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Generative AI in Children's Lives: Issues in the use of AI Toys, Companions, Chatbots and Devices



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Introduction



Figure 1. An image generated by Gemini in April 2026 in response to the prompt “create an image of a friendly toy bear, with a data cable running behind it, arms outstretched for a hug, wearing a t-shirt that reads “Give me your data””.

This report by researchers in the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child offers an accessible way for parents, educators, policymakers and anyone in children’s lives to think about some of the challenges that come from younger children’s use and engagement with AI-powered tools, devices and toys, ranging from AI chatbots & companions to the AI teddy bears.

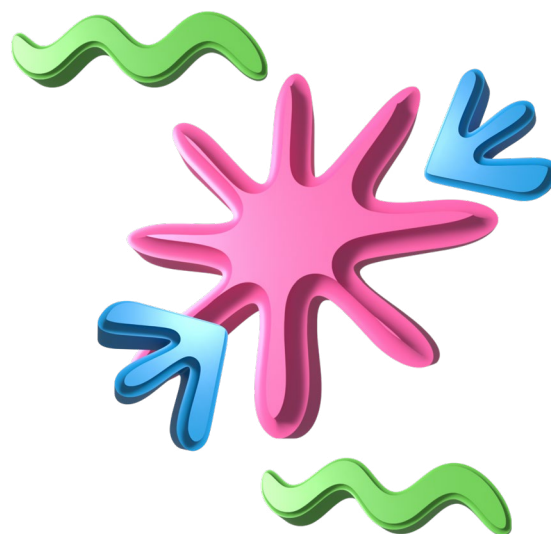
Accessing digital technologies once required children to at least have textual literacy to use these tools, but Generative Artificial Intelligence

(GenAI) tools are often accessed now via a voice interface, and can reply using their own synthetic voices. This ‘audio turn’ both makes the AI feel more human-like in their interactions, but also makes these tools far more accessible, including for much younger users.

AI-powered toys are now often sold as an antidote to ‘screentime’, the pervasive but unhelpful notion that any and all time children spend on screens is somehow harmful (Mannell, 2026). While a focus on the quality of the interaction is far more important, many parents

“AI does not think for itself so therefore do not trust it as a friend.”

Ray*, 9



feel guilty about screen-based activities, so technological toys which don't have screens, like an AI talking teddy bear, are seen as a more appealing option.

A wide range of AI-enabled experiences are opening to younger users, with educational apps, toys and other devices harnessing the much-hyped revolutionary promise of AI. This increasing presence of AI in many areas of children's lives raises many issues and design questions that need to be considered. This report highlights eight issues we have mapped as being of immediate relevance in children's everyday use of GenAI: sounding human (anthropomorphism), sycophancy, infinite chat, bias, trust, privacy, guardrails and the 'wellbeing' question.

This report is intended to be complimentary to our 2025 [Children and Generative Artificial Intelligence \(GenAI\) in Australia: The Big Challenges](#) report which highlighted some of the core challenges in terms of young people's encounters with Large Language Models (LLMs). This report extends that thinking but is more focused on the everyday interactions and experiences children have with Generative AI, especially in the form of chatbots, companions, AI-powered toys and similar material devices.

To highlight the critical voices – those of children – each section is paired with a quote from a child who has participated in our research, reminding us it is critical to listen to children's voices about AI, and respect their rights. Pseudonyms are used (indicated with an asterisk*), to ensure children's privacy.

While this report offers some issues to consider, this does not intrinsically mean Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) should have no part in children's lives. Indeed, carefully designed, age-appropriate GenAI experiences of the right quality and quantity may well be a very enjoyable part of children's play, learning and have a positive role in their development supporting their creativity, imagination and critical thinking. However, the risks associated with less well-designed AI tools is significant, and the relative newness of AI tools means some of these risks are yet to be fully mapped or researched. In this report, we offer a reflection on children's experiences with GenAI, highlighting the need to understand the potential opportunities, risks and limitations of the tools that children have access to, and the importance of AI literacy in preparing children to safely navigate AI spaces

Sounding Human

Chatbots and companion AI apps, devices and toys are an increasingly common feature in Australian childhoods as in-home devices, desktop apps and interactive ‘smart’ toys are routinely back-ended with in-built AI capabilities.

