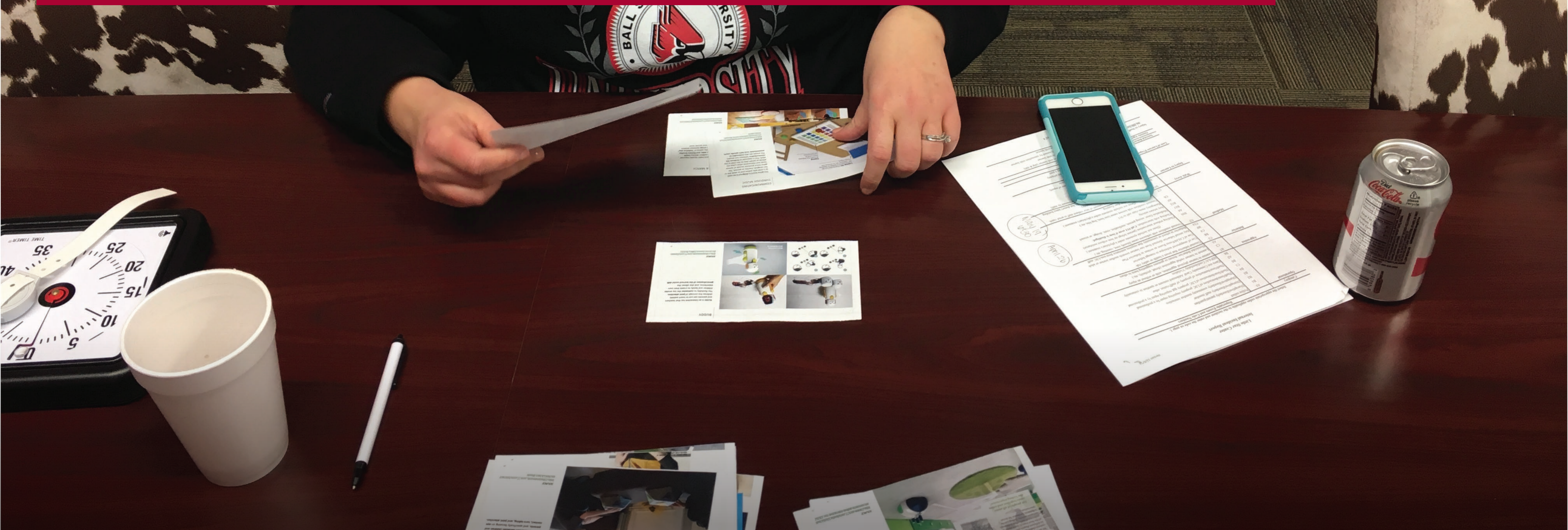


Design for Children with Autism: Awareness, Empowerment, and Acceptance

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SITUATION

Due to the atypical neurological development, individuals with autism have atypical ways of sensorimotor processing, thinking, and interacting with people. In a society designed around the needs of neurotypical people, individuals with autism almost always struggle to fit in. What can designers do to improve the community experience for children with autism, so that they have more chance to learn and grow? How can we bring awareness in the community and promote acceptance?

PROCESS

I talked to an activists, two ABA therapy professionals, and two parents of autistic children to gain different perspectives. I learned about how children with autism are learning to be independent and fit in, what happens when families bring their autistic children out to the community, and what they want people to know about interacting with these children. By gathering feedback on a few design concepts, I discovered more about how to achieve autism awareness through design.

