



# How to co-create digital solutions with girls

**Co-creation and designing with users is an essential part of any digital product development process. Putting end users front and center of the design process ensures that the digital solution is relevant for them, responds to what they want, and offers an enjoyable user experience.**

**However, in design of digital solutions that target young audiences, girls are often not included in the same way that boys are. Girls face unique challenges and lived experiences that are different to those of male end users, especially when accessing and using digital technology. If girls are not deliberately involved in the design process, then the resulting digital solutions may be less accessible, relevant and useful to them. It is crucial to incorporate girl users' perspectives, their offline and online realities, and their preferences into the design process.**

This guide supports developers to co-create digital solutions that intentionally include young women and girls as well as young men and boys. It gives 8 practical tips and uses examples and case studies to illustrate how to co-create and design with young female users in order to develop an end product that they will want to use.



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**03. Gain informed consent about benefits and risks**



**04. Pair girls up with digital buddies**



**05. Map girls' influencers and include insights from their close social circles**



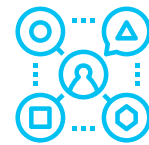
**06. Provide tailored tools for mock-ups and prototyping of digital solutions**



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**08. Co-develop female user personas with a diversity of digital preferences and behaviors**



# 01. Follow best practices of human-centered design and co-creating with girls

- **Decide whether to run mixed, gender-balanced or separate design sessions for girls.** In many contexts, girls and boys may not speak freely if members of the opposite sex are present, especially when discussing sensitive topics such as puberty, reproductive or mental health, or violence. In these cases, separate design sessions with just girls and just boys may be best. But in other contexts, and with other topics, design sessions that include both girls and boys may be appropriate and work well. Consider what is appropriate for your context. Use methodologies that ensure voices and inputs by girls and boys are equally heard.
- **Work with partners who have established networks and trust with girls.** Run a co-creation process with a partner who has experience working with adolescent girls and can work with a group of girls to help them feel more at ease and more comfortable sharing their views. Consider working with a group of girls who already attend an existing activity with the partner, such as an after-school club.

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- **Choose young female facilitators.** Girls may respond better and be more open to sharing their perspectives with other females, especially if closer to their own age.
- **Ensure diversity.** Include a diverse range of girls in design sessions so that multiple perspectives are captured. These can include, for example, girls with disabilities, from different socio-economic groups, geographical locations, religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations and identities, and girls both in and out of school.
- **Make everyone feel safe and comfortable.** Hold your sessions in a safe and trusted venue where girls feel comfortable. Hold separate briefings for both facilitators and participants before you start. This is to ensure that everyone understands the objectives of the design process, and also that the girl participants feel comfortable asking questions or sharing their experience, understanding that they are in a safe space.
- **Take time to break the ice.** Build rapport first, through a few ice-breaking activities, rather than starting with the most sensitive topics.
- **Use pair or group work activities.** Girls often prefer collaborative problem-solving. Opportunities for teamwork and peer learning can be beneficial for engaging girls and encouraging participation, as this often increases their interest and self-confidence.
- **Organize discussion around activities.** Girls often feel more confident in engaging and actively participating if discussions are organized around specific activities, rather than following a focus group discussion approach. For example, to learn more about how girls use mobile phones and the internet, activities could include having girls demonstrate the apps they use on their phones, or specific tasks such as finding information about a topic online.

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## 02. Pay attention to safeguarding and risk mitigation

Girls face disproportionate risks to their offline and online safety, such as abusive comments, threats, bullying, stalking, sex trolling, sexual harassment, or exploitation. Gaining insights into how girls understand and navigate online safety and privacy is an essential component of the co-creation process. Digital solutions need to be designed for privacy and safety from the very beginning, informed by girls' realities.

It is also imperative to put safeguarding measures in place during the co-creation process itself and provide support and guidance to participants. Ensure that facilitators receive safeguarding training. Facilitators should also brief participants on online safety if they will be using their mobile phones or other digital technologies during the sessions. Remember to provide information about where participants can access services and further resources in case their participation in the co-design process triggers need for support.

