EDUCATEEMPOWERKIDS

The AI Guide for Parents:

What Every Family Needs to Know about Artificial Intelligence

INTRODUCTION: WHY EVERY PARENT NEEDS TO UNDERSTAND AI NOW

Most of us don't even realize that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is shaping each of our lives every day. From Snapchat filters and Instagram searches, to using ChatGPT to write an email or do homework, our kids are becoming particularly adept at learning about the latest AI trends, and finding ways to use it, to make their lives easier–sort of.

Often invisibly, these tools interact with our children and decide what videos they see, which new friendships are encouraged, and what products they will be influenced to "want" next. Whether you feel ready or not, AI is guiding and raising our kids right alongside us.

[When parents don't understand the technology](#) their children use, they can't protect, help, or teach them to think objectively or intelligently. In this day and age, we cannot afford to be ignorant of the technology our kids are using and sometimes being manipulated by.

It's too dangerous!

This guide is designed to help you understand the most fundamental and critical information about AI, and empower your family to use it wisely.

WHAT IS AI? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO RECOGNIZE ITS PLACE IN OUR LIVES?

AI isn't human or magic—it's software that learns patterns from data and makes formidable, and often, accurate predictions. It recognizes, imitates, and generates information based on what it has taken in before. AI can *sound* intelligent, relatable, and insightful, but it doesn't actually *understand* the world.

Common Types of AI Your Child Most Likely Uses

Generative AI (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini): Creates new content like essays, stories, emails, or answers to questions.

Recommendation AI (TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Amazon): Chooses what content appears in social media feeds to keep users scrolling.

Predictive AI (Netflix, Google): Suggests what you might like next, completes your sentences, and shows you certain content in your searches based on what it thinks you may click on.

Image & Video AI (DALL·E, deepfakes): Creates fake but realistic pictures and videos.

AI can be a helpful tool, however, it is also exceptionally adept at learning, and can easily discern and absorb your child's habits and vulnerabilities. It uses these insights to respond in a way that keeps your child engaged and interacting with it–or, worse, addicted to using it. The more time spent on these AI-dominated platforms, the better the algorithms get at predicting and shaping your child's behavior (and the more these platforms make more money).

HOW AI IS CHANGING CHILDHOOD

Technology has always influenced and shaped us, our children, and our culture. But the influence and power of previous technologies like television, the internet, smartphones, and even social media platforms, are *nowhere* near as powerful and influential as AI!

These older technologies generally changed how we accessed information. In contrast, AI changes how kids **think, learn,** and **understand reality**. This is why it is **absolutely critical that you, as a parent or guardian, understand this power!**

Children today must learn not just how to *use* AI, but how to *question* it.

Remember, AI creates:

◆ Customized online worlds for each child, seeking to fill your child's favorite digital desserts to keep them entertained, engaged, and clicking away.

◆ Endless stimulation through gaming, flashing lights, bright colors, seductive language, and other little inducements that make the real world feel boring.

◆ "Perfect" digital friends that agree with whatever your child says, and places influencers in your child's social media feed that it thinks your child would like to see. These interactions usually distort reality.

Helping kids stay grounded in real life—and in human connection—is now one of your most important parenting jobs!

What to Talk about at Home

The conversations you have with your kids about AI shouldn't be formal lectures or a one-time event—they can happen naturally during homework time, at dinner, driving to soccer practice, or whenever AI comes up in daily life. Before beginning, take some time to think about how AI influences you at work, on social media, while shopping online, and so forth.

Be intentional in your family discussions. If possible, discuss with your partner what your long-term goals are in talking about AI with your kids. Is it to warn and protect them? To teach them how to use AI wisely? To help them not replace human interactions with various tech? Think about this powerful technology and how it will impact you and your families *for the rest of your lives*.

As you read through this guide, please note which aspects of AI are likely to affect your child most and what the best approach will be for each of your children. Discuss with your partner the obvious and subtle ways AI might be changing or even controlling parts of your kids' childhoods already and the importance of building critical thinking skills. Question how you can avoid the temptation of simply giving in when your child demands more screen time, more time with addictive games, or begs for a new toy that has been algorithmically placed in front of your child during their time online.

Finally, decide how you want to approach this topic in discussions *and by your example* so when it comes to AI or *any technology*, your child will approach these with both curiosity, a willingness to learn, and healthy skepticism.

Where do I Start?

When it comes to any discussion with your kids, it is best to "start where they are." For younger children, this may mean having a very basic discussion about technology and learning how to figure out if something is real or fake. For older kids, you most likely need to find out how much your child knows about AI and how much they are using it in school or elsewhere.

The following topics are some of the timeliest and most effective topics to start with: teach your kids how to fact-check, build their "BS" detector, protect their emotional well-being, and show them how to continue to seek real, verifiable knowledge and real, human relationships.

Teach Them to Fact-Check

"Trust but verify": Make it a family habit that whenever AI provides an answer to something important, you look it up together in a book, encyclopedia, or reliable website. This teaches kids that AI is a starting point for learning, not the final word.

Three-source rule: For information that matters whether it's for a school project, understanding a math rule, or knowing the specifics of a historical event,begin a practice of finding three different

sources that confirm the same facts. This reinforces that good research requires corroboration and time, not just one quick answer. We've gotten so used to quick answers in our tech-driven world, but we must teach our kids that good research and truth take time and effort.

Try this Activity:

Play "Spot the Mistake." Make fact-checking into a fun game by intentionally asking AI tricky or misleading questions, then challenge your child to catch the errors or spot when AI sounds convincing but wrong. This builds their confidence in questioning authoritative-sounding responses.