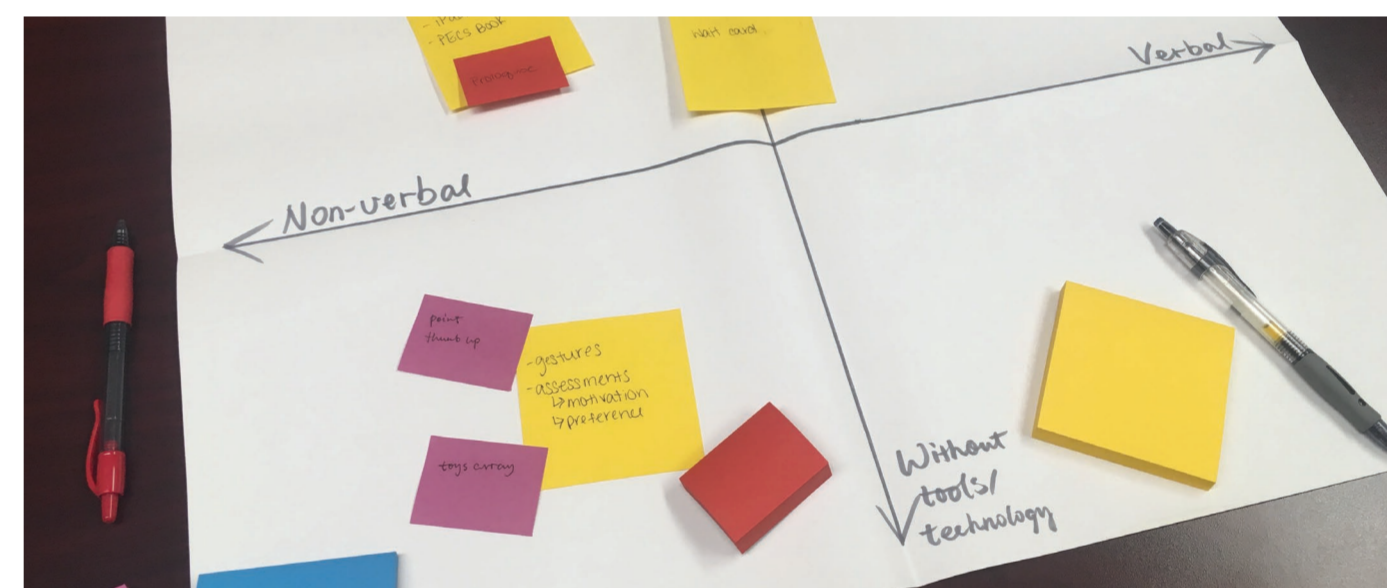
RESEARCH ACTIVITIES



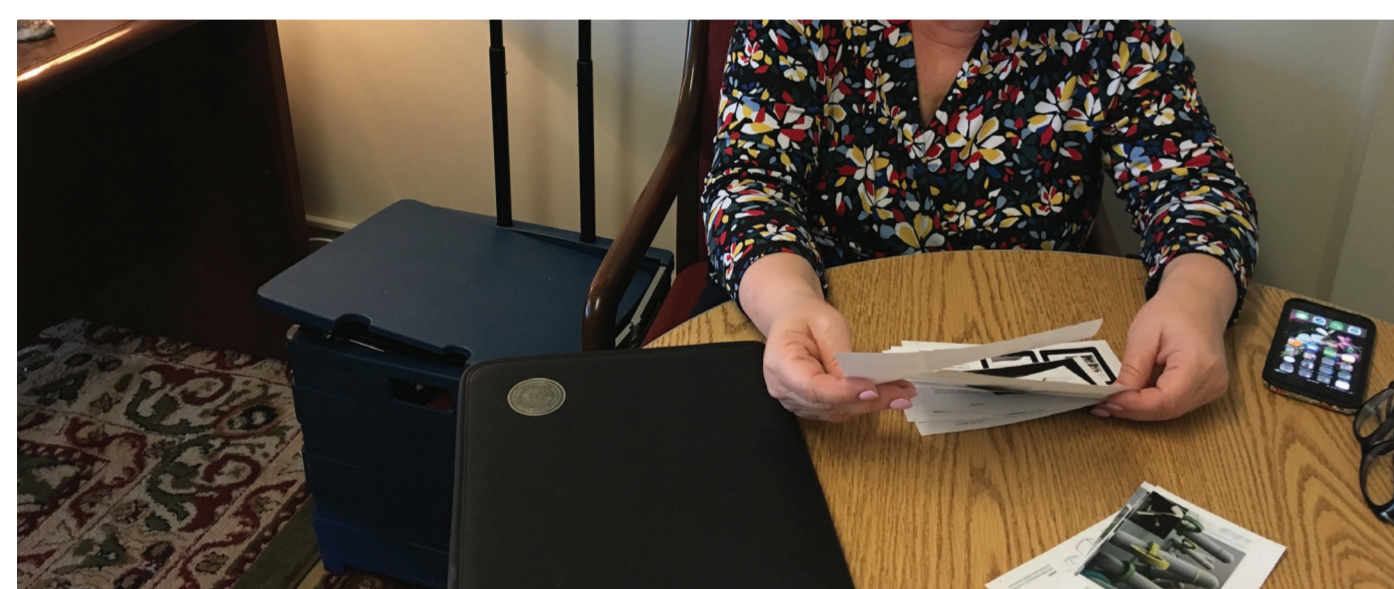
Preliminary research with activists
 Understand how they bring autism awareness in the community, and get in contact with autism therapy providers through them.



