

Chatbots, AI Companions, and Youth

2026

Children and adolescent interactions with conversational or “social” AI are rapidly increasing in frequency with the widespread availability of these tools online. Despite the ease of use and impressive capabilities of these new tools, evidence is still limited on any significant benefits to youth health and well-being. Meanwhile, gaps in AI literacy and limited child-appropriate guardrails may pose meaningful risks.

72% of 13-17 year olds report using AI companion tools.

(Common Sense Media, 2025)

Anthropomorphism: When Children See AI as Human-like

Social AI chatbots write, speak, and act in human-like ways that affect how youth view and emotionally respond to AI. Experts agree that anthropomorphism and empathy can create attachment that introduces risk.

Children and adolescents commonly attribute human-like thoughts, emotions, and intentions to social robots and chatbots.

Children feel closer to and trust a robot more if it doesn't clearly disclose that it's a machine and lacks human-like mental abilities.

Teens who perceive AI as more human-like are 3x more likely to talk about feelings with a chatbot.

Using chatbots for emotional support, creativity, or companionship leads to strong emotional attachment, excessive use, and disruptions to sleep, school, hobbies, and real-world relationships for some youth.

Children's engagement with and brain responses to AI depend more on how they interpret the AI's “mind” and perceptiveness than on how much they interact with it.



Children perceive AI-enabled media characters as more human-like when they engage in real-time, responsive interactions.

Kids treat more assertive robots as more “human-like,” mirror that assertiveness in their own responses, and adjust their communication style based on the robot's perceived gender.

Children understand that voice assistants are AI, yet often overattribute intelligence and human-like qualities to them.

Teen boys (49%) are significantly more likely than teen girls (35%) to agree that generative AI feels human-like.

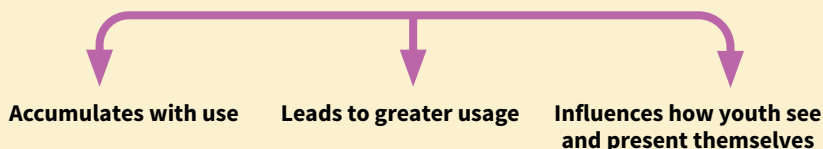
Research is limited on how to effectively address and educate youth about anthropomorphism of AI.

Children's tendency to anthropomorphize can change over time and with experience.

(Andries & Robertson, 2023; Family Online Safety Institute, 2025; Kim et al., 2025; Kühne et al., 2024; Maj et al., 2024; Namvarpour et al., 2026; Stanja et al., 2025; van Straten et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2024)

Role of Trust

Child trust in conversational AI products



(Sula et al., 2026)

31% of teens find AI conversations equally or more satisfying than human conversations.

(Common Sense Media, 2025)

One-third of teens have turned to AI instead of a real person for something serious in their lives.

(Common Sense Media, 2025)

Teen Motivations to Use Conversational AI



- Fun and entertainment
- Information seeking
- Perceived usefulness
- Social influence from peers or teachers
- Experimentation with storytelling, ideas, and identity exploration
- Companionship or emotional support
- Sexual or romantic role-play
- Judgement-free space to vent, ask questions, and process feelings

(Blake et al., 2026; Caffaratti et al., 2025; Hopelab, 2024; Maheux et al., 2026; Menon & Shilpa, 2023)

Mental Health and AI Chatbots



- **Increased reliance for mental health:** 13% (~5.4 million) of U.S. youth ages 12-21 years old report using AI chatbots for mental health advice when feeling sad, angry, or nervous.
- **Supportiveness over helpful guidance:** Leading AI “therapy” chatbots agreed with harmful ideas from distressed teens 1/3 of the time, including ideas involving self-harm and extreme social isolation.
- **Safety risks:** Most mental health chatbots are categorized by trained raters as unsafe for mental health support because of:
 - » Lack of evidence-based therapeutic methods
 - » Poor performance in crisis detection and risk management
 - » Limited or no transparency about privacy or training data
- **Clinical effectiveness is inconsistent** and not well-established.
 - » Evidence supports meaningful benefits for reducing depressive symptoms in adolescents and young adults, but less so for other conditions.
- **Lack of trust and empathy:** Youth feel AI chatbots used for mental health support must be designed in trust-building ways.
 - » Secondary school students saw non-therapeutic AI chatbots as accessible and non-judgmental, but insufficient for therapy because they lack human oversight and human traits like empathy, trust, emotional understanding, and adaptability.

(Balan et al., 2024; Clark, 2025; Hou et al., 2025; McBain et al., 2025; Sobowale et al., 2025)

Conversational AI for Literacy

- **Culturally-grounded Large Language Models** embedded in ebooks significantly increased bilingual children’s verbal engagement during shared reading that supported vocabulary gains and improved language engagement and learning for English as a foreign language.
- **3-7 year olds learned more literacy skills from parents**, and preferred learning from them, compared to a conversational AI.
- **Conversational AI has been shown to:**
 - » Help increase parent-child dialogue while reading that can help support early literacy
 - » Match or outperform parent-led shared reading in vocabulary and reading comprehension



(He et al., 2025; Leech et al., 2025; Quan et al., 2026; Xiao et al., 2025)

Neurodivergent Youth



- **Robot and humanoid robot-assisted interventions** for children with autism spectrum disorder suggest potential benefits for improving social interaction, communication, attention, and emotional skills.
 - » Newer studies suggest stronger effects as technology and intervention methods advance.
 - » Major gaps remain in long-term evidence, standardized methods, clinical validation, and real-world application.
- **When users disclose they’re autistic**, chatbots often adjust their advice and tone around familiar stereotypes. They commonly suggest avoiding stressful situations—which can feel supportive to some youth, but restrictive or dismissive to others.
- **Chatbot interactions may reinforce avoidance** of difficult but essential social experiences.

(Alghamdi et al., 2023; Vagnetti et al., 2026; Wohn et al., 2026)

Parent Perspectives

- Four in ten parents have never discussed chatbots with their teens.
- Parents in lower-income households are more open (30%) to emotional support use of AI by their children than higher-income parents (16%).
- Parents want GenAI chatbot “parental controls” that operate at the conversation level to:
 - » Explain and reframe risky or misleading content so children understand why something is unsafe
 - » Adapt responses to the child’s developmental stage and emotional state
 - » Escalate or alert parents when interactions suggest risk, overdependence, or harmful intent

(Driscoll et al., 2026; Pew Research Center, 2026)