For more information about safeguarding and ensuring girls' privacy and wellbeing in digital solutions, [this guide from Girl Effect has specific tips.](#)

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## 03. Gain informed consent about benefits and risks

Girls and their caregivers should be aware of any risks and benefits of their participating in the co-creation process. They must also be aware that their participation is voluntary. Facilitators need to explain in clear girl-friendly language, using icons and pictures in the consent/assent forms if needed. It may be helpful to provide a verbal explanation and receive verbal consent at the beginning of the co-creation process. Consider deferring the signing of dedicated forms to a time in the session when participants feel comfortable, as signing a formal document can be intimidating for girls, especially in places where this is not common practice.

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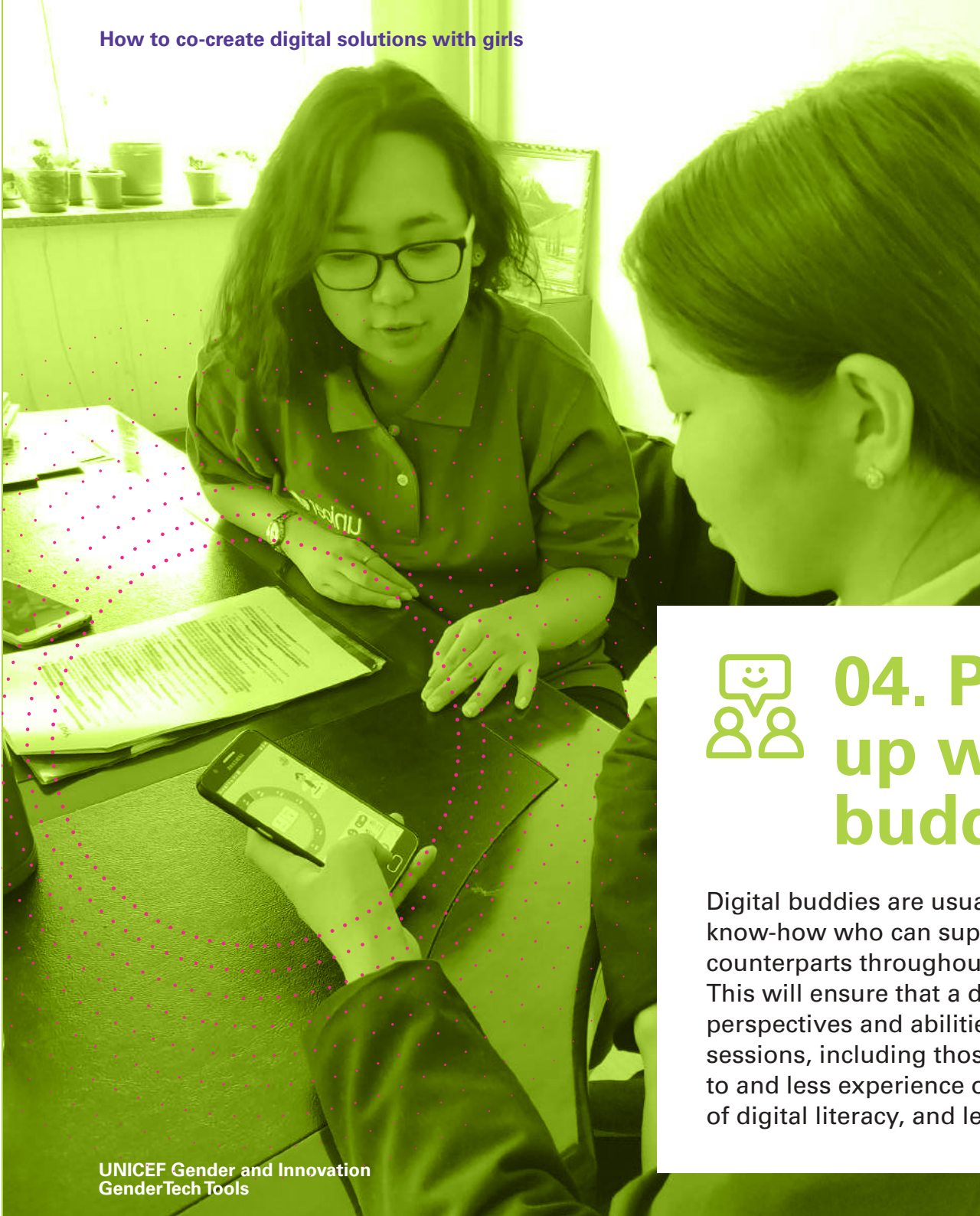
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## 04. Pair girls up with digital buddies

Digital buddies are usually older peers with more digital know-how who can support and mentor their younger counterparts throughout the co-creation process. This will ensure that a diverse range of girls' digital perspectives and abilities are captured in the design sessions, including those of girls who have less access to and less experience of digital technology, lower levels of digital literacy, and less familiarity with devices.