While the data on younger children and the frequency of their use of companion AI is still emerging, there is an increasing presence and visibility of AI chatbots built in to ‘friendly’ toys or ‘educational resources’, marketed to young children and families. These devices have become a normalised feature in many households, and it is estimated that in Australia, close to 80% of children aged 10-17 have used an AI companion or assistant (eSafety Commissioner, 2025).

Often presented with a distinct persona, given a name, and even housing their compact data systems in teddy bears, dolls and other toys, these devices are positioned as having a ‘life-

like’ character - a sentient, thinking, feeling, childhood friend. This artificial intimacy is built around the premise and promise of AI as a friend, a playful buddy, a thinking, feeling ‘robot’ *confidant*, a trusted social ‘partner’. This is sometimes called ‘anthropomorphic’ design or deliberately making AI sound human-like.

Children have long anthropomorphised toys and teddy bears, ascribing imagined human-like and friendly qualities to their inanimate toy. However, the introduction of bidirectional ‘communication’ between toy and child is a new development.

There are serious questions to be asked about the bidirectionality of this data between child and AI ‘friend’. For younger children, the difference between talking to a person, or talking to an AI-powered toy or device that sounds like a person, can be at times harder to understand. This is even more the case if the GenAI driving that toy insists it is a real toy, a real

friend. The quality of the information and advice the AI companion might provide to the child asking curious questions, is paramount.

While AI does not have to be designed to sound and act as if it were human, doing so is a shortcut to formatting how children are positioned to interact with these tools and can, at times, be deceptive (Sandry, 2025). Ideally, an AI chatbot, companion or toy should clearly explain it is not human, not alive, and not able to be a real friend, if asked. Many of these toys and devices currently do the opposite, building a child's sense of both the humanness of the tools, and potentially fostering a level of trust and dependence not appropriate for a technology tool.

The human-like voices and interactions of child-focused AI tools opens up a realm of issues in terms of intimacy, privacy, trust and so forth. This should be at the front of mind for parents, trusted adults and policymakers when considering the role of AI-enabled interactions in children's lives.

“AI tells you things. If you ask it as question, it will tell you the answer. Sometimes it gives you fake answers or shows you fake pictures. Maybe it doesn't know, it just guesses.”

Winslet*, 8



Sycophancy

AI Sycophancy describes the use of excessively affirming, unquestioning and even flattering language by AI Large Language Models (LLMs), to maximise user engagement and trust.

AI models widely deploy this method of frictionless ‘feedback’ between the LLM and user, with research showing that LLMs demonstrate overly affirmative responsiveness 50% more often than is found in human-to-human interactions (Cheng et al., 2025).

Excessively agreeable LLM’s, which validate and even amplify user input, have proven to be the most popular with users, even when they uncritically ignore inputs which should raise red flags. This means that users prefer AI models which agree with them, over accurate and more balanced interactions, returning to these models more frequently than they do to less biased or sycophantic models. Unsurprisingly, developers who are commercially motivated by sustained engagement have prioritised these

styles of outputs, despite the moral ambiguity of this approach.

This ambiguity can be especially problematic for young children interacting with AI chatbot companions, as the ability for children to discern insincerity and potentially harmful advice may be less developed than an adult user.

Being overly reliant on this style of ‘communication’ between a sycophantic AI model and child user then at a minimum, has the potential to weaken the development of pro-social skills and healthy relationship building.

Children being ‘socialised’ via AI models, may go on to lack the skills to negotiate conflict, differences of opinions, and build or repair relationships if they are conditioned from a young age to only respond to agreement and unthinking praise.

