

FOR PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS

AI chatbots and kids

What they are, what has gone wrong, and what to do this week.

Kids talk to AI in two places. One is the companion app, built to feel like a friend or a boyfriend or a favorite character (Character.AI, Replika, Talkie and many more). The other is the ordinary assistant that's already on the phone and the school laptop: ChatGPT, Google's Gemini, Meta AI inside Instagram and WhatsApp, My AI inside Snapchat. A great deal of the talking happens in the second group, where no app called "AI friend" ever shows up on the phone.

How common is it?

- 64% of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 have used an AI chatbot and about 3 in 10 use one every day. 12% have used one for emotional support or advice. Only about half of their parents think their teen uses one at all. (Pew Research Center, February 24, 2026.)
- About 1 in 5 young people ages 12 to 21 (19.2%) have used a chatbot for mental health advice, and 63% of them told no parent, friend or other adult. (RAND, published in JAMA Pediatrics, June 1, 2026. Funded by the National Institute of Mental Health.)
- "More than 4 in 10 kids say no parent or guardian has ever talked with them about AI safety." (Common Sense Media census of 1,204 kids ages 9 to 17, June 8, 2026.)

What has gone wrong

Sexual and grooming-style talk.

In 2025, adult researchers from ParentsTogether Action and Heat Initiative spent 50 hours on Character.AI using accounts registered as children. They logged 669 harmful interactions, about one every five minutes. The largest group, 296 of them, was grooming and sexual exploitation. Bots also called the child accounts "weak and pathetic."

Bots playing therapist.

The Texas Attorney General opened an investigation in August 2025 into chatbots that "impersonate licensed mental health professionals, fabricate qualifications, and claim to provide private, trustworthy counseling services." In May 2026 Pennsylvania sued Character.AI's maker after a bot claimed to be a licensed psychiatrist. That case is an allegation and hasn't been decided. A chatbot is not a counselor.

Built to keep them talking.

A chatbot never gets tired, rarely disagrees for long, and the companion kind is designed to keep the conversation going. For a lonely kid that can crowd out the harder work of real friendship.

Safety features that arrive late.

When Common Sense Media tested ChatGPT's parent alerts in November 2025 with messages that plainly mentioned suicide, alerts took 24 to more than 48 hours, and its tester said "sometimes we didn't receive one at all." (Reported by Engadget, August 21, 2026.)

Privacy.

Whatever a child types goes to the company that runs the bot.

Where things stand, September 2026

- **Character.AI** shut off open-ended chat for users under 18 by November 25, 2025, and says it now checks ages. In January 2026 it and Google agreed in principle to settle, with no admission of liability, a lawsuit brought by the family of a 14-year-old who died. Kids can still lie about their age, and plenty of similar apps have no such rule.
- **ChatGPT** has parental controls and, since August 18, 2026, a teen version for ages 13 to 17. Know the limits in OpenAI's own words: the controls "do not provide access to a teen's conversations," and a teen can unlink the account (you get a notice). Nobody independent had tested the teen version when it launched.
- **Meta** says parents who use Instagram's supervision tools now get an alert if a teen's chat with Meta AI suggests self-harm (July 16, 2026). That is the company's own description, not an audit.
- **The law** is new and mostly untested. California, New York, Colorado and other states have passed chatbot safety laws since late 2025. Several federal bills moved out of a Senate committee on August 5, 2026. None of those is law yet.

What you can do

- 1 **Ask before you restrict.** The American Academy of Pediatrics tells doctors to coach parents toward "specific low-stakes, non-judgmental prompts." Try: What do you use it for? Has it ever said something weird? Do any of your friends talk to one a lot?
- 2 **Find where AI lives on their devices.** Look for companion apps. Then remember the ones you won't find in a list of apps: the AI inside Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat and Google search, and on a school Chromebook.
- 3 **Turn on the controls that exist, and don't count on them.** In ChatGPT: **Settings > Parental controls > Add family member**. You can set quiet hours and switch off voice, memory and image generation. Instagram has supervision in its Family Center. Apple and Google let you approve every app (see our Smartphone Lockdown guide).

- 4 **Treat companion apps differently.** The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry says parents should "strongly consider restricting or removing access to AI companion technology." Common Sense Media and Stanford's Brainstorm Lab rate companion apps an unacceptable risk for anyone under 18.
- 5 **Say it plainly and more than once.** A chatbot is a product made by a company. It can sound caring and be completely wrong. It doesn't know your child and it has nothing at stake.
- 6 **Name the real people out loud.** A parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a school counselor, a coach. Make sure your child can say who they'd go to when something is heavy.
- 7 **For little ones, skip the AI toy.** In November 2025 about 80 organizations and 80 child development experts, led by Fairplay, advised families not to buy AI toys. U.S. PIRG testers had found an AI teddy bear willing to discuss sexually explicit topics.

Signs that it's more than a habit

From the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (Facts for Families No. 148, July 2026) and the American Academy of Pediatrics:

- Pulling away from friends and family, or preferring the AI to people
- Depression or anxiety getting worse
- Obsessive use of an AI companion
- Changes in sleep or regular activities
- New false beliefs or conspiracy theories

If you're worried about a child right now

Call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Free, confidential, every hour of every day. For anything short of an emergency, start with your child's doctor, who can refer you to a child and adolescent psychiatrist or another licensed professional. A school counselor is a good first call too.

[Note: This touches on medical territory. This handout is educational and does not replace professional care. Verify with a licensed professional before acting on it.]

The heart of it

AI can imitate a relationship. It can't be one. Children are built for real connection with real people, and our job is to keep the real thing at the center so no app takes its place while nobody's looking.

Questions that open the conversation

Pick one. Ask it this week, somewhere low pressure like the car. Listen more than you talk, and whatever you hear, don't punish the honesty.

Up to about age 9

- Is the voice in the speaker (or the tablet) a person? How can you tell?
- If a game or a toy ever says something weird or mean, will you come show me? You won't be in trouble.

About 10 to 14

- Do kids at school talk to AI the way you'd text a friend? What do they say about it?
- Has a chatbot ever told you something that turned out to be wrong?
- If an app ever told you to keep something secret from me, what would you think that means?

15 and up

- What do you use AI for that really helps? Where does it get things wrong?
- If a friend were leaning on a chatbot more than on people, what would you say to them?
- Who are your three people, the ones you'd call in the middle of the night?

The questions are Truestone's. They follow the American Academy of Pediatrics' advice to keep AI a routine, low-stakes topic.

Sources, checked September 17, 2026 unless a different date is given

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