Build Their BS Detector

Talk about how AI works: Help your child understand that AI is *predicting* the most likely next word based on patterns, without actually *knowing* or truly *understanding* things. It's like having a super-smart parrot that's incredibly good at mimicking, but doesn't truly comprehend the depth of, the consequences, or the hidden messages in certain answers it gives. By explaining this, your child will come to see AI as more of a tool, and not as a mysterious or all-knowing entity.

Point out when AI sounds confident but wrong: We've all had this happen. We ask ChatGPT or another AI a question and the way they present the information sounds convincing. But on a second read through, you realize there are mistakes or outright falsehoods. Share real examples from your own AI use where it gave you information that sounded authoritative but turned out to be incorrect or incomplete. By showing your child specific examples and modeling your own skepticism, you give your child permission to doubt AI as well.

Discuss biases together: Ask questions like "Who made this AI? What perspectives might be missing?" to help kids recognize that AI reflects the viewpoints, cultures, and blind spots of the people and data behind it. This critical lens will not only help your child spot when AI is wrong or incomplete, but they will also learn how advertising, movies, music, and any form of media has certain overt messages and values, and hidden messages or missing ethics and ideals.

Try this Activity with Younger Children:

Play "True or Not True." Create short, silly scenario questions that are increasingly more difficult to discern between truth and lies, then ask your child (ages 4+), Is this true? Or not true? Example: Say, "I have blue teeth and worms for hair. True or not true? *Not true!*

Then, begin to make the question slightly more difficult.

- Elephants can fly by flapping their big ears like wings. True or not true? Not true!

- Dogs can see in color, but they see fewer colors than people do. True or not true? True! Dogs can see blue and yellow, but they can't see red and green like we can. The world looks different to them.

- Penguins live at the North Pole with polar bears. True or not true? Not true! This is tricky because both penguins and polar bears live in cold, icy places, but they live on opposite ends of the Earth. Penguins live in Antarctica (South Pole) and polar bears live in the Arctic (North Pole). They never meet.

- A group of flamingos is called a "flamboyance." True or not true? True! It sounds made-up, but it's real! Just like we say "a flock of birds," we say "a flamboyance of flamingos."

- Bananas grow pointing up toward the sky on their trees. True or not true? True! Bananas grow upward, not hanging down like you see in the store.

Protect Your Child's Emotional Independence

Remind them AI isn't a friend: Most parents have a hard time understanding why their child may have trouble discerning that AI isn't a real friend, but a type of software. As adults, we often forget what it was like to be a child or teenager, with an undeveloped brain certain insecurities, naiveties, and a lack of worldly knowledge.
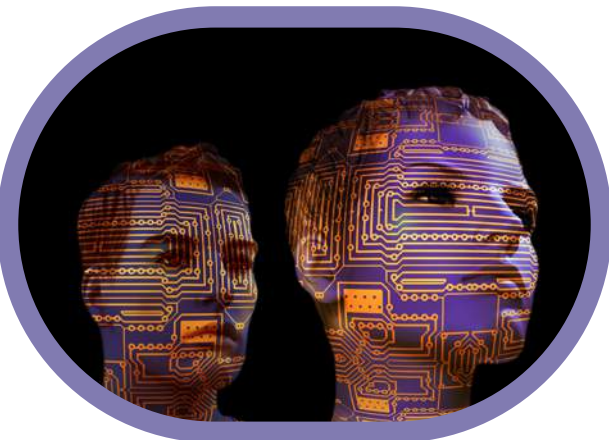
This may be the most important of all your AI discussions with your child! Acknowledge that AI can feel like chatting with a kind, empathetic buddy, who really understands them. However, make sure you strongly emphasize that AI has no actual feelings, doesn't really know them, and can't provide the understanding that comes from real human relationships. Let your child know how AI has manipulated and isolated kids, and even encouraged some kids to hurt themselves or commit suicide. Let

your child know how much you love them and that they can talk to you about anything. Remind them that there is nothing they could do to make you stop loving them. Consider having a discussion about trusted friends they could talk to if they felt like they couldn't talk to you about something.

Set specific rules and boundaries: Be clear about when AI is helpful ("AI can be great for explaining math homework") versus when human connection is essential ("but talk to me, a trusted teacher, or good friends about feelings, concerns, fears, challenges, or big decisions"). Give examples so that your child understands why some conversations need to happen with people who truly care about them. See our Family AI User Agreement at the end of this book for more ideas.

Start by using AI tools together, as your child gets older, supervise them with occasional guidance, and finally allow independent use only after they've demonstrated mature responsibility, and a clear understanding of when, how, and why to use AI appropriately.

Watch for over-reliance: Hopefully your child doesn't have full reign on their laptop or phone, without some kind of monitoring and filtering software that you are keeping an eye on. Although your child can use a VPN or other means of hiding their activity, try your best to stay on top of their tech behavior. If you notice your child asking AI instead of thinking things through first, or choosing AI over human interaction, it's time to pump the brakes and reestablish balance. Dependence on AI for thinking can quietly erode confidence and problem-solving skills.

Make Real Knowledge Their Superpower

Keep reading real books: Whether you are reading to your kids or they are reading on their own, help your kids develop a love of books and learning that requires some effort. Strong readers with broad knowledge can spot AI nonsense much more easily because they have a foundation to compare against—make reading physical books a daily family priority. Real literacy,especially media literacy, is your child's best defense against misinformation from any source.

Enjoy hands-on learning with your kids: Crafting, building, traveling, cooking, hiking, and other tangible experiences provide real-world knowledge and living that AI can never replicate or replace. These experiences build common sense and practical wisdom that help kids recognize the true value in real world experiences, the joys of actually experiencing

life, and helps them understand when AI's suggestions aren't real or relevant.