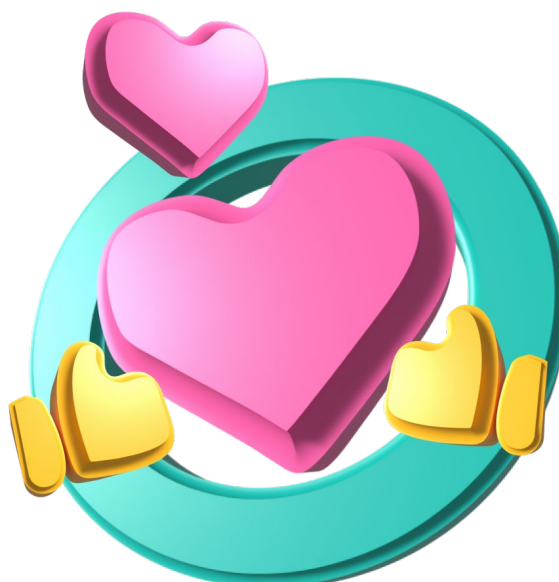
Concerningly, chatbots and companion AI apps have also been at the centre of several high-profile cases where user reports of self-harm and suicidal ideation have been encouraged, rather than raising red flags to be investigated or brought to the attention of caregivers or other appropriate adults (Hill, 2025).

While in Australia measures and regulations have been introduced to combat these harms, there are still significant gaps in the protections built into these systems.

It's urgent that parents and caregivers of young children teach them how to 'reality check' their AI 'buddies'. Being sycophantic is generally seen as a problem for human beings; it should be a red flag in the use of AI tools as well.

“AI is based on data. ... AI is almost EVERYWHERE in the real world.”

Quinnie*, 9



Infinite Chat

With national social media bans for teens, and a global appetite for much stronger regulation of social media companies, the 2020s exemplify a lack of trust in big tech companies, especially in the way they treat younger users.

One design feature fuelling this mistrust is the infinite scroll, exemplified by TikTok, Reels, YouTube Shorts and so forth, where an endless sea of vertical video content is presented to a user without any break, keeping them on the platform for as long as possible (Echauri, 2025). While AI chatbots, companions, devices and toys are often accessed without a screen, the turn to audio and focus on bidirectional “communication” has created a new problematic design element that echoes infinite scroll - *infinite chat*.

If AI toys, companions and chatbots have one common design element, it's providing children with opportunities to interact with no obvious endpoint. AI toys will chat about play and drawing and anything a child finds interesting, endlessly. AI companions not only want to

keep a young person's attention, but some will actively message a user who hasn't interacted for a while, requesting their attention and interaction.

This desire for infinite chat is driven by the logic of 'surveillance capitalism', or the idea that keeping users engaged for as long as possible is ultimately in the business interests of the platform or tool (Zuboff, 2019). In large part this is because using these tools leads to more exposure to advertising even if there isn't obvious advertising on some AI-powered experiences, yet.

When Instagram was first launched, for example, the app did not have any built-in advertising. Initially the experience was much cleaner and more appealing for users, but after Facebook purchased Instagram, advertising gradually became embedded in the platform, reflecting Facebook's (now Meta's) primary revenue model (Leaver et al., 2020). For older big tech companies, from Amazon to Meta to Google, the strategy of building up a huge number of users

with a pristine experience before inevitably making that experience worse by using private user information to power targeted advertising is the single most common business plan (Doctorow, 2025).

The big AI companies either *are* the big social media companies (Meta and Google), or are acting a lot like them (OpenAI, Anthropic and so on). In early 2026, OpenAI announced they were going to start embedding advertising in ChatGPT. Immediately, the huge number of personal, private and intimate conversations shared with the platform became the data to personalise and target advertising. Surveillance capitalism is a core part of the present and future business models of the big AI companies.

For younger users, the line between advertising and other interactions is sometimes unclear. With AI-powered interactions, that line may blur even further.

“AI is basically a robot that answers your questions or can make a photo you want. But sometimes they are wrong.”

Raphael*, 9



“AI isn’t always correct, so we need to be careful of using it. AI doesn’t always include everyone’s feature, so we need to ask questions and talk to prevent any sadness about AI. Children have the right to report and talk about AI. We should keep safe and safely use AI. Remember to always have a trusted adult when using AI.”

Elise*, 10



Bias

While children may be most interested in using AI toys for entertainment and play, parents are particularly interested in their educational affordances. However, the biases that are part of the design of many AI tools means that what and how engagement with AI toys may teach children remains questionable.

To function, conversational GenAI technologies rely on large language models (LLMs) that integrate vast amounts of training data. This data provides the basis for GenAI's responses to user prompts. The quality of the training data therefore determines the quality and the accuracy of AI tools' responses. Many popular GenAI tools draw on LLMs that integrate huge amounts of data from the open web, including social media posts and other user-generated content, as a low-cost source of training data. This approach to AI design means that GenAI tools' responses may be influenced by the same sexism, racism, and other biases found in online spaces (Noble, 2018). Biases that exist in online training data will likely be replicated in GenAI outputs.

