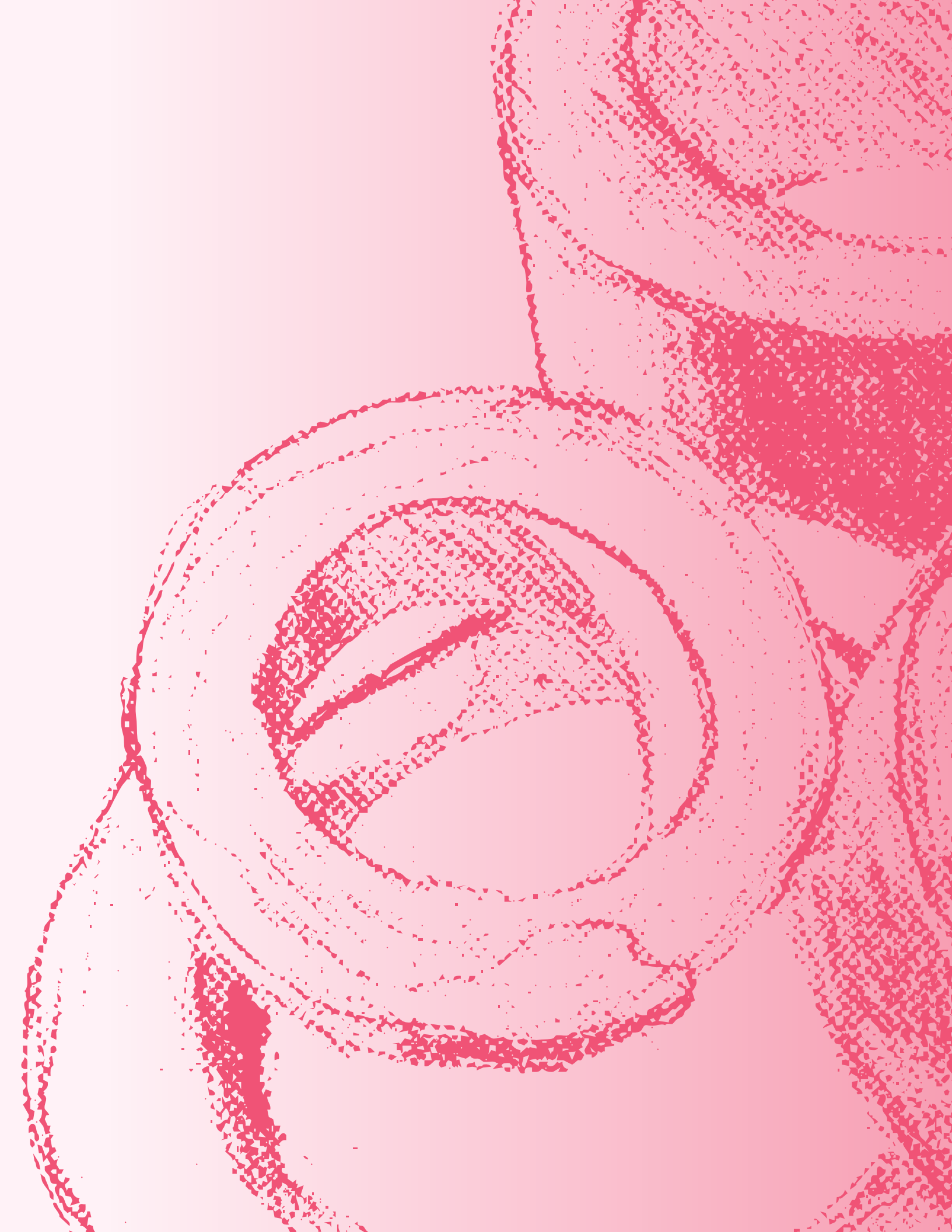
Lean into co-designers' strengths and interests

Encourage co-designers to decide how to participate in each step of the design process. For example, individual co-designers may be interested in working on mockups of new signage, or helping to facilitate on prototyping days.

For example:

At Explora, co-designers led the Makey Makey activities with visitors of all ages. Not only did co-designers facilitate the activities, they also invited visitors to try controllers that they had made earlier in the project. They provided multiple different ways for visitors to engage, from connecting a simple circuit to making their own controllers. Being able to showcase their work and help other visitors have engaging experiences was a huge source of pride.