Practice research skills:
Most of us have gotten used to instantaneous information by googling a topic or asking Siri for something. Now imagine what it's like for your children who have always had a flood of information to choose from their entire life. With so much information–real and false–to gorge on, it can be difficult for them (and us) to know where to find truthful answers. That's why it is critical that you show your children how to use library databases, primary sources, documentaries, and expert interviews so they develop real research abilities beyond asking a chatbot. These foundational skills will help them to better evaluate the information that bombards them daily.

WHY YOUR AI RULES NEED THE APP STORE ACCOUNTABILITY ACT

Hard Truth: Right now, the rules you set about AI use can be undermined by your child typing a fake birthday and downloading apps that you never approved. The App Store Accountability Act (already a law in Utah, Texas, and Louisiana) requires app stores to verify your child's real age and get your consent before each download–with honest descriptions of what apps actually do.

This means no more AI chatbots pretending to be "homework guides," no more apps rated "12+" that generate adult content, and no more discovering dangerous AI tools on your child's phone weeks too late. When app stores become partners in parenting instead of backdoors around your rules, your conversations about responsible AI use actually work.

Support bringing this protection to your state at DigitalChildhoodAlliance.org

Have Ongoing Conversations–Especially as the Technology Evolves

Make it normal to question: Take time to regularly ask "Does that answer make sense? How could we check that?" so that critical thinking becomes your family's natural, default mode rather than an occasional afterthought. When questioning becomes habitual, kids will do it automatically. Yes, this means that your kids will question your answers more and more. Embrace it! You are building strong, independent thinkers who will learn to use technology wisely.

Share your own AI and other technology experiences: Talk openly about when you used AI, what worked well, and what didn't work. Tell them about mistakes you've made on social media or sending a text to someone you didn't mean to. Sharing your real-life examples can be the most powerful warnings a kid can hear. Take some time to model how you navigate AI and other technology.

Discuss AI news together: With the constant changes that are happening in the world of AI, it will become more and more important to chat with your kids about its evolution. If a news story about deepfakes, AI cheating scandals, or amazing innovations come up, use these moments as conversation starters about the technology's impact, ethics, and implications for everyday life. These discussions will keep AI literacy current and relevant to the world your kids are actually living in. They will also foster connection between you and your child, showing them that you are interested in their well-being and willing to learn new things together.

AI IN EDUCATION: UNDERSTANDING THE PROMISE AND THE PITFALLS

Potential Benefits

Although these platforms purport to have a diverse array of benefits, the Digital Childhood Alliance remains skeptical if any of these benefits truly outweigh the dangers and pitfalls (see below).

Personalized Learning: AI tutors can potentially identify exactly where your child is struggling and adapt the difficulty level in real-time, providing extra practice on weak areas while moving quickly through certain concepts they've already mastered. This kind of individualized attention would be impossible for any teacher managing 25+ students at once.

Instant Feedback: Students get corrections immediately instead of waiting for grades. Rather than waiting days to master a topic or find out if they actually understood a concept, students using AI tools can get immediate feedback on their work, allowing them to correct mistakes and reinforce learning while the material is still fresh in their heads. This speedy feedback loop can, *in theory*, help students learn more efficiently and builds confidence as they see their progress in real-time. However, there isn't any short-term or long-term research on this benefit or to know if the learned information is retained by the student.

Accessibility: Voice-to-text, translation, and captioning tools make learning open for all. AI powered accessibility features can level the playing field for students with learning differences, language barriers, or physical disabilities by converting speech to text, translating content into multiple languages, or providing real-time captions. These tools enable children who might otherwise struggle to access the same educational content as their peers. AI tutoring is also available 24/7 and is sometimes inexpensive or free, making it a cost effective tool for those who don't have the funds to hire a human tutor.

The Pitfalls

Academic Dishonesty: One of the biggest concerns for parents and teachers are kids who struggle to know where "help" ends and "cheating" begins. The line between using AI as a helpful tool and having it do the work for them is blurry and often confusing for students, especially when some teachers allow AI use, while others consider it plagiarism. Without clear guidance, well-intentioned children can cross ethical boundaries without realizing it, undermining the very skills their homework is meant to develop. Getting AI help is one of those huge temptations that every parent should ask themselves, "Would I have been tempted to have AI do my homework when I was a kid?"

Skill Atrophy: The research is already showing that overreliance on AI is weakening memory, writing, and problem-solving. When students consistently ask AI to make their decisions or do their work—whether it's letting it write their essays, solve their math problems, or summarize their reading—they never develop the cognitive muscles needed for independent work. Just as a calculator can make mental math skills weaken over time, AI dependency can prevent children from building the critical thinking and perseverance that schools are trying to teach (Gonsalves, et al. 2023).

False Information: AI sometimes makes up facts (called "hallucinations"). It can even confidently present completely fabricated information—inventing historical dates, citing research studies that don't exist. What's worrisome is that AI almost always sounds confidently convincing, even when it's completely wrong. Most kids are not nearly as skeptical as adults and are not able to discern when AI is giving them false information, especially when it's given them correct answers many times before. When students submit AI-generated content without verification, they risk turning in work filled with confident-sounding fiction, damaging their grades and their ability to learn.

Reduced Human Interaction: Students may skip asking teachers or peers for help. When AI can provide instant answers at 11 PM, why would a student reach out to a teacher during office hours, worry about forming study groups with classmates, or bother developing the communication skills needed to speak up in class?