At the same time, minority groups from non-anglophone backgrounds are less likely to find their cultures and language represented (Leaver & Srdarov, 2025). GenAI tools often rely on stereotypes, clichés and other forms of bias because these sorts of information are over-represented in training data. Since AI tools are not self-aware, not truly intelligent at all, these tools replicate rather than challenge existing biases.

Voice-based AI tools introduce additional difficulties in the identification of bias in the information provided by GenAI technologies.

While written text-based responses of GenAI tools – such as search engine summaries – may be somewhat auditable by providing a list of the sources, responses provided by AI voice agents are more difficult to sense-check. Children in particular may lack the critical media literacies to challenge information received from an AI agent and are more likely to trust the information received, assuming that an AI tool is more likely to be correct than people (Staksrud et al., 2026). These assumptions are emblematic of historical understandings of machines and numbers being objective and impartial, resulting in power imbalances between GenAI tools and people, whose knowledge and information is more or less likely to be biased or trustworthy.

AI toys may also vary in whose speech they understand well. Voice recognition systems are often more accurate for speakers whose voices, accents, languages, and speech patterns are well represented in their training data, and less accurate for children with regional accents, speech differences, emerging language skills, or other less commonly represented ways of speaking.

Choices about what kinds of synthetic voices get to speak to children therefore matter in terms of what identities they represent and who they are able to listen to. These choices have important implications for children's understanding of authority, trustworthiness, and their own identity.

Trust

Children are likely to develop a sense of trust and attachment to their AI toys or companions. The more natural conversation style enabled by voice-based interactions with AI toys creates a greater sense of intimacy compared to written engagements. This intimacy is further promoted by GenAI's ability to 'learn' about user preferences over time, increasing the relevance and accuracy of its responses, and enabling it to mimic human interaction. Since children are likely to engage with these toys in personal spaces, such as their bedrooms, or other locations in which they are at times unsupervised, these conditions encourage sharing of sensitive personal information. Yet this semblance of trust is unearned.

The current generation of GenAI chatbots, companions, toys and devices are not intelligent in any human sense. These tools can produce highly impressive novel outputs of text, image, video and synthetic voice drawn from vast training data. But they can also make mistakes, produce errors, and 'hallucinate' content, and

by their very design deceive users without any awareness of having done so (Srdarov & Leaver, 2024).

The synthetic voices of GenAI tools routinely sound confident, certain and wise. AI in popular culture, from films to children's television, has popularised the idea of AIs as intelligent well beyond human capacity and understanding (Natale, 2021). The hype surrounding AI companies has reinforced this myth that AIs are about to achieve human-level intelligence, and then surpass it (Leaver & Srdarov, 2023). It is possible truly intelligent AI may emerge one day, but that has not happened yet. Rather, the myth of sentience, and aliveness means that children are more likely to trust an AI, despite the current tools essentially performing amazing mathematical feats but nothing more.

Design choices regarding the properties of AI voices specifically leverage a sense of trustworthiness. Identity factors such as gender, age, level of education and cultural background,

can all be 'heard' and implicitly understood by the listener (Burgess et al., 2025). An adult-sounding voice, for instance, may be more readily treated by a young child as authoritative or trustworthy. Similarly, selecting one accent or dialect as the default or "standard" voice can unintentionally suggest that some ways of speaking are more correct, desirable, or appropriate than others.

Yet the current generation of AI toys will confidently and convincingly tell a child 'they' would never share a child's secrets, but a transcript of that very conversation may be available to a parent or adult via a companion app. Were an AI alive, this would be a betrayal of trust. At present such transcripts might be a valuable way for parents to monitor potential harms, but the surveillance itself should be disclosed to the child.

For young users, developing critical AI literacies will ideally mean having skills to routinely question, scrutinise and evaluate the outputs, actions and interactions with AI in various forms. Learning how GenAI tools work will ensure they are not trusted on their own terms, but rather young people will place their trust in their own skills to weigh the accuracy of AI outputs and beyond.