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## 05. Map girls' influencers and include insights from their close social circles

Girls often have more gatekeepers than boys when it comes to accessing mobile phones and digital technology. Understanding their environment and influencers is crucial. Engage with girls to map key influencers in their lives, and then spend time with these influencers and close social circles to understand their views of both the issues as well as the proposed digital solution. Caregivers and other adults such as teachers may play an important role in shaping a girl's ability and decision to use the digital solution you are designing. Identifying their role in the girls' lives and their opinion towards the digital solution is essential. Understanding the attitudes of boys and young men, and their behaviour towards (and influence on) girls, is equally important.

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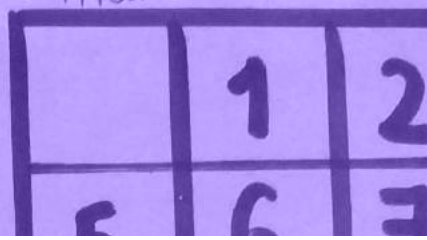
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## 06. Provide tailored tools for mock-ups and prototyping of digital solutions

As girls may have less exposure and confidence utilizing digital technology, they may need more guidance in the design process. Ensure that facilitators do not assume that everyone in the room understands the different types of technology or technological platforms. Avoid using tech jargon, and show examples where possible. It can be helpful to print out large phone screens to help girls create a mock-up, or give girls a demonstration of an interactive platform, e.g. a chatbot, as they may have never seen one before. Consider doing online prototyping as well as offline prototyping, using tools such as [Proto.io](https://proto.io), to get a full sense of the experience users may face in reality. For more information on collaborative online prototyping, see [Figma](https://www.figma.com) (although use of this tool will require some training and support beforehand).

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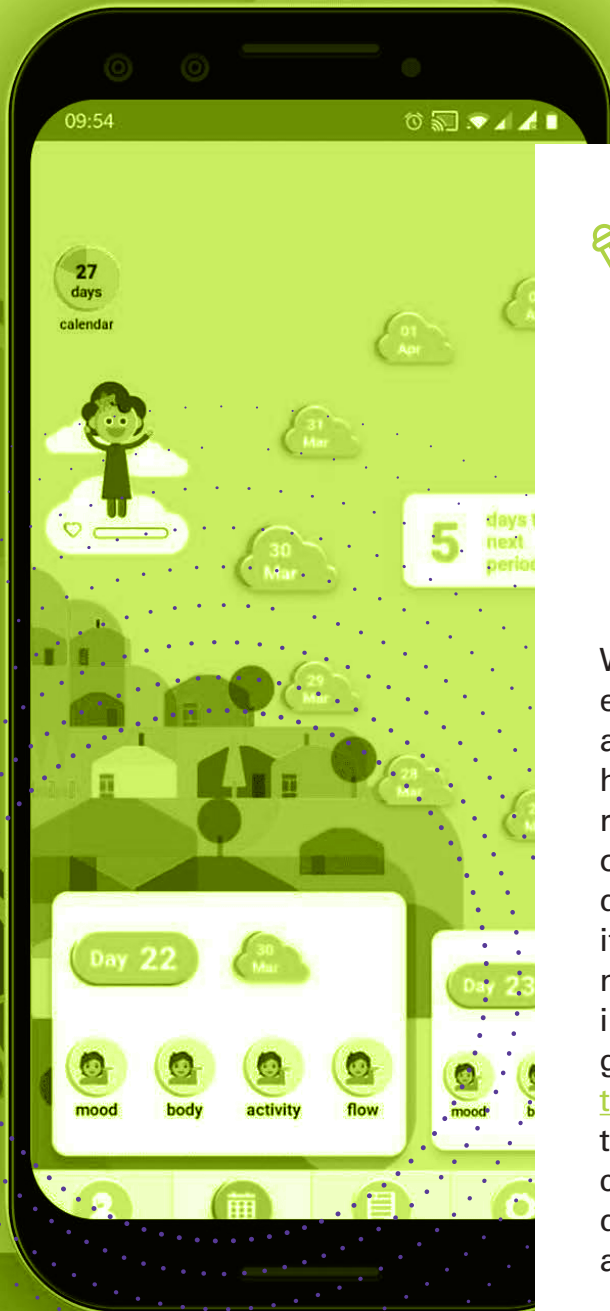
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## 07. Tailor the user interface and experience to girls' preferences