The background of the page features a series of overlapping circles in various shades of blue and teal. A halftone dot pattern is overlaid on these circles, creating a textured, pixelated effect. The text is positioned on the right side of the page, with the title 'Next Steps' in a large, bold, white font.

Next Steps

Now that we've shared what you can change to make activities more accessible, and various options for testing out new designs, we want to leave you with practical steps for taking action at your institution. This last section offers suggestions to continue learning with your colleagues, and some quick and easy tools to help you get started making changes.

Starting Discussions with Colleagues

Find your starting point

What accessibility work are we already doing that we can build on?

What experiences in our institution are not accessible for neurodivergent visitors, and how do we know?

What do we have the power to change? What constraints do we have that might limit the changes we can make?

Reflect on your goals and capacity

Are there any simple or low-cost changes we can make right away?

What changes might require additional funding or staff time?

What longer-term goals do we have?

Build relationships

What connections and partnerships can we build on?

What other local organizations could we reach out to?

What perspectives are we missing?

Take action

Which ideas should we try first?

When can we test out our ideas? With whom?

Can we plan for multiple cycles of testing and revision?

Additional Readings and Resources

Universal Design for Learning: [CAST.org](https://cast.org/)

Unmasking Autism, [Devon Price](#)

We're All Neurodiverse, [Sonny Jane Wise](#)

The Reason I Jump: The inner voice of a 13 year old boy with Autism, [Naoki Higashida](#)

The Secret Life of Rose, [Jodie Clark & Rose Smitten](#)

Divergent Mind: Thriving in a World That Wasn't Designed for You, [Jenara Nerenberg](#)

It's Never Just ADHD: Finding the Child Behind the Label, [Sandra Coral](#)



NUDL Guidelines for Neurodiversity-Affirming Museum Activities

Foster Belongingness and Agency as a Foundation for Learning

- Anticipate diversity in learning preferences and describe differences as expected and valued
- Make accommodations available to all and help learners adjust their environments

Communicate Goals and Expectations

- Express goals and parameters right away
- Offer explicit guidance with visuals and words
- Offer examples to show what's possible
- Provide low-stakes skill-building activities

Build Autonomy

- Provide a wide range of entry points and ways of approaching each activity
- Encourage learners to make choices
- Balance providing suggestions and leaving room for experimentation

Sustain Engagement

- Break up complex tasks into smaller steps
- Scaffold iteration or trying again in a new way
- Provide structure for engaging with others in different ways
- Connect to learners' interests, STEM topics, and/or everyday life

Reflect and Transition

- Encourage learners to reflect on what they did before moving on
- Provide ways to share and celebrate what learners do
- Suggest activities to try next based on learners' interests

Options for Implementing

- Materials and physical environment
- Activity design
- Facilitation strategies
- Social interactions

