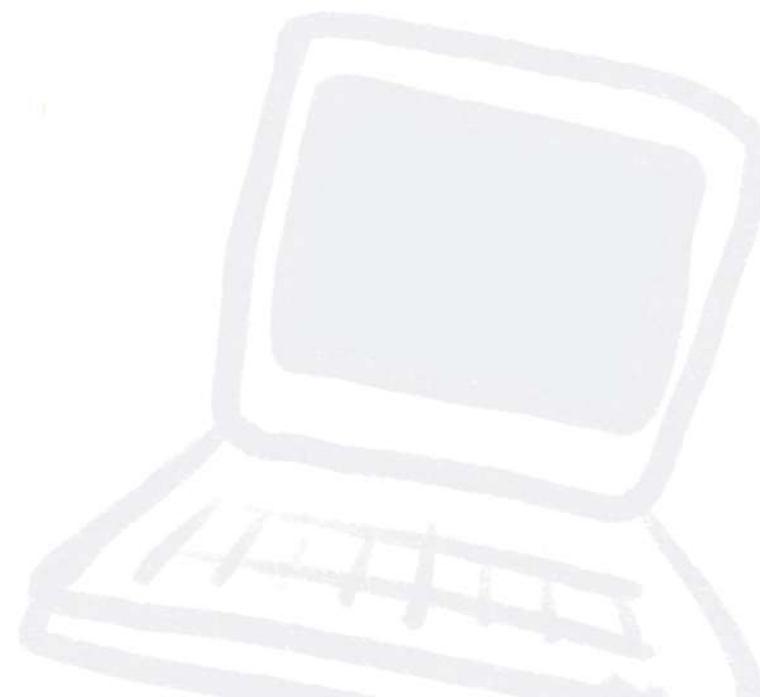# Peppy's healthy game design framework

How to develop fun and healthy video games for kids?

Healthy design techniques can directly contribute to the **success of your kids' game**. But if your studio is a little fuzzy on what healthy design looks like and worry that it costs fun and flow, check out this framework.

It's **rooted in social and emotional learning** (SEL), a proven method to teach kids the skills they need to become capable, confident, and empathetic people.

When game design intentionally fosters SEL, play becomes more than entertainment. It becomes a space where kids can **safely explore, experiment, and grow** (while still having a great time).

The foundation: kid-led design

The principles in this framework depend on understanding kids. Not assumptions and gut feelings, but real insights. So get them involved before, during, and after development. Create focus groups, test ideas with diverse groups of kids, and treat their input as essential, not optional.

What's this mean in practice?

Establish **ongoing relationships with kids**, not just one-off testing sessions

Tell kids they are your role models and that **their opinion matters**

Include diverse voices: different ages, abilities, backgrounds, and play personalities

Create safe spaces for **honest feedback**, and act on what you hear

The core experience: healthy play toward skill development

Some of the principles in this framework shape how the game feels to a child while they're in it. Others focus on what kids take away: the skills, connections, and confidence that extend beyond the screen. Combined, they can steer your team toward healthier game design for kids.

Overview of the principles:

1 Emotional balance

2 Autonomy and agency

3 Imagination and intrinsic motivation

4 Diversity and adaptability

5 Mastery and meaning

6 Connection and community

1 Emotional balance

Games create emotions: excitement, pride, frustration, disappointment. That's not a problem. The problem is when games leave kids without support to navigate those feelings.

Healthy game design helps kids recognise and manage the emotions that arise during play. It builds in moments to reset, frames setbacks as part of learning, and rewards effort rather than just outcomes.

What's this mean in practice?

- Design gentle feedback loops and natural **moments to pause or breathe**

- Celebrate persistence and **progress**, not just winning

- Frame **failure as a chance** to try again, not a punishment

2 Autonomy and agency

Kids want to choose, not feel compelled. Healthy game design gives players real control over how they play, when they stop, and what they explore. It avoids mechanics designed to create dependency, and respects kids' time and attention.

What's this mean in practice?

- Create clear, natural **stopping points** rather than endless loops

- **Avoid dark patterns** like forced streaks, artificial urgency, or punishing players for taking breaks

- Let kids **shape their own experience** through meaningful choices

3 Imagination and intrinsic motivation

When games invite curiosity and creativity, kids play for the joy of discovery. Healthy game design taps into intrinsic motivation. It creates worlds worth exploring for their own sake, where imagination drives progress and play itself feels satisfying.

What's this mean in practice?

- Design for **exploration and experimentation**, not just completion

- Create **open-ended systems** where there's no single "right" way to play

- Make the experience **rewarding in itself**, so external rewards become a bonus rather than the point

4 Diversity and adaptability

Every player is different. Good games meet them where they're at. Healthy games do too, while also offering multiple ways to play, accommodating different abilities and moods, and ensuring all kids can see themselves reflected in the experience.

What's this mean in practice?

- Offer **varied play modes** (creative, competitive, cooperative) so kids can choose what suits them

- Design for different **attention spans, energy levels, and abilities**

- Ensure diverse **representation** in characters, stories, and worlds

5 Mastery and meaning

Healthy games reward learning and discovery over grind. They help kids build real competence and connect what they achieve in-game to confidence outside it. The goal isn't to keep players chasing the next unlock. It's to create moments for growth that feel purposeful.

What's this mean in practice?

- Build progression systems that **celebrate curiosity and creativity**, not just time spent

- Help players see their own improvement and feel genuinely **proud** of it

- Make rewards feel **earned and meaningful**, not like a slot machine

6 Connection and community

Games are increasingly where kids hang out, make friends, and find belonging. That's a responsibility as much as an opportunity. Healthy game design fosters collaboration and empathy over comparison. It creates environments where kindness is rewarded, teamwork matters, and every player can feel like they belong.

What's this mean in practice?

- Design mechanics that **encourage cooperation**, not just competition

- **Reward positive social behaviours**: helping others, fair play, good sportsmanship

- Build community spaces where **belonging doesn't depend on performance**

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