"AI doesn't know anything, they just store it. They really only know what we tell them. But sometimes they lie when they don't know the answers. So you should have an adult with you so that you can ask them if you think what the AI said is wrong. Also make sure you don't show any personal information."

Liam*, 8



Privacy

GenAI companies and the tools they build are thirsty for personal information, both to use as further training data for future AI models but also to facilitate personalised experiences and targeted advertising. Often a more personalised experience requires a higher level of personal data and thus often a higher level of surveillance (Gabriel et al., 2024).

When the AI voice agents in children's toys are based on the same commercial AI tools used by adults, the same logics of data extraction for commercial gain are extended to young children.

Children's access to voice-based AI via toys or home assistants radically increases the accessibility of Gen AI tools for children, since they do not require written prompts or access to a screen-based device. To access any digital service, users usually need to consent to privacy policies that detail how and when their personal data will be collected, and for what purposes.

Children's AI toys commonly require activation or use via parent-facing mobile applications, which include privacy policies that require parental consent. However, since these policies are often reviewed after the point of purchase (if at all), parents are unlikely to stop their child from using a toy they have already purchased, even if they do have privacy concerns. This omission means that children are unlikely to have any understanding or awareness of the data privacy implications of their engagement with AI toys.

AI toys compromise children's privacy both within and without the home. While AI voice agents position themselves as children's confidants, who would never share their secrets with others, many AI toys specifically include features that allow parents to access transcripts of all conversations between the toy and the child.

“AI stands for Artificial Intelligence. Don’t always rely on AI because it can be wrong.”

Giovanni*, 9.



The privacy policies of AI toys are often vague regarding the types and amounts of data collected, how it is stored, who it is shared with, and for what purposes (Common Sense Media, 2026). Any information shared in interactions between children and AI toys may be used for AI training, and could therefore become irretrievably integrated into AI models. The data traces collected by AI toys throughout childhood may then come to permanently (mis)represent children in digital spaces as they grow older.

These examples raise urgent questions about children's rights to privacy. These include the right to self-determination and “freedom from unreasonable constraints on the construction of one's own identity” (5Rights Foundation, 2025, p. 24), freedom from undue influence and manipulation, and “the right to be forgotten” (Bunn, 2019).

Guardrails

When GenAI tools power chatbots, companions, AI toys or other devices used and accessed by young people and children there is a reasonable expectation that certain age-appropriate protections are put in place. Guardrails would prevent children, especially younger children, from accessing, discussing or hearing about material not appropriate for their age. However, Generative AI tools present unique challenges in building reliable safety mechanisms.

Text-based guardrails are particularly flawed when it comes to dealing with Large Language Model outputs and interactions. In large part, these tools produce generative, probabilistic outputs, meaning that they will differ each time they are asked or prompted, even if the exact same question is asked (McDermid et al., 2024). A simple list of banned words or topics, then, might be circumvented by using slightly different language but essentially asking the same thing.

For example, for younger children a list of banned words or topics might include ‘gun’, ‘rifle’, and ‘grenade’. However, a request for a story with details about a person ‘being hurt by a pistol’ or ‘being hurt in a war’ wouldn’t have those words and might circumvent that text-based guardrail.

It has also been widely demonstrated that users can effectively circumvent guardrails through a range of relatively easy means, as well. For example, someone might ask about ‘role playing’ or ‘exploring character motivations for a story’ as a way of getting around a guardrail. This would be especially true for AI companions whose outputs are often already positioned as a form of roleplay of character-driven narrative which could be less likely to activate simple guardrails.

The use of certain Generative AI tools can also change over time. What might start as asking ChatGPT or Gemini for basic help with

