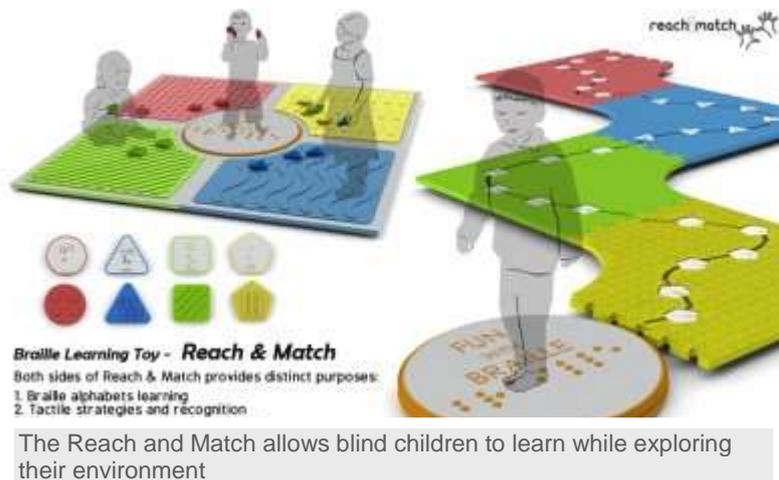


Designer's play mat a touching story

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A Monash industrial design student has developed an interactive play set which helps visually impaired children learn the basics of Braille and develop their motor skills.

Concerned by the lack of educational toys for visually impaired children, Lau Shuk Man created the Reach and Match play mats as part of a project for her Masters degree.



The modular set of reversible play mats uses sound and texture to engage children and can be arranged in various combinations, encouraging children to explore their physical environment. Lau hopes the award-winning design will familiarise children with internationally recognised mobility symbols and help them take the first step towards literacy.

As a student in Hong Kong, Lau wanted to explore how she could use design to make life better for children with disabilities. She realised that while new technology has led to learning equipment that enhances speaking and listening skill development, it hasn't helped those with a visual impairment to learn how to match sounds to Braille words.

'Blind children cannot rely solely on voice recognition technology as it does not help them develop the reading skills essential to literacy. I wanted to help blind children have a delightful experience with Braille in their early development, to encourage them to develop their literacy skills,' Lau said.

Lau was recently nominated as one of seven finalists in the prestigious international INDEX Design Awards. She attended an intensive two-day workshop in Copenhagen where she met with humanitarian agencies and internationally renowned designers. With their help she refined her design to target developing countries where resources and opportunities for visually impaired children are scarce.

The Reach and Match recently won in the 'Product Design – Consumer' category at the Melbourne Design Awards.

The next step is for the product to be tested by potential users and Lau is currently developing a working prototype so she can commence user testing. Lau is also in talks with UNICEF and Vision Australia about the future of her product. A prototype of the Reach and Match will feature in the United Nations ECOSOC Innovation Fair, held in Switzerland in July.

Lau Shuk Man is currently completing her Master of Design at Monash.