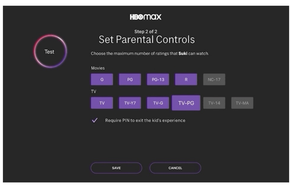
HBO Max Kids Experience

HBO has always been known as a place where boundaries were pushed and adults could go for premium entertainment. This reputation has the side-effect of HBO seeming like a place that was not always safe for children. We set out to change that in HBO Max.

My Role: *Principal Designer.* I was responsible for end-to-end UX and architecture and coordinated all research, visual designs, and design workshop activities.

Most Fun: I really enjoyed learning about the wide variety of approaches and philosophies of parenting that our users had. Our surveys and interviews highlighted the deeply personal decision-making that goes into keeping kids safe while watching streaming videos.

Biggest Challenge: Not letting our own attitudes and opinions affect how we approached designing the parent and kids experiences. Since parenting is so personal, we needed to keep our research in the forefront and ensure we were creating experiences that reflected what our users told us was important to them.



What I Would Do Differently: The only thing I would have changed about what we were able to deliver by launch was the teen experience. I wish I could have had some sessions with teen users, to understand how applicable our kid's catalog was to their interests. My suspicion is that this is the group that is least served by our Kids profile, but we didn't have time to fully understand how to improve that.

The Process

AS AN EARLY AID FOR DISCUSSING WHAT FEATURES WE WOULD NEED TO SUPPORT BOTH ACTIVE AND PASSIVE PARENTING STYLES, I CREATED A QUADRANT TO MAP FEATURES ON WHERE THEY FIT ON A PREFAB-CUSTOMIZED AND PASSIVE-CONTROL CONTINUA.

User Need

Parents needed to feel that they could allow their kids to use HBO Max without worrying they would be exposed to unsafe content.

Opportunity

Streaming services, by and large, had very limited and sometimes confusing parental controls features. They rarely extended beyond some rudimentary means of blocking content based on ratings. If we provided easy to understand features that gave parents right-sized control over how their children used HBO Max we could become a the best-in-class streaming service for kids and families.

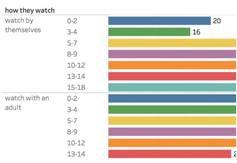
Research

User Research

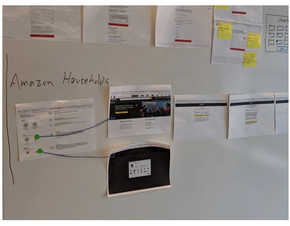
Before any analysis or design work was done, we had already done a lot of research. We reviewed mountains of data that had been gathered by the research arms of all WarnerMedia's channels (HBO, Turner, Cartoon, etc), the Sesame workshop to better understand families and children's attitudes and behaviors towards consuming movies and series.

We then created a survey and ran a diary study to fill in any gaps we still had after reading the secondary research. What we ultimately found was:

- Parents valued having control and visibility into what their kids can watch
- Once parental controls are set, they are rarely touched or changed
- There is a smallish subset of parents who want to have a *lot* of control over their kids' watching



WE SURVEYED PARENTS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARDS STREAMING AND WHAT FEATURES THEY WOULD FIND MOST USEFUL.



I TOOK *MANY* SCREENSHOTS AND HOOKED THEM UP INTO A LAW AND ORDER STYLE DETECTIVE BOARD TO COMPARE KIDS AND FAMILY FEATURES ACROSS DIFFERENT SERVICES.

Comparative Research

Once we felt comfortable with what the underlying needs of parents and children were, we took a look at what other online services were offering as far as kid experiences. We looked at streaming and media apps across mobile, desktop, and TV to understand what approaches had been taken and what we saw to be working or not.

Design

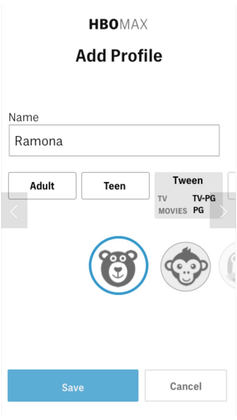
Kid Profiles

Kid profiles were the primary component of our effort to empower parents to manage their children's experience. They were able to set up each kid to have the specific level of content that was appropriate for them, as well as control whether the child could leave their profile without entering the parental PIN.