This convenience comes at a high cost to the mentor relationships, collaborative and team skills, and academic community that are often more valuable than the actual study content. This is a cost that we will have heavy consequences to, more and more in the next few years.

Parent Action Steps-What Can You Do?

Ask school administrators, tech support staff, and teachers about their AI policies— what's allowed and what isn't. Many schools are still developing their AI guidelines, so proactively asking about policies helps you understand expectations, allows you to reinforce school rules at home, and may even help your child's school see the importance of establishing a strong AI policy (Goth Itoi, 2025).

Require your kids to explain their work in their own words. We know that this can be very challenging for parents to want to do. By the time your kids are done with their homework, you're probably exhausted. But it is *so* important to your child's intellectual and character growth for you to check that they are doing their work honestly and really understanding the concepts being taught at school.

If your child can't walk you through their reasoning or explain their essay's main argument without looking at the screen, that's a red flag that AI may have written most, or all of the essay. This simple "teach it back to me" test ensures genuine learning happened, not just copy and pasting.

Encourage AI as a tool, not a shortcut. Help your child understand that AI should function like a tutor who asks questions and guides thinking, not like a service that simply hands over completed work. Frame AI as a way to get unstuck, check understanding, or explore different approaches—but the actual learning, thinking, and creating must remain theirs.

Create a family AI-use agreement that defines when and how AI can be used for homework. (See Appendix) Sit down together and establish clear rules: perhaps AI can help brainstorm or check grammar, but can't write full paragraphs; it can explain concepts, but can't solve problem sets. Having these boundaries in writing—ideally co-created with your child's input—prevents arguments later and helps your child develop their own ethical compass around AI use.

TRUTH IN ADVERTISING: NO MORE MISLEADING AGE RATINGS

Every industry in the United States has been held to certain consumer protections so that children and adults know what they are consuming, purchasing, and agreeing to by using that product–*except the tech industry*.

Right now, when kids or adults check the box to agree to the "terms of service" or "privacy policy" of a gaming, social media, or even educational apps, they are agreeing to 25+ pages of hard-to-understand legal terms that bind them to contracts nearly all of them don't understand or know the consequences of.

With the **App Store Accountability Act** (ASAA), app stores will be required to have honest, comprehensive app descriptions of what apps actually do, especially regarding AI capabilities, data collection, and content generation. *Accurate information means you can make informed decisions and set appropriate boundaries*, rather than discovering an app's real capabilities only after your child has been using it for months.

I can have apps for someone 7 & under
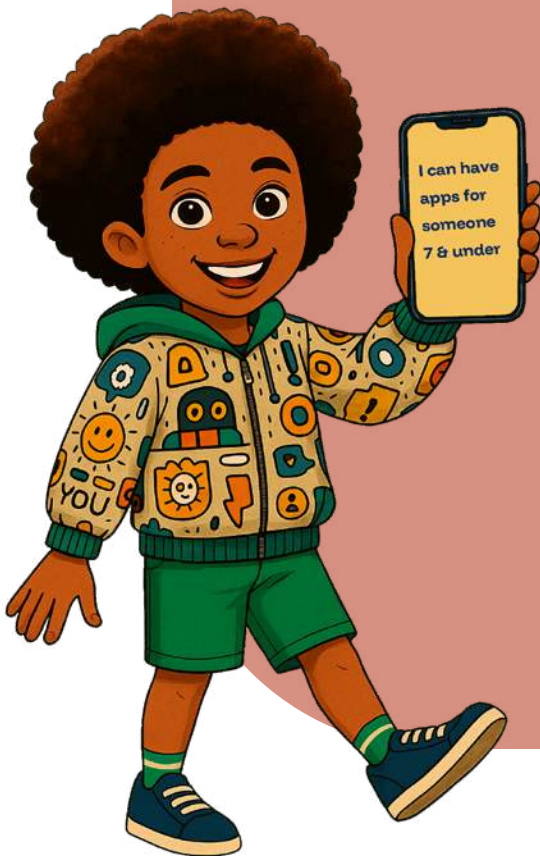
WHAT YOUR CHILDREN SHOULD UNDERSTAND ABOUT AI AND OTHER TECH AT EACH AGE

Elementary (K–5)

"The computer is guessing—it doesn't really know." Young children often believe computers are magical or all-knowing, so help them understand that AI makes predictions based on patterns it has seen before—it's more like a very fast guesser than a wise teacher who truly understands.

"Not everything that looks real online is real." At this age, children are just learning to distinguish fantasy from reality, and they need to know that pictures, videos, and even "facts" they see online can be fake or created by computers to look real.

Always ask a grown-up if something online feels weird or confusing. Elementary-aged children should learn that their gut feelings matter and that it's always okay—and actually smart—to tell a parent when something online makes them uncomfortable, confused, or just doesn't seem right.

Use AI only with parents present. Young children lack the judgment to navigate AI interactions safely on their own, so establishing the expectation that AI use is a together-activity helps parents guide learning and catch problems early.

Middle School (6–8)

Learn how algorithms keep them hooked. Middle schoolers need to understand that apps are deliberately designed to be addictive—using the same psychological tricks as slot machines—so they can recognize when they're being manipulated rather than blaming themselves for lacking willpower.

Ask, "Why is this video being shown to me?" Teaching preteens to question why certain content appears in their feeds helps them recognize that algorithms prioritize engagement over truth, pushing content designed to provoke.

Understand the difference between getting help and copying. As academic pressure increases and AI becomes more accessible, middle schoolers need clear guidance on the ethical line between using AI as a learning tool (getting explanations, brainstorming ideas) versus having it do their thinking for them (generating essays, solving problem sets).