Low Cost Changes Playbook

Rearrange
furniture or
activity stations

Break up
an activity
into steps

Encourage
facilitators to
model or use
parallel play

Leave out
examples of
what people
have made

Add solo
versus social
zones or
quieter areas

Try different
combinations
of materials

Make it
self-paced or
drop-in rather
than scheduled

Sort and
arrange
materials

Change where
signage is
located to
make it
more visible

Connect to
learners'
interests

Add visuals
to signage

Provide
information
to caregivers
to help them
co-facilitate

Suggest
2 or 3 goals/
challenges
learners can
choose from

Make safety
rules or
guidelines
easily visible

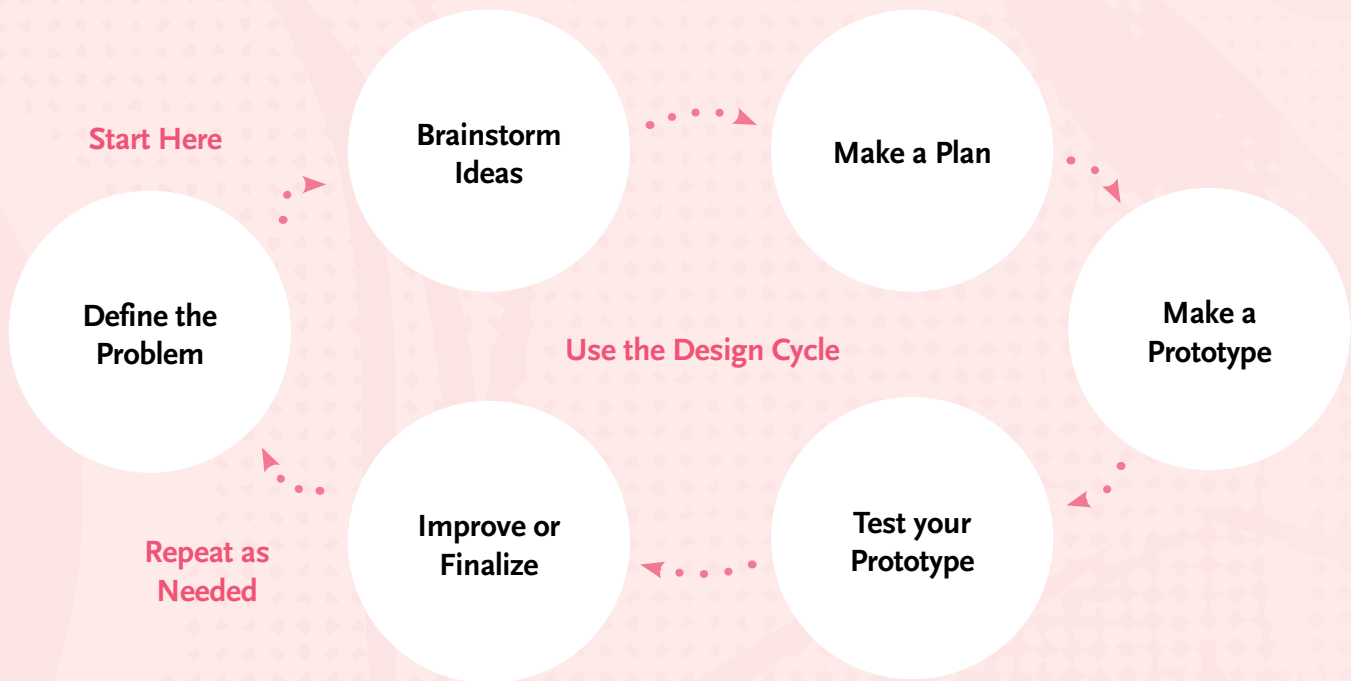
Find at-home
resources you
can share
that relate to
the activity

Help learners
notice what
worked and
what didn't



 add more ideas in the empty boxes

NUDL Recommendations



Info to include on signage (using words and visuals/icons):

- ☐ What kind of thing you make/do
- ☐ How much time it takes
- ☐ Maximum (or minimum) number of people
- ☐ Sensory or cognitive considerations
- ☐ Safety rules/guidelines
- ☐ Accommodations/supports offered
- ☐ Materials/tool glossary
- ☐ Where and how to get help if needed

Tips for setting up the physical environment:

- ☐ Make safety rules/guidelines conspicuous with signage or by blocking off areas
 - ☐ Put signage outside of entrances so people can decide whether or not to enter
 - ☐ Sort and group materials, and arrange them in ways that are appealing to explore
 - ☐ Show examples of what other visitors have made (with photos, videos, physical items)
 - ☐ Use multiple stations to break up a complex activity into smaller tasks/steps
 - ☐ Create a quiet area, even if it is just a corner slightly away from others with dimmer lighting and sensory materials
-

Tips for Activity Designs:

- ☐ Provide multiple entry points and ways of approaching the activity
- ☐ Build in options that learners can choose from (challenge/design prompts, separate stations, multiple types of materials, etc)
- ☐ Provide opportunities to explore individual concepts, materials, or parts of the activity
- ☐ Let learners do each step at their own pace (avoid time pressure whenever possible)
- ☐ If everyone's projects come out the same, adjust the goals of the activity or the materials people can use
- ☐ Offer free and user-friendly resources people can continue using at home to learn more

Facilitation Tips:

- ☐ Consider talking with visitors about being neurodivergent (if you are and if you feel comfortable doing so)
 - ☐ Give structured, low-pressure intros to unfamiliar tools and materials
 - ☐ Make connections to visitors' interests and real-world situations
 - ☐ Suggest options using "either/or" phrasing to give learners language to choose
 - ☐ Do the activity next to visitors (parallel play) to model and be available for questions
 - ☐ Help visitors persist through challenges by noticing what happened, and identifying something to change/adjust
 - ☐ Help visitors celebrate, document, and share what they did
 - ☐ Suggest other activities to try next, ways to keep learning at home
-

Structuring Social Interactions:

- ☐ Create spaces for people who want to work solo or with others
- ☐ Offer to take photos for people of what they made
- ☐ Encourage facilitators (and other visitors) to work side-by-side
- ☐ Support caregivers as co-facilitators — give enough info that they can help support their children
- ☐ Offer visitors suggestions for different ways of doing the activity (separately, collaboratively, or competing)

Co-design Best Practices Cheat Sheet

Trust and Belongingness:

- Create accessible and welcoming spaces for learning
- Create community agreements or norms
- Offer multiple ways of participating and sharing ideas
- Talk about learning styles and preferences
- Normalize stimming, taking needed space and breaks, and using accommodations
- Make collaborative roles and responsibilities clear
- Provide structure and consistency
- Build familiarity with new activities and environments

Structure and Support for Design Thinking:

- Break down the process, focus on one step/prompt at a time
- Use examples and modeling to spark ideas
- Activate critical thinking by repeating activities/discussions with different prompts
- Establish routines for giving and receiving feedback
- Create time and structure for reflecting on iterations
- Build in time for multiple iterative cycles
- Encourage social connections and collaboration
- Lean into co-designers' strengths and interests

Checklist for Co-design Meetings

Supplies

- ☐ Fidgets
- ☐ Notebooks
- ☐ Whiteboard
- ☐ Headphones
- ☐ Tablets or laptops
- ☐ Post-it notes
- ☐ Pens/pencils/markers
- ☐ Visual timer
- ☐ Snacks, water
- ☐ Badges/nametags for co-designers

To-do: Before meetings

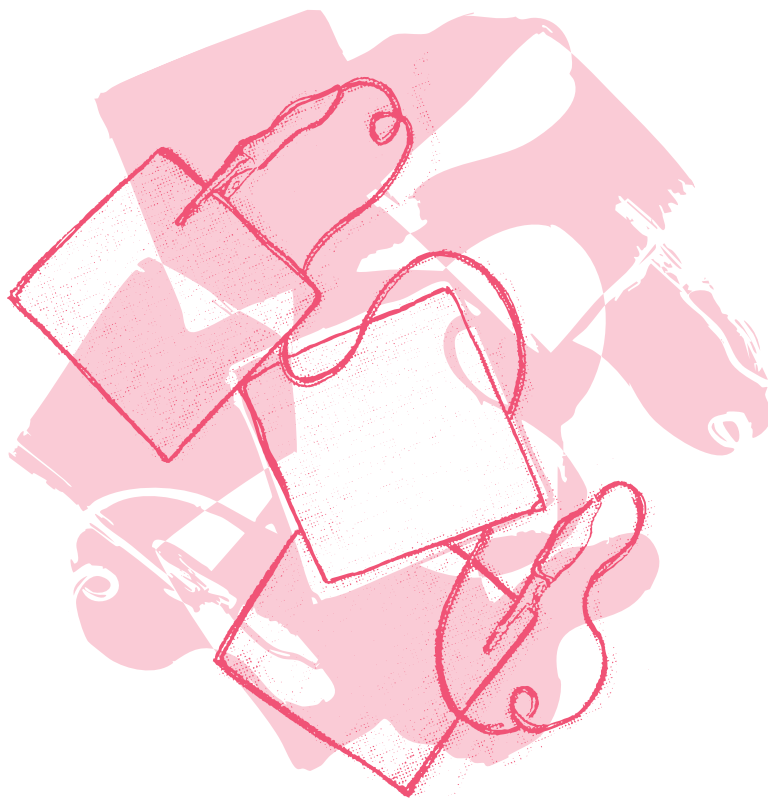
- ☐ Choose a welcoming and accessible meeting space
- ☐ Set up or choose a quiet area
- ☐ Send visual schedule and/or agenda to co-designers in advance
- ☐ Decide who will be a notetaker, who will be the primary facilitator, and who can be available to provide individual support to co-designers if needed

To-do: At meetings

- ☐ Rearrange or decorate space with co-designers
- ☐ Revisit community agreements and project goals
- ☐ Focus on one step/prompt at a time
- ☐ Provide multiple options for participating
- ☐ Notetaker takes notes on whiteboard during group discussions
- ☐ Set aside time to reflect about important ideas/next steps

Notes and References

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4. International Dyslexia Association (2017). Dyslexia Basics Fact Sheet. <https://dyslexiaida.org/dyslexia-basics/>
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