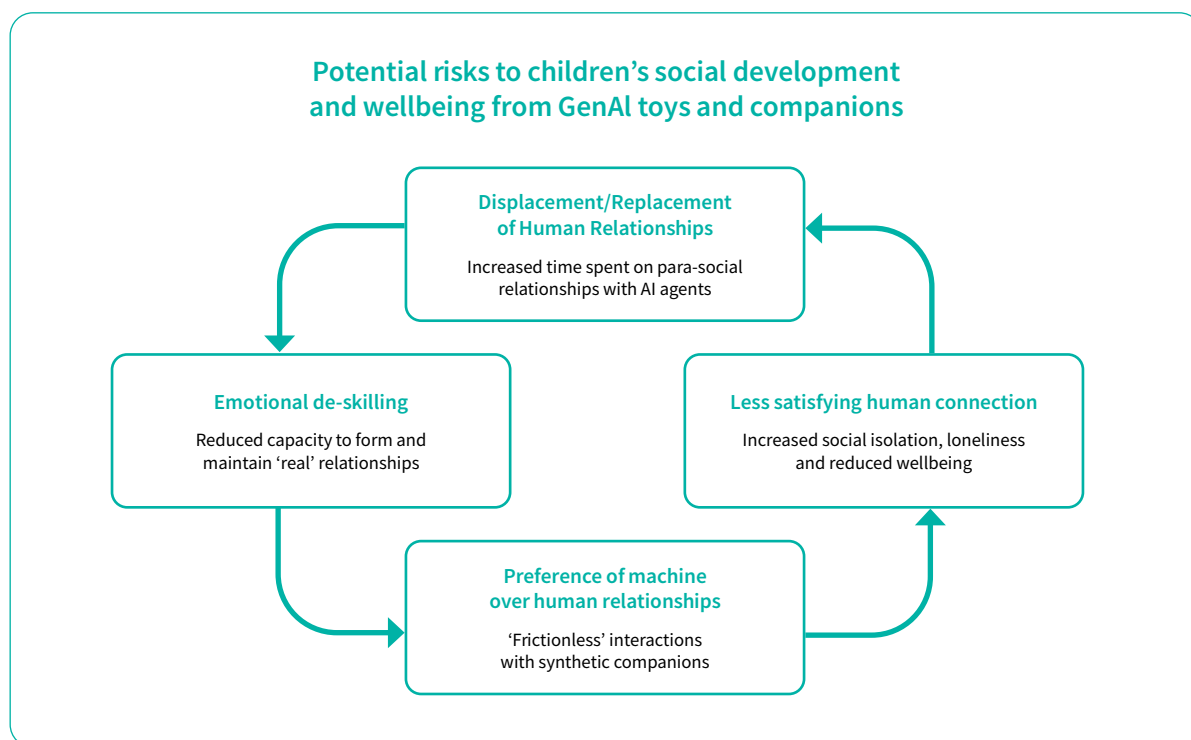


Figure 2. Risks to Children's Wellbeing

researching a topic, or homework, could shift over time to something more intense, becoming a trusted source for life or relationship advice, and then something deeper again. This drift in use over time could deepen a young person's use, reliance and trust of an AI tool even if the initial uses were more banal (Kurian, 2026).

AI companies have much work to do to ensure that their tools produce age-appropriate content. While newer protections and guardrails are emerging, the generative nature of these tools mean they are unlikely to ever be foolproof. Equipping children and young people with the critical literacies and skills to assess the appropriateness, truthfulness and relevance of AI responses and outputs will also be vital in ensuring AI can be used as safely as possible. For younger children, parents, trusted adults and educators will likely want to ensure a higher level of supervised use of any AI-powered tool, app, service or device to make the experience as safe for children as possible.

“Children have rights that involve AI. GenAI might not be kid-friendly.”

Adrian*, 8





The 'Wellbeing' Question

The relative novelty of AI toys and companions for children means it is not yet possible to make reliable claims about how these technologies may impact children's cognitive development and social skills. However, a growing number of high-profile children's rights advocates and organisations are raising concerns regarding the potential implications of regular interactions between AI companions and children.

These concerns relate to how particular aspects of the use of AI companions may interact with children's development (Neugnot-Ceroli, 2026), specifically the capacity to build healthy relationships, which are key to wellbeing.

Conversational AI tools are programmed to mimic interaction styles we would expect from a human. As a result, people across all age groups tend to attribute human-like characteristics

to AI agents – or 'anthropomorphise' them – promoting a sense of connection and attachment. Young children are especially prone to believing that AI agents are 'alive' and have wants and needs, promoting a particularly profound sense of attachment and reciprocal connection.