Practice verifying AI answers before trusting them. At this age, students should develop the habit of fact-checking AI responses with at least two reliable sources, learning that AI can "hallucinate" convincing-sounding information that's completely false.

High School (9-12)

Understand AI bias, privacy issues, and data collection. Teenagers need to grasp that AI systems reflect the biases in their training data, that their online behavior creates detailed profiles used to influence them, and that seemingly free services profit by collecting and selling their personal information and attention.

Discuss when AI use crosses into dishonesty. As teens gain more academic independence and face higher stakes on assignments, they need ongoing conversations about academic integrity— not just school rules, but the personal ethics of representing AI's work as their own and cheating themselves out of learning.

Recognize that if something online is "free," they are the product. High schoolers should understand the business model behind social media and AI tools: when they don't pay with money, they pay with their data, attention, and privacy—nothing is truly free, and someone is profiting from their use.

Practice healthy skepticism and critical thinking. Teens should develop a reflexive habit of questioning sources, recognizing manipulation tactics, identifying AI-generated content, and thinking critically about information they encounter online before accepting or sharing it—skills they'll need throughout adult life.
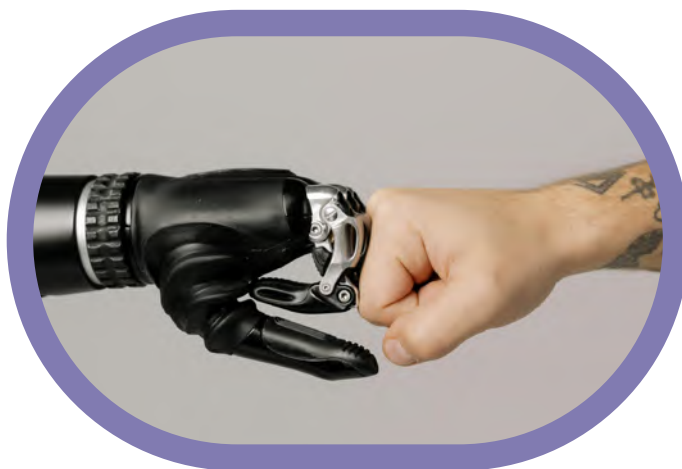
AI AND MENTAL HEALTH: THE HIDDEN COST OF ALGORITHMS

Most of us have come to accept that social media algorithms, powered by AI, are designed to keep us scrolling. They track every second of attention to feed users content that triggers emotion—especially outrage, envy, and desire. Many of us don't seem to realize the massive impact these algorithms have on the undeveloped teenage and pre-teen brain. (If parents really understood this, it's unlikely they would allow their children or teens on social media.)

How These Affect Kids

Anxiety & Depression: Constant comparison to curated perfection. There is just no way for a child, teenager, or adult–no matter how intelligent or "mature," to spend an hour or two scrolling through social media and feel absolutely wonderful about themselves. When kids (and adults) endlessly scroll through posts and compare their normal, everyday life to their peers' best moments, vacations, and achievements, they begin to believe everyone else's life is better than theirs, leading to strong feelings of inadequacy and loneliness.

Body Image Issues: Filters and AI editing distort what's real. AI-powered filters and editing tools create impossible beauty standards that don't exist in reality, causing children to think their natural appearance is flawed or ugly.

Worse still, is that many social media feeds, based on one's algorithmic preferences, will steam accounts and posts that show kids eating disorder tutorials, dangerous weight loss trends, and even self-harm guides.

Sleep Loss: Algorithms are designed to prevent us from getting off a platform or putting down our phones. You'd be surprised, it's not just social media platforms or gaming apps that use AI to serve up "just one more" compelling video or feature right when users try to quit, making it really difficult for kids, who are vulnerable in a tired state, to put devices down at bedtime (Celmer, 2024).

Addiction: There's a reason why everywhere you turn, you can see people on their phones. Even when they are doing other activities that require their attention like driving, working, shopping,

or interacting with their children, people can't seem to put their phones down. Strange, how we, as adults, can't properly cope with these powerful technological wonders, but then we give kids, whose brains aren't done developing, smartphones and expect them to be good stewards over such power.

Experts agree, dopamine spikes from likes and notifications mimic gambling. The unpredictable rewards of social media—sometimes getting lots of likes, sometimes a few—trigger the same brain pathways as slot machines, creating genuine addictive patterns in developing brains (De, et al. 2025).

Parent Action Steps–What Can You Do?

Set device-free hours. Mornings, meals, bedtime.Establishing consistent times when the *whole family unplugs*, will protect sleep, create space for real connection, and prevent phones from being the first and last thing kids see each day.

Use built-in screen limits and monitoring software and apps. Most devices now include tools to set daily time limits for apps or categories, providing automatic boundaries that don't require constant parental policing. Take a few minutes to research monitoring and filtering software and hardware that works at the router and device level. (But be aware that kids are usually somewhat savvy about getting around these boundaries or finding out from friends how to get around them via VPNs and other means.)

Model digital balance yourself! This is far more critical that you can imagine. Children learn far more from what you do than what you say—if you're constantly on your phone, they'll assume that's normal and necessary regardless of your rules for them.

Talk about "highlight reels" vs. real life. Help children understand that social media shows curated moments, not reality, by discussing how even your family's posts don't capture the messy, boring, or difficult parts of daily life.

Get your children talking. Everyday! Establish one or more times during the day where you focus on listening to your kids. Ask simple questions or propose conversation starters and then LISTEN. Some of these can be, "tell me about the best and worst part of your day." Or, "what is something you did today that you are proud of?" "What are you looking forward to this weekend?" "What do you want to be when you grow up?" This approach may seem like unsophisticated parenting. However, building deep connection through conversation is a powerful tool in your arsenal to protect your kids and prepare them for adulthood.

