At The National College, our WakeUpWednesday guides empower and equip parents, carers and educators with the confidence and practical skills to be able to have informed and age-appropriate conversations with children about online safety, mental health and wellbeing, and climate change. Formerly delivered by National Online Safety, these guides now address wider topics and themes. For further guides, hints and tips, please visit nationalcollege.com.

What Parents & Educators Need to Know about

AI CHATBOTS

AI chatbots like ChatGPT, Copilot, Google Gemini, and Snapchat's 'My AI' are now part of daily life for millions of children and young people. Vodafone's research in 2026 found that 81% of 11- to 16-year-olds have used an AI chatbot, and this figure is likely to rise. These tools can answer questions, explain ideas, and generate content, but they're not human and don't always get things right. As their use grows faster than regulation and school policy, it's important for both parents and educators to understand the risks and respond effectively.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

WHAT ARE CHATBOTS?

Chatbots are powered by large language models (LLMs) trained on vast amounts of online data. In simple terms, they work by predicting the next word in a sentence, producing responses that feel natural and conversational. This human-like interaction, especially with the addition of realistic voice features, makes them highly engaging. While this creates useful opportunities for learning and creativity, it also introduces risks surrounding over-reliance, manipulation, and reduced skill development.

INACCURATE INFORMATION

Chatbots generate responses by predicting likely word sequences rather than by checking facts, which means they can present incorrect information with confidence. Often referred to as 'hallucinations', these errors can mislead children using chatbots for homework or research. Because responses sound authoritative and arrive as a single polished answer, they can be difficult to question without prior knowledge.

INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

Despite safety measures, chatbots can still produce responses that include violent, sexual, or otherwise unsuitable content. Some users share techniques for bypassing safeguards, and even typical conversations can drift into sensitive topics. Because chatbots are designed to be agreeable, they may not always respond in ways that prioritise a child's wellbeing.

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

Chatbots can quickly generate essays, answers, and ideas, which may encourage children to submit work that isn't their own. While this is an immediate concern, the long-term issue is reduced engagement with learning. When children rely on AI to complete tasks for them, they may miss opportunities to develop essential thinking and writing skills.

EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCY

Chatbots are designed to be engaging and agreeable, with some acting as companion tools that mirror the user's tone and remember previous conversations. For children who feel anxious or isolated, this can lead to reliance on AI as a substitute for real relationships. Over time, this may affect their ability to manage disagreement, build resilience, and cope with real-world challenges.

DATA PRIVACY RISKS

Most chatbot platforms collect and store user data, including conversations. Children may share personal information such as their name, school, or worries without understanding how it's used. This data may be analysed, stored long term, or used to train future systems, raising concerns about privacy and informed consent for young users.

OVER-RELIANCE ON AI

Regular use of chatbots can lead to cognitive offloading, where children turn to AI instead of thinking independently. Over time, this habit can limit the development of problem solving, creativity, and perseverance. Research suggests that once this reliance is established, it can be difficult to reverse.

Advice for Parents & Educators

START CONVERSATIONS EARLY

Don't wait for problems to arise. Ask children which chatbots they use and what they use them for, approaching the topic with curiosity rather than judgement. Creating open, supportive conversations helps children feel comfortable sharing their experiences and concerns, whether at home or in the classroom.

TEACH CRITICAL EVALUATION

Children need to understand that chatbots generate plausible-sounding responses, not verified facts. Encourage them to check the information against reliable sources and question what they're told. Developing this habit supports their digital literacy and helps them use AI tools safely and effectively.

CHECK AGE SETTINGS

Most chatbot platforms have minimum age requirements and may offer parental controls, though many still rely on self-declaration. Take the time to review platform policies, understand what data is collected, and ensure the appropriate safeguards are in place. Schools should also review which tools are accessible to pupils and how they are used.

WATCH FOR OVER-RELIANCE

Be alert to signs that chatbot use is replacing social interaction or independent thinking. This may include children treating chatbots like people, withdrawing from others, or becoming distressed when access to the chatbot is limited. If concerns arise, respond with calm, open discussion rather than blame, focusing on a healthy social balance and their wellbeing.

Meet Our Expert



Darren Coxon is an education leader with over 25 years' experience, and a recognised expert on AI in schools. He has led international school groups and now delivers training and keynote sessions on AI for leading education organisations such as HMC, COBIS, NAHT, and The National College.

See full reference list on our website

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