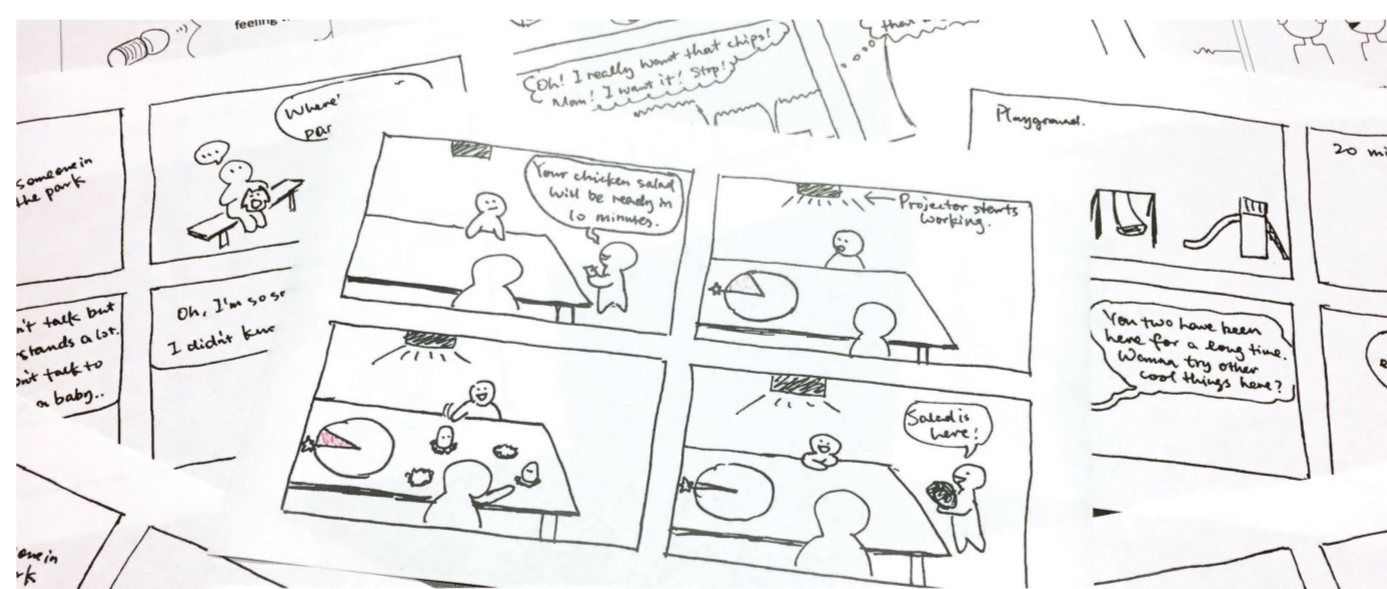
Observe two children with autism at a therapy center
 Purpose: to see for myself how they interact with people
 Methods: contextual inquiry, fly-on-wall observation



Interview their therapy professionals
 Purpose: to learn how professionals communicate with them
 Methods: generative toolkits, photo probes



Interview their parents
 Purpose: to learn how parents spend time with their children
 Methods: narrative inquiry, photo probes



Generate design proposals
 Purpose: to apply research insights and derive deeper understandings
 Methods: storyboarding, design schema



Review proposals with therapists and parents
 Purpose: to gain more insights by getting feedbacks on designs
 Methods: what-if scenarios

INSIGHTS



Increasing exposure is the key to awareness.
 "Having people interacting with them [children with autism] is more powerful than any flyers we can put up." --Andrew



Always balance acceptance with empowerment.
 "How long does that accommodation have to be there? Is it the rest of their life? Or can we push them a little bit to get pass that?" --Kaitlin



Everyone should know these basics about autism.
 "It's not that everyone needs to know as much as we [therapists] do. It's just the basics." --Grace
 "No two kids with autism are the same." --Kaitlin



Treat them like you would any other kids of the same age.
 "He doesn't like to be touched, so personal space is big for him. Other than that, he likes things that any other little boys like." --Amber

INSPIRATION-IN-A-BOX



The inspiration-in-a-box communicates research insights in an inspiring way, to designers of public spaces, policy makers, and whoever may have an impact on shaping the community. The box includes a set of "puzzle" -- when put together, it explains the key findings and how they are related to each other. The box also includes a series of stories, told by the research participants, about the challenges they've met in the community, as well as the progress they've made.