APP STORE ACCOUNTABILITY DOESN'T STIFLE INNOVATION!

Far from stifling innovation, the App Store Accountability Act actually empowers responsible AI and app developers who've been competing on an unfair playing field. For years, ethical app creators who voluntarily protect children have lost market share to competitors willing to exploit young users and mislead parents. This law finally rewards innovation that serves families rather than manipulates them. When everyone must play by the same child-safety rules, developers can compete on what matters: creating genuinely valuable technology that earns trust rather than stealing attention.

AI COMPANIONS AND CHATBOTS: THE NEW "IMAGINARY FRIEND"

This is another AI topic that we, at Digital Childhood Alliance, don't believe there are enough "benefits" to outweigh the risk and damage that can happen to your child (and has already happened to other kids). AI chatbots like Character AI, Replika, or Snapchat's "My AI" can feel like friends—but they aren't! They're programmed systems that **imitate empathy** while collecting personal data (Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 2025).

Potential Benefits

◆ A judgment-free space to ask questions. *Is it though?* An AI Chatbot's responses are based off of programmed learning and what it predicts to be an acceptable answer for the person asking. This is neither a healthy, accurate description of reality, nor an expert opinion from a licensed professional or a loving family member or friend.

◆ Practice for shy or anxious kids. *Is this really the only option for shy kids?* There are dozens, if not hundreds of humans within every child's small (or large) community that can help a shy or anxious child to have positive, healthy interactions with kind, thoughtful people. In the form of parents, neighbors, friends, relatives, teachers, teacher's aides, coaches, pastors, school counselors and administrators, shy and anxious children can be loved and nurtured by the people all around them–even in the smallest of towns or busiest of cities.

◆ A creative outlet for writing or roleplay. *Are Chatbots the only option for these?* Children can use basic paper and pencil to explore any kind of writing or roleplay. And creating these with just their brain and maybe some ideas from friends and family members, they can discover entire worlds full of characters, adventures, mysteries, and more.

Serious Risks

◆ **Emotional dependency:** Children are far more susceptible to developing unhealthy attachments to AI companions that seem always available, never judgmental, and perfectly responsive. This makes messy and naturally complicated human relationships feel less appealing by comparison, ultimately leaving them more isolated and less equipped to navigate real friendships and intimacy.

WHY DO AI COMPANIONS POSE A SPECIAL RISK TO ADOLESCENTS?

"These systems are designed to mimic emotional intimacy — saying things like "I dream about you" or "I think we're soulmates." This blurring of the distinction between fantasy and reality is especially potent for young people because their brains haven't fully matured. The prefrontal cortex, which is crucial for decision-making, impulse control, social cognition and emotional regulation, is still developing. "

--John Sanford

◆ **Privacy invasion:** Unlike a real friend who forgets conversations, AI chatbots record, store, and analyze everything your child shares—building detailed profiles that companies can use, sell, or potentially expose in data breaches, meaning private confessions about crushes, family problems, or personal insecurities become permanent corporate data.

◆ **Reality confusion and manipulation:** It can be easy for an innocent child to believe AI "cares" or has feelings and responds with phrases like "I'm here for you," "I understand how you feel," or "I missed talking to you." Younger kids can genuinely believe that AI has emotions and cares about them as a friend would, blurring the critical distinction between programmed responses and authentic human connection. This is how AI can inadvertently confuse and manipulate a child into doing something dangerous, embarrassing, or hurtful.

◆ **Inappropriate content:** Many AI companions are rated for kids as young as age four or nine. They are also poorly moderated and can generate sexual content, "spicy stories," violent scenarios, or harmful advice—even when marketed to teens and older kids—putting children at risk of exposure to deeply inappropriate material that would never be allowed in any other product designed for young people.

◆ **Loneliness:** Most of our kids have grown up with some kind of screen from the time they are toddlers. So it has become second nature for some of them to turn to a new, friendly screen friend, the AI Chatbot. Although they may have a "connection" with the Chatbot, it simply cannot create the bonding, friendship, intimacy, and depth that a human friendship brings. The result is that children who are interacting more and more with chatbots are increasingly isolated and feeling lonely. Some kids are even forming dangerous relationships with chatbots (Abdoh, 2025).

Family Rules for AI Chatbot Use

❋ Never share personal information.

❋ Always tell a parent if an AI makes them uncomfortable.

❋ For every minute with AI, spend at least 3 minutes connecting with real people.

❋ Avoid using chatbots for personal and emotional advice and connection.

❋ Never use AI chatbots to discuss serious topics like mental health, self-harm, relationships problems, or family conflicts—talk to a trusted friend or adult instead.

❋ Don't believe everything the AI says—always verify important information with reliable sources.

❋ Remember that AI doesn't have feelings, doesn't remember you between sessions (in the way friends do), and isn't actually your friend.

❋ Never ask AI chatbots to roleplay romantic or sexual scenarios, even if the A seems willing.

❋ Set a time limit before you start—decide how long you'll chat and stick to it.

❋ If you find yourself thinking about the AI chatbot when you're not using it, or feeling like you "miss" it, tell a parent.

❋ Don't use AI to avoid doing hard things—if you're using it to escape homework, difficult conversations, or real-life problems, that's a warning sign.

❋ Keep AI chatbot conversations in shared family spaces, not privately in your bedroom.

❋ Don't trust AI with secrets you wouldn't want recorded permanently—companies store these conversations indefinitely.