There were two main challenges in getting this work right:

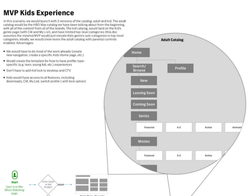
1. **PIN to Exit**: We were proposing a feature that would let parents keep their kids in their profiles until the parent unlocked it. This was a new model that didn't exist anywhere else, so we needed to teach parents how it worked.
2. **Capturing Age**: There are many ways to classify a child's age, from cohort (teen, little kid, etc.) to exact birthdate. We needed to figure out how to balance privacy while also providing ease of use and utility.

We had a total of 4 usability sessions of very different iterations of the kid profile and profile creation to make sure we were getting it right. We ultimately found that parent's found birthdate to be too personal, but saw little value in a cohort or monolithic "kids" designation, but were comfortable with MM/YY. After shopping many iterations of messaging for the PIN-lock feature, we finally found one that resonated with most users and left them clearly understanding how the feature worked.



Kid Streaming Experience

As we worked through what a kid profile would be and how parent's would manage what content their kids saw, we also needed to really push the capabilities of the software framework to deliver kids the content they wanted. Initially, we had assumed that we could present slightly different catalogs across our age groups (little kid, older kid, tween, teen), but quickly ran into technical roadblocks that made it seem highly unlikely that we could create *any* separate catalog and would instead need to build a lock on the Kids genre as a substitute.



I USED SOME QUICK FLOWS TO CAPTURE AN COMMUNICATE MY VISION FOR HOW THE KID AND ADULT EXPERIENCES WOULD DIFFER, WHICH HELPED SPEED US TO AGREEMENT ON THE APPROACH THAT WE LAUNCHED WITH

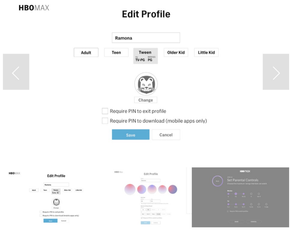
In a two week sprint, we went through 3-4 low fidelity iterations of a "kids lock" design with frequent meetings with our Product and Engineering counterparts. We landed on an option that would work, but really felt like a huge compromise, especially for older teens who would be locked into a very kid-oriented genre. This solution would deep link kids into a Kids genre page and lock them in there. This seemed very disorienting and in a lot of ways much less secure since if they got out of the Kids area they would have access to the full catalog.

I continued to have reservations about moving forward with a design that would leave our kids with such an unsatisfying experience. I worked with my engineering counterparts to understand the difficulties of curating an age-appropriate experience to see if there was anything that could be done. In one of the last meetings of all of the stakeholders before scoping for delivery I had an epiphany: the changes that were being proposed for Kids lock were almost identical to those that could get us a kid-specific catalog. There were a few small additions that meant the full kids catalog would be slightly more work, but I made the case in the meeting that it would be worth it to avoid rework and give a better experience. By the end of the meeting, we had diagrammed a path towards our ultimate goal of a proper Kids experience.

Within a week of that meeting I had a full set of flows, sitemaps, and wireframes for our MVP Kids experience ready for engineering to use for scoping.

Final Design

Much of the visual design was done as part of the Profiles project. The main piece that remained for us to design was the ratings selector. We needed a design that immediately and clearly let user know:

1. Their child will be able to watch the selected rating *and* all ratings below it
2. By selecting an object they would be enabling more than just the item they selected

Our initial design proposed button groups that would have used existing components, and ultimately save us development effort, which was of paramount importance for hitting our tight launch deadlines. However, when we tested this design, we saw that there was a lot of confusion around how the component worked. I took these findings to Product and Design leadership and made the case that we needed a new, specific, component for this purpose that would let users understand how it worked more intuitively. I sketched out some improvements and worked with my visual design counterpart to get an updated design done and improved within a week. The new design has additional connective lines that better illustrate that the ratings are on a continuum. This design has proven to be much easier to understand and is the one we launched with.