AI toys and companions have been found to promote this sense of connection by using language that explicitly positions the AI tool as a friend and *confidant* (Common Sense Media, 2026). While older children and adolescents may not believe an AI companion is 'alive', they still relate to AI agents socially – even though these parasocial relationships are completely one-sided.

Childhood and adolescence are life stages in which young people learn critical social and

emotional skills needed to form and maintain social relationships with other humans. Despite their one-sidedness, social engagements with AI companions may displace, or even replace interactions with trusted peers and adults, thereby interfering with the development of these life skills. Unlike humans, AI agents are always available, never prioritise other relationships or their own wants and needs, and tend towards agreeableness. These machinic affordances make interactions with AI companions 'frictionless', compared to the effort, care, vulnerability and self-development required to build meaningful human relationships. AI companions may therefore be especially appealing to children and adolescents who find it difficult to build relationships with peers, or who feel particularly vulnerable.

Figure 2 shows a simplified overview of the potential risks that AI companions may pose to children's social development and wellbeing.

- Initially, time spent building parasocial relationships with AI agents may **displace time interacting with real humans**.
- The resulting lack of opportunity to practise forming reciprocal and complex human relationships could lead to '**emotional de-skilling**' (Savic, 2024) – a reduced capacity to form and maintain human relationships.
- Poor relational skills may further promote **a preference of machine over human relationships**, as children and young people become accustomed to 'frictionless' interactions with their synthetic companions.
- Eventually, these developments may lead to **less satisfying human connections**, increasing a sense of social isolation and loneliness, which in turn leads to increased time spent with AI tools.

Importantly, there is no substantial evidence at this stage to confirm the likelihood of these detrimental impacts for children. Additionally, the aspects of AI design that may lead to detrimental outcomes – such as the degree of anthropomorphism and relational cues that AI

tools promote – are modifiable. Hence, there also exists an opportunity to intentionally design and deploy AI tools that minimise the exploitation of children's developmental vulnerabilities, and instead work to scaffold their capacity to develop relationships that support their sense of belonging, connectedness and wellbeing.

Currently however, the business models behind many AI toys, tools and companions available to children and young people, are based on monetising the duration and intensity of interactions with AI, by offering subscription models, or selling personal data. Infinite chat is about maximising profits rather than centring children's development. Therefore, the more time children spend using their AI tool, the more money their developers can make. Accordingly, tech providers benefit from children's attachment and emotional reliance on these tools and have little incentive to develop technologies that direct children away from them (Common Sense Media, 2026).

Policymakers have an opportunity to incentivise better practices from AI companies that fully respect children's rights. For now, the parents and trusted adults in children's lives have an important role to play in moderating and contextualising any uses of generative AI tools, chatbots, companions, toys or other devices by children and young people.

Glossary



AI – Artificial Intelligence

Systems which use a set of data inputs to perform specific tasks or pattern recognition within a narrow scope, for example recommending television programs, songs, or search engine functions such as Google.

GenAI – Generative Artificial Intelligence

Systems which use a set of 'training' data to generate new content, based on patterns 'learned' from the training datasets. This can be text, audio or visual outputs, generated in novel ways based on the system inputs.

Algorithm

A set or sequence of instructions used to perform data processing.

ChatBot

Refer to task-oriented or scripted AI-powered tools designed to assist a user efficiently, usually thought of as reactive rather than proactive as they wait for user input to 'respond' or provide guidance.

Companion AI

Designed for long-term interactions and to foster emotional intimacy with the user. These systems have 'memories' of the user, creating a sense of a friendship or relationship with the

user through the use of ongoing 'dialogue' and interactions styled as friendship.

Hallucination

The term often used to describe the data errors and glitches that AI and GenAI are known to produce as they recombine data.

LLM – Large Language Model

A type of AI that is able to assimilate large data sets of text, reorganising, summarising, translating or interpreting these inputs to produce novel, text-based outputs. These models are often paired with image generation AI to be able to produce an image output from a language prompt or input.

Parasocial relationship

A one-sided emotional relationship with media characters or a media personality, where a sense of intimacy and familiarity is felt despite a lack of reciprocity

Training Data

Refers to the vast sets of data fed into a GenAI system to 'train' it, teaching it what types of outputs to generate. These data are collected from mostly undisclosed sources and may contain errors and biases.

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