Work with girls to design an interface and digital experience that matches their preferences and realities and that is inclusive and attractive to them. For example, how virtual characters are designed and how they look can reinforce negative stereotypes and exclude some groups of users. Consider whether any characters that you are designing will have a specified gender or appearance, or if designing a character that has a 'genderless' name or non-stereotypical look will make the product feel more inclusive. For example, during co-creation sessions with girls in Mongolia and Indonesia to design [Okky, a period tracker app for girls](#), girls created mockups of avatars that had diversity in skin, hair and eye color, and chose color palettes and visuals for interfaces that represented diversity in their country and physical environment as well as their own tastes.

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**Case study**

## **Maru chatbot combats online harassment through inclusive, feminist co-design process**

Plan International worked with Feminist Internet to co-design an anti-harassment chatbot with youth activists from Africa, Europe and Asia. They ran a series of co-design workshops to understand the activists' experiences of online harassment and to design the chatbot together. Participants made important design choices about what information the chatbot would convey, and how the personality and character of the chatbot would be represented. They designed the personality of the chatbot to be genderless, and to have characteristics of an activist such as being 'strong,' and 'inspiring'. They decided on using a bold color palette, as they felt it would be more representative of the diversity of the target users. Young people were also involved in discussions about language choices to use in the content of the chatbot, for example deciding whether to use terms such as 'victim' or 'survivor'.

You can [find more information about Maru here.](#)

 Khulan

 14y.o.

 Bayankongor,  
Mongolia



bio

Khulan lives in Bayankongor, the largest city and capital of the southern Mongolian province with the same name. She lives with her family. She hasn't got siblings but has a large group of friends that she spends most of her time when not at school. She hates when boys tease her about periods.

 • outgoing • fearless • funny

 playing with friends

 being outdoors

 drawing and colouring

 • mother • grandmother

favourite brands / apps



Draw it



## 08. Co-develop female user personas with a diversity of digital preferences and behaviors

Girls often have different digital preferences and habits from boys. For example, during user research to develop [Oky](#) in Indonesia, the team found that girls reported using their phones for social media, while boys used their phones to play games. Creating female user personas – fictional profiles of girls that reflect their habits, digital literacy and behaviors – makes it much easier down the road for software developers to meaningfully design a product that works for girls as well as for boys. As part of the co-creation process, co-develop a diversity of female user personas with girls that reflect their own lives, and clearly indicate what is unique about their digital preferences and how they would interact with and utilize the digital solution. Building a digital solution based on a diversity of male and female user personas ensures better user journeys, user interfaces, and user experiences for both boys and girls.

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Want to know more about co-designing digital products with girls and young women?

**Check out these other great resources:**

- [Ideo: Designing for and with girls](#)
- [WHO: Youth-centered digital health interventions](#)
- [Feminist Internet: Feminist design tool](#)

Do you have any additional tips for co-designing with girls? Are you interested in being part of a community of practitioners working on digital products with and for girls?

Get in touch with the **UNICEF EAPRO Gender and Innovation team** via **Gerda Binder** ([gbinder@unicef.org](mailto:gbinder@unicef.org)), **Emilie Minnick** ([eminnick@unicef.org](mailto:eminnick@unicef.org)) or **Alex Tyers-Chowdhury** ([atyers@unicef.org](mailto:atyers@unicef.org))

Check out UNICEF EAPRO's other GenderTech Tools:

- [How to build digital solutions to girls' digital realities](#)
- [How to include girls in digital product user testing](#)