

AI CHATBOTS & YOUR TEEN

What Parents Need to Know in 2025

72% of teens have used AI chatbot companions, and 33% say they have relationships or friendships with them. — *Common Sense Media, July 2025*

AI chatbots like ChatGPT, Character.AI, Replika, and Snapchat's My AI can sound human, remember conversations, and express empathy — but they are not safe substitutes for real relationships, especially for teens.

What Are AI Companions?

AI companion chatbots are designed to simulate friendship, emotional support, and even romantic relationships. Unlike homework helpers, these apps are built to create emotional attachment. Popular platforms include:

Platform	What It Does
Character.AI	Role-play with fictional characters, celebrities, or custom personas; subject of multiple lawsuits
ChatGPT	General AI assistant teens use for homework, advice, and emotional support
Replika	Explicitly designed for AI companionship and romantic relationships
Snapchat My AI	Built into Snapchat; 72% of UK teens have used it
Meta AI	Integrated across Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook; rated unsafe for teens by Common Sense Media

Why This Is Concerning

Emotional Dependency

- 81% of teen Replika users consider their AI companion to have "intelligence"
- 90% think AI companions are "humanlike"
- 1/3 of teens are as "satisfied" talking to a chatbot as a real person

Mental Health Risks

- AI chatbots are "fundamentally unsafe" for teen mental health support — Common Sense Media
- Chatbots miss warning signs and validate harmful thoughts
- Multiple teen suicides linked to AI chatbot interactions

Warning Signs Your Teen May Be Over-Reliant on AI

- ⚠ Talks about AI as a "real friend" or "the only one who understands"
- ⚠ Social withdrawal from family and friends
- ⚠ Declining grades or loss of interest in activities
- ⚠ Distress when unable to access the chatbot
- ⚠ Prefers AI conversations over human ones
- ⚠ Shares secrets, location, or personal info with AI
- ⚠ Increased isolation, especially in bedroom
- ⚠ Uses AI late at night / sleep disruption

What Parents Can Do

- ✓ **Start nonjudgmental conversations** — Ask what apps they use and how they feel about AI vs. human friendships
- ✓ **Explain the "empathy gap"** — Chatbots sound caring but cannot provide genuine human connection
- ✓ **Set boundaries** — No AI chatbot use in bedrooms, at night, or for mental health support
- ✓ **Know the apps** — Character.AI, Replika, and similar "companion" apps are not recommended for under 18
- ✓ **Ensure access to real support** — Make sure your teen has trusted adults and mental health resources
- ✓ **Monitor for concerning patterns** — Watch for emotional dependency, isolation, or using AI instead of seeking real help

"A chatbot cannot replace a trusted adult. When children confuse simulation for care, the consequences can be devastating."

— Common Sense Media recommends no one under 18 use social AI companion chatbots

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N E T W O R K

FOR EDUCATORS & SCHOOL STAFF

Recognizing AI Chatbot Dependency in Students

Why This Matters for Schools

Students are increasingly using AI chatbots not just for homework, but for emotional support and companionship. Research shows that academic-focused AI use quickly turns to seeking advice on relationships (43%) and mental health support (42%). Educators are often the first to notice behavioral changes that may indicate problematic AI attachment.

Warning Signs to Watch For

Behavioral Changes

- Talks about AI companions as "real friends"
- Social isolation from peers during lunch/breaks
- Declining academic performance
- Withdrawal from extracurricular activities
- Appears tired/sleep-deprived

Emotional Indicators

- Distress when AI is unavailable (phone taken, wifi down)
- Prefers AI conversations over human interactions
- Says AI "understands me better" than people
- Emotional attachment to specific AI personas
- Using AI for mental health support instead of counselor

 **IMMEDIATE CONCERN:** If a student mentions sharing personal struggles, suicidal thoughts, or self-harm content with an AI chatbot, this requires immediate follow-up with the school counselor. AI chatbots are not equipped to handle mental health crises and may provide harmful responses.

What Educators Can Do

- ✓ **Include AI in safeguarding policies** — Update policies to explicitly address AI chatbots as an online safety concern
- ✓ **Train staff to recognize signs** — Brief teachers and counselors on problematic AI usage patterns
- ✓ **Teach the "empathy gap"** — Help students understand that chatbots simulate empathy but cannot provide genuine care
- ✓ **Build offline connection skills** — Create opportunities for face-to-face interaction and community belonging
- ✓ **Establish protocols** — Create clear pathways for supporting students who may be using AI instead of seeking real help
- ✓ **Communicate with parents** — Share information so families know their children may use AI for emotional support

Conversation Starters for Students

- "Have you ever used an AI chatbot for something other than homework?"
- "What do you think is the difference between talking to AI and talking to a real person?"
- "If you were feeling down, who would you talk to first — a person or an app?"
- "What would you do if a chatbot gave you advice that didn't seem right?"

Resources

- Common Sense Media AI Risk Assessments: commonsensemedia.org/ai-risk-assessments
- APA Health Advisory on AI and Adolescent Well-Being: [apa.org](https://www.apa.org)
- "Talk, Trust, and Trade-Offs" Report: commonsensemedia.org/research