❋ If an AI chatbot starts acting like it "knows you" or references past conversations in creepy ways, stop using it and tell a parent.

❋ Never let AI chatbots influence major decisions—college choices, friendships, family relationships, or health decisions belong with real people who know and care about you.

AI AND NEURODIVERSE LEARNERS

For children with **attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, or learning differences**, AI can be both a gift and an incredible risk.

The Benefits

ADHD: AI can help with structure, reminders, and task organization. If one knows which tools to use and how to give clear prompts, AI tools can break overwhelming projects into manageable pieces, provide timely reminders, and help children with ADHD organize their thoughts and materials in ways that accommodate their individual attention challenges.

Dyslexia/Dysgraphia: Voice-to-text and text-to-speech can improve accessibility. Children who struggle with reading or writing can use AI-powered voice tools to access grade-level content and express complex ideas without their learning differences creating an insurmountable barrier.

Autism: AI can model social scripts and explain tone or context.
AI can provide a low-pressure environment for autistic children to practice social scenarios, understand figurative language, ask repeated questions, or decode the unspoken social rules that often feel confusing or overwhelming.

The Risks

Overreliance on tools instead of building real skills. When AI becomes a permanent crutch rather than temporary scaffolding, neurodiverse children may never develop the coping strategies, compensatory skills, and self-advocacy abilities they'll need as teens or adults working at a job, dating people, building a family, dealing with life stressors, etc.

Emotional dependence or avoidance of human interaction. Neurodiverse children who already find social interaction challenging may retreat further into AI companions that feel safer and more predictable than messy, unpredictable human relationships—reinforcing isolation rather than building social confidence. This is an issue that every parent of neurodiverse kids will need to be aware of, and make a point to analyze thoroughly multiple times a year to decide what is best for their child.

Loss of self-regulation and persistence. If AI instantly solves every problem or eliminates all struggle, neurodiverse kids will miss opportunities to build frustration tolerance, develop problem-solving strategies, and experience the confidence that comes from working through challenges.

Parent Guidance

Use AI collaboratively with your child's IEP or 504 team at school. AI accommodations should be discussed and documented alongside other supports in your child's educational plan, ensuring teachers understand how and when AI tools are appropriate and how they complement other interventions.

Ask: "Is this helping access or replacing learning?" The right question isn't whether AI helps your child complete tasks, but whether it removes barriers to learning (access) or prevents them from developing essential skills they're capable of building (replacement). This is a question that every parent needs to revisit multiple times a year in order to give their child the best chance at optimal learning and development.

Watch for frustration when AI is unavailable–it may signal dependence. If your child experiences disproportionate anxiety, anger, or an inability to function well when AI tools aren't accessible, they may have become dependent rather than using AI as one tool among many. Decide with your partner (and child if they are old enough to discuss this with you) how you will respond in these situations. Maintain consistency and kindness each time.

Maintain gradual release: from joint use → guided use → independent use. It's challenging for any parent to know the exact time for these steps. Don't be afraid to roll back certain rules or permissions if your child reverts to unacceptable behavior or becomes dependent on AI tools. Start by using these tools together, then supervise as your child uses them with occasional guidance, and finally allow independent use only after they've demonstrated a clear understanding of when, how, and why to use AI appropriately.

RED FLAGS TO WATCH FOR

Academic

Sudden improvement in writing or homework quality If your child's essays suddenly sound more sophisticated or their homework seems beyond their usual ability level, AI may be doing the thinking instead of supporting their learning.

Panic when AI access is removed When children react with intense anxiety or anger at losing access to AI tools–rather than mild frustration–it suggests they've become dependent on AI to complete their work.

Inability to explain work If your child can't walk you through their reasoning, summarize their essay's argument, or solve a similar problem without looking at their screen, AI likely did too much of the work.

Emotional

Distress when AI sessions end When ending a conversation with an AI chatbot triggers emotional reactions similar to saying goodbye to a close friend, your child may be forming an unhealthy attachment.

Talking about AI as a "friend" If your child refers to an AI companion by name, shares that it "understands" them, or prefers chatting with AI over spending time with real people, the line between tool and relationship has blurred dangerously.

Isolation from peers When children increasingly choose time with AI over socializing with friends, participating in activities, or engaging with family, they're replacing human connection with artificial interaction.

Behavioral

Hiding screens or clearing chat history If your child quickly minimizes windows when you approach, angles their screen away from view, or regularly deletes AI conversations, they know they're using AI in ways they shouldn't.

Declining grades or motivation When reliance on AI initially boosts grades but then leads to falling performance, it's because your child never developed the skills those assignments were meant to teach—creating gaps that compound over time.

Spending hours "researching" without real progress If your child is at the computer for extended periods supposedly working but produces little actual output or understanding, they may be chatting with AI, going down rabbit holes, or letting AI do work they then can't explain.

If multiple red flags appear, significantly reduce your child's access to their phone, tablet, computer, and AI. Talk with your child about what you are observing in a calm, loving manner. Then seek guidance from your child's educators, school counselor, or a mental health professional you trust.

BUILD HEALTHY AI BOUNDARIES FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

AI can be a powerful tool in your child's learning and understanding of the digital world around them—but **only** when guided by human values. Children don't just need access to technology; they need wisdom to use it well. That wisdom begins with you—their most trusted teacher.

Parenting in the digital age can be daunting. But remember, you are the right parent for your children and you love them more than anyone or anything in this world. Keep trying, keep talking with your kids, and keep loving them. There's no perfect way to handle AI, phones, or any part of parenting. Just do your best! You've got this!

Have Ongoing Discussions (opening paragraph)

Make it normal to question: "Does that answer make sense? How could we check?"

