

Understanding AI and chatbots: a guide for parents and carers

Created in partnership with First News

Plus top tips from NSPCC on how to have healthy
conversations about AI chatbots with your child



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Helping children understand what AI can – and importantly, what it can't – do is one of the most powerful ways adults can support them to use these tools thoughtfully, responsibly and safely.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and chatbots are an increasingly visible part of our everyday lives. From search engines to gaming sites and educational apps to streaming services, children – and adults – regularly interact with this kind of technology, sometimes without even realising it.

When used in the right way, AI can be incredibly useful. For example, it is great at helping experts analyse vast quantities of data and speeding up difficult tasks, which means it is already contributing to important advances in scientific and medical fields.

'...chatbots have the potential to negatively impact the emotional and social development of the youngest users of their services.'

However, AI can get things wrong, depending on the information it's been trained on. This means it can sometimes give answers that are incorrect or biased, which is why it's always important to check the information before it's used.

AI chatbots are where many of these issues can become most immediate for children. With many designed without children's safety in mind, chatbots have the potential to

negatively impact the emotional and social development of the youngest users of their services. Created to sound as human as possible, they can be extremely persuasive – giving encouraging responses to questions they are asked and not offering sufficient challenge, or alternative viewpoints.

Unlike the responses of friends, family or professionals.

To help children build their media literacy skills and create healthy digital habits, Vodafone and the children's newspaper, First News have created a suite of educational materials focused on using AI and chatbots in a safe and responsible way – schools can find them at firstnews.co.uk/vodafone. These resources are part of Vodafone's Breakfast Club campaign, featuring limited edition chatbot cereal boxes that help explain the 'ingredients' of AI chatbots – what they're good for and what they're 'free from'.

This guide is designed to support similar conversations at home, helping parents and carers feel confident discussing what AI tools can and can't do and above all, where human judgement, curiosity and empathy make all the difference. It aims to help empower children and young people to take charge of when and how they use the technology, understanding both its strengths and its limitations.



What are AI chatbots?

AI chatbots are computer programmes that can answer questions or hold conversations.

They work by:

- analysing vast amounts of data
- spotting patterns (such as which words, phrases, sounds and images are most often found together)
- using those patterns to predict the most likely 'best' response to whatever prompt they are given

They don't "know" things like humans do, and they don't think or feel, even though they can sound friendly, confident, reassuring and "human-like". It can be tempting to think of them as a friend – one that is always there and never lets us down or wants us to feel bad – but they cannot replace real friendships or connections with people.



Discuss with your child

Try asking your child: What do you think are important qualities in a friend?

Once your child has come up with some ideas, ask if good friends:

- ? Always tell us what we want to hear?
- ? Never disagree with us?
- ? Are available to us 24/7?

This helps to explain why AI chatbots aren't a replacement for friends, family or trusted adults. Although they can sound supportive, they are software designed to respond in a certain way.

Share the following questions with your child and discuss how an encouraging, reassuring answer might not be what is best in each case:

- ? Should I wear my pyjamas to school tomorrow?
- ? Is this a good answer for my homework?
- ? Shall I have ice cream for breakfast?



It can be helpful (and fun!) to role play responding to these questions as a chatbot, with your child asking follow-up questions that are increasingly silly e.g., "Should I put ketchup on my ice cream too?"



Understanding the ingredients of AI chatbots

We check food labels because we want to know what we're putting into our bodies, how we can keep healthy, and to make sure what we're eating is safe. It can help to think about the 'ingredients' of the technological tools we use, like AI – what's inside – to understand what it's designed for, and what it isn't.

Try asking your child what 'ingredients' they think would make up an AI chatbot, using examples like algorithms, machine learning and human-inspired language – essentially computer-powered software and data.

As an added extra, you could expand on the food labelling analogy and talk about what AI chatbots 'may contain', including bias, incorrect responses and other inaccuracies.

100% software



Source of information*

*Not a substitute for friends or family.

✓ Free from empathy

✓ Zero challenge

✓ Unlimited servings



Ingredients harvested from across the web



Artificially generated



Best when served with human judgement

Ingredients:[†] Large language models (LLMs), generative AI systems, machine learning, training data, algorithms, pattern recognition, prompts, application programming interfaces (APIs), software development kits (SDKs), testing processes, predictive models, and human-inspired language. **May contain: BIAS, INCORRECT RESPONSES, OUTDATED INFORMATION and OTHER INACCURACIES.**

[†] Not an exhaustive list





If the main ingredients of AI chatbots are software and data, what are they 'free from'?

AI chatbots are 'free from':

Empathy: Chatbots don't understand how someone feels or why. They can recognise emotional language and use data and pattern recognition to respond politely, but they don't feel concern, care or compassion in the way a human does.

Emotion: Chatbots don't experience happiness, sadness, worry or excitement. Any emotional language they use is generated to sound appropriate, not because they feel it.

Challenge: Chatbots are designed to be agreeable. They don't often question, push back or tell someone something they might not want to hear, even when that challenge could be helpful or necessary.

Accountability: Chatbots are not responsible for the advice they give. They can't reflect, apologise, learn from consequences or be held to account in the way people can.

These things only come from real human relationships.

Remember: healthy digital habits matter just as much with AI as with any other technology or online platform.

Regularly remind your child that it's important to:

- Check where information comes from
- Look at multiple sources, not just one AI-generated answer
- Think critically and form our own conclusions
- Remember that real support and connection comes from real people, like friends, family and trusted adults who care about us



To see what parental controls are available for AI chatbot platforms visit [Digital Parenting Pro.](#)



Conversation starters: things to talk about with your child

What do you think AI is good at?



How is talking to a chatbot different from talking with a friend?



What ingredients make up an AI chatbot, what are they 'free from', and why does that matter?

If you had a tricky question, who would you ask about it first, and why?



NSPCC's ten top tips to help parents talk to their children about AI chatbot use:

NSPCC

1 Start with curiosity, not concern

Begin conversations by asking your child which AI tools they're using and what they find helpful or interesting about them, while sharing how you may use the tech too. This creates an open dialogue rather than making them feel like they're in trouble, and helps you both understand each other's experiences.

2 Talk about where AI is being used

Have open conversations with your child about where you are both encountering AI tools and content online. This is an opportunity to discuss and learn about the risks and benefits you're both experiencing, from homework help to creative projects and social interactions.

3 Explain that AI chatbots don't "know" them

Talk together about how it isn't possible to have a real connection with an AI chatbot, even if conversations feel personal or friendly. These tools don't have genuine emotions and shouldn't replace human connection with friends, family or trusted adults.

4 Remind them to check sources and verify information

AI chatbots can be helpful for quick answers, but it's important to understand that AI can also make mistakes. Share how it's important to verify important information from trusted sources, especially for schoolwork or health-related questions. Check that sources are listed and clickable and, if not, suggest verifying elsewhere.

5 Discuss privacy and what not to share

Personal information like full names, addresses, school names, phone numbers or photos should never be shared with AI chatbots. Explain that information they share might be stored or used to train AI systems, and treat any conversations like talking in a public space.



NSPCC's ten top tips to help parents talk to their children about AI chatbot use:

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6 Remind young people that not everything they see online is real

It's important to remind children that AI can generate realistic-looking images, videos and text that aren't real. Discuss common indicators like overly "perfect" appearances, unusual body parts or movements, or things that don't look quite "true to life" – though emphasise these aren't always obvious. Also, try to stress the importance of not using AI to create or share images, videos or messages that could hurt, embarrass or upset someone else.

7 Signpost to safe, age-appropriate sources

Make sure your child knows about reliable, child-friendly resources for information and support, such as [childline.org.uk](https://www.childline.org.uk). When they need advice on sensitive topics like health, relationships or wellbeing, these trusted sources are better than AI chatbots.

8 Set boundaries around usage

Work together to establish healthy boundaries about when and how AI chatbots should be used. This might include time limits, off-limits topics or rules about using AI for homework, like using it to help understand concepts rather than to complete assignments.

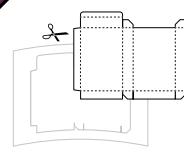
9 Model critical thinking

When you encounter AI-generated content together, practice analysing it critically. Ask questions like: "Does this seem accurate?", "Where might this information come from?" and "How could we verify this?". This builds essential digital literacy skills.

10 Make sure they know where to go for help

Ensure your child knows they can talk to you or another trusted adult, like a teacher, if anything worries them online or offline. They can also contact Childline 24/7 on **0800 11 11** or by visiting [childline.org.uk](https://www.childline.org.uk) for confidential support about anything troubling them.







Are you an AI whizz? Let's find out

Hidden in the puzzle are words that help explain how AI chatbots work.

See how many you can find and learn something new along the way.

Need a helping hand? Try teaming up with another trusted human.



DATA – Any information that has been collected for analysis or reference

ALGORITHMS – A set of rules that a computer follows to complete a task

AUTOMATION – Use of software, such as AI, to perform tasks with little or no human involvement

MACHINE LEARNING – When software learns how to do a task on its own, and gets better at it, by using algorithms and data

CHATBOT – Software that has been designed to mimic human conversation

LLMs – Large Language Models are AI

systems that can generate human-like language and responses as they've been trained on large amounts of data

GENERATIVE AI – An AI system that generates text, images, audio or video, in response to user prompts, by using an LLM

BIAS – The ability of AI systems to produce unfair results due to the data they are trained on

HALLUCINATIONS – When an AI generates incorrect or made-up information that sounds believable

ETHICS – Principles that guide the design and use of AI to ensure it's fair.

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Further support

VodafoneThree believes that being online is a vital part of everyday life. For 16 years, Vodafone has helped families enjoy safe and happy digital experiences, providing tools, guidance and resources with partners including the NSPCC.

Visit vodafone.co.uk/digitalparenting to access these resources, as well as Digital Parenting Pro, one of the UK's largest parental controls and safety settings toolkits, created in partnership with Digital Awareness UK, with new guidance on AI chatbots and available controls.

Three's Discovery team also delivers online safety assemblies and lessons in schools nationwide. If you'd like to explore what they can offer your child's school, please email discovery@three.co.uk

