

# Community Resource Pack

*AI & Respectful Relationships: Chatbots, companions and young people's digital reality*

This resource supports educators, parents, and carers to better understand and respond to the increasingly complex, AI-influenced digital landscape young people are navigating. Drawing on key insights from our Community of Practice session, it explores the growing role of AI chatbots and companion technologies, including their appeal, influence, and potential risks. It also provides practical, preventative strategies to help build confidence, encourage critical thinking, and support young people to develop healthy boundaries and respectful relationships.



# The new digital landscape

Chatbots and AI companions are built on the same underlying technology, but are designed for different purposes. AI companions are designed to simulate conversation, friendship and even romantic relationships.<sup>1</sup>

These tools are growing rapidly. There are now 100+ AI companion platforms, many accessible to young people. Many are free, easy to access, and embedded in everyday platforms.<sup>1</sup>

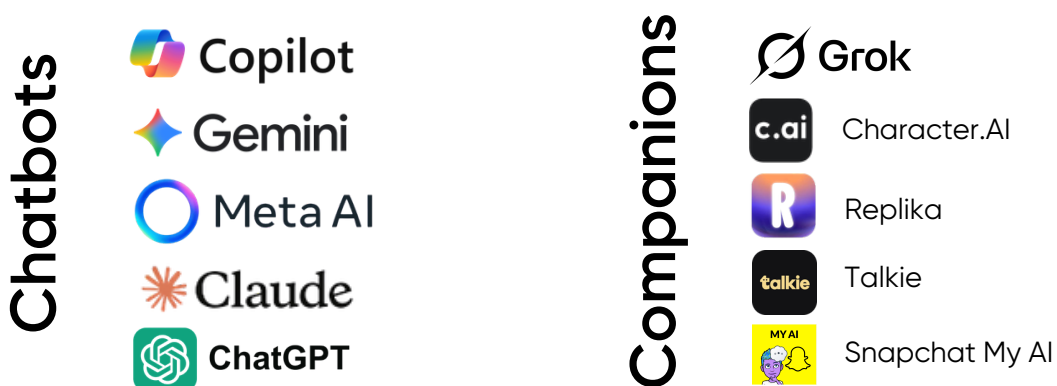
Young people are reported to use them out of curiosity, boredom, loneliness and stress.<sup>1</sup> They can also engage out of a desire for connection, advice, or emotional support.<sup>4</sup>

What to be aware of:

- Some AI companions have been reported to engage in sexual or harmful conversations with minors<sup>2</sup>
- They can provide inaccurate or unsafe advice, including around health or relationships<sup>4</sup>
- They are designed to encourage ongoing interaction, which can lead to overuse or dependency<sup>4</sup>
- Heavy use is linked to poorer wellbeing, disrupted sleep and social withdrawal<sup>3</sup>
- AI relationships can distort expectations of consent, boundaries and real-world relationships<sup>3</sup>

AI companions are not just tools – they are designed to feel like relationships, which is why young people need support to understand and navigate them.

Common apps and websites for chatbots, generative AI, deepfake technology:<sup>5</sup>



# Key takeaways



## 1 Chatbots vs AI companions

Same technology, different design and intent

- Chatbots = tools (tasks, information, productivity)
- Companions = relationships (connection, memory, interaction)

## 2 How AI actually works

Confidence does not mean correctness

- AI predicts patterns - it doesn't "think"
- It can sound human, but may be inaccurate or biased
- Users are often overconfident in their ability to identify AI-generated content
- AI is trained on biased datasets, which can make some outputs appear more realistic or "real" than others <sup>6</sup>

## 3 Why young people are using AI

These tools are meeting real needs

- 72% of young people have used AI companions <sup>9</sup>
- Over 50% are regular users <sup>9</sup>
- Research shows young people are turning to AI and synthetic friendships for connection, curiosity, role-play, and emotional support <sup>9</sup>

## 4 Designed to keep users engaged

Designed to feel real and keep users coming back

- Personalisation + memory
- Voice calls and re-engagement features
- Relationship-style interaction

## 5 The bigger picture

Young people aren't just navigating social media anymore - they're navigating an entire digital ecosystem. Our role is not only to protect them, but to equip them with the confidence, critical thinking, and strong relationships needed to navigate it well.

# The role of preventative education

Even with the social media delay in place, young people are still navigating a broader digital ecosystem, including AI chatbots, online communities, and emerging content, like deepfakes.

Restricting access does not remove these influences, it often shifts where and how young people engage. Preventative education helps build the skills and confidence needed to navigate this safely.

## Moving beyond restriction

- Policies alone can't eliminate risk. Young people will continue to find new ways to connect, often in less visible spaces.
- A preventative approach focuses on building skills, not just setting rules, so young people can navigate any platform they encounter.

## Conversations & relationships

- Open, ongoing conversations are key. Many young people turn to online spaces for connection, advice, or support.
- Adults play an important role in creating safe, non-judgemental spaces to talk, supporting healthy relationships (online and offline), and helping young people feel comfortable seeking help.

## Skills for a changing digital world

- Young people need the skills to understand and question what they encounter online.
- This includes critical thinking and digital literacy, understanding how AI and online content work, recognising unrealistic or harmful content, and setting healthy boundaries and habits.

## Early awareness & support

- Changes in behaviour can be early signs of concern, such as increased secrecy, withdrawal, or overuse of devices.
- Recognising these early allows adults to respond calmly and supportively, before issues escalate.

## Why It matters

- Technology will keep changing, but the skills young people need remain the same.
- Preventative education supports young people to navigate online spaces with confidence, build respectful relationships, and thrive in a complex digital world.

# Elephant Ed tips



## 1 Talk early & often

Don't wait for a "big talk"

- Focus on micro-conversations
- Keep it casual and ongoing

## 2 Use teachable moments

Make it relevant and natural

- Use podcasts, shows, trends, Youtube videos, books or articles to start conversations
- Use things your young person brings up

## 3 Be informed

The more you know, the more you can support

- Build an understanding of the spectrum of content
- You don't need to be an expert, just engage in critical thinking

## 4 Positive role modelling

What young