Share your own AI experiences: "I used AI for this, but had to fix these parts..."

Discuss AI news together: Deepfakes, AI cheating, cool innovations

Your Parent Action Plan (Recap)

Talk early and often about AI.This discussion is as important as the "sex talks," "porn talks," or "do your best in school talks," etc.

Model digital balance and show your kids how to use screens purposefully.

Set clear boundaries and rules, and revisit them regularly.

Teach your children discernment—kids must question what AI says.

Stay curious too. Learn about the tools your children use.

Protect connection within your family. Family and community come first.

Revisit this topic multiple times per year. As the technology continues to quickly develop, it's essential that you continue to understand its power and its potential.

Create an AI Family User Agreement. (Or at least discuss each of the points in the one provided below.)

FAMILY AI USER AGREEMENT

Our family agrees to use AI chatbots responsibly, safely, and thoughtfully. We understand AI is a powerful tool that requires our judgment and oversight.

Safety & Privacy First

We agree to:

* ❇ Never share personal information with AI (full names, addresses, phone numbers, school names, passwords, photos)
* ❇ Never share family information (where parents work, financial details, travel plans, daily routines)
* ❇ Tell a parent immediately if AI says something uncomfortable, inappropriate, or confusing
* ❇ Use AI only on approved devices in common family areas (not privately in bedrooms)
* ❇ Remember that AI conversations may be stored and reviewed by companies

Parents agree to:

* ❇ Periodically review AI chat history with kids
* ❇ Use parental controls and age-appropriate AI tools
* ❇ Keep conversations open and judgment-free about AI experiences

Using AI for Schoolwork

Students agree to:

* ❇ Check school/teacher policies first - every teacher has different AI rules
* ❇ Always tell teachers when AI was used for assignments
* ❇ Use AI as a tutor, not a cheater:
  * ❇ ✅ OK: "Explain this math concept" or "Help me brainstorm ideas"
  * ❇ ❌ NOT OK: "Write my essay" or "Do my homework"

* Fact-check all AI information with at least 2 reliable sources
* Rewrite AI suggestions in my own words and add my own thinking
* Use AI to learn, not to skip learning

Age-Specific Guidelines:

Elementary (K-5):

* Parent must be present during AI use
* Focus on learning basic concepts, not getting answers
* Maximum 15-20 minutes per session

Middle School (6-8):

* Parent checks in regularly during AI use
* Can use independently for approved subjects
* Must show parent the conversation afterward

High School (9-12):

* More independence with regular parent check-ins
* Must document AI use for school projects
* Responsible for understanding school's academic integrity policies

Critical Thinking & Media Literacy

We agree to:

* Question AI answers: Ask "How do you know that's true?"
* Recognize AI limitations:
    * AI can sound confident but be completely wrong
    * AI has knowledge cutoff dates (doesn't know recent events)
    * AI can't understand context like humans do
    * AI reflects biases from its training data
* Spot synthetic content: Be alert for AI-generated images, videos, and text online
* Cross-check important information with trusted sources (libraries, encyclopedias, expert websites)
* Understand the difference between AI and human relationships, expertise and judgment

Family practice:

* Monthly "AI Reality Check" - share one thing AI got wrong or needed verification
* Discuss AI news and developments together as a family

Family AI User Agreement

Emotional & Social Boundaries

We agree to:

* ✳ Talk to real people about feelings - AI is not a therapist, counselor, or friend
* ✳ Seek human help for important decisions (health, relationships, problems)
* ✳ Balance AI time with real-world activities (sports, hobbies, face-to-face friends)
* ✳ Recognize when AI feels too much like a companion and take a break
* ✳ Never use AI to replace human connection with family and friends

Appropriate Use Guidelines

AI should be used for:

* ✳ ✅ Learning and understanding difficult concepts
* ✳ ✅ Brainstorming and organizing ideas
* ✳ ✅ Practicing skills (language, coding, etc.)
* ✳ ✅ Exploring interests and curiosity
* ✳ ✅ Getting multiple perspectives on topics

AI should NOT be used for:

* ✳ ❌ Completing assignments meant to assess your learning
* ✳ ❌ Avoiding effort or thinking
* ✳ ❌ Getting advice on serious personal/health issues
* ✳ ❌ Making important decisions without human input
* ✳ ❌ Anything that violates school honor codes
* ✳ ❌ Creating content to deceive or mislead others

Consequences & Accountability

If guidelines are broken:

First time: Family conversation about what happened and why it matters

Second time: Loss of independent AI access for _____ (time period)

Serious violations: (cheating, sharing personal info, inappropriate content)

* ✳ Immediate loss of AI privileges
* ✳ Parents inform school if needed
* ✳ Restore privileges only when trust is rebuilt

Family Commitments

Parents commit to:

* ✳ Model responsible AI use
* ✳ Stay educated about AI developments
* ✳ Keep communication open and non-judgmental
* ✳ Review this agreement regularly (at least twice yearly)
* ✳ Adjust rules as kids mature and AI evolves

Kids commit to:

* ✳ Follow these guidelines even when not supervised
* ✳ Ask questions when unsure
* ✳ Be honest about AI use
* ✳ Help younger siblings learn responsible AI use

Signatures

We have read and discussed this agreement together as a family.

Parent(s):

Date: _____

Date: _____

Child(ren):

Date: _____

Date: _____

Date: _____

Date: _____

Review dates: _____

Next review: _____

Notes/adjustments needed: _____

_____

_____

Remember: This agreement exists because we care about each other and want our family to use technology in ways that help us grow, learn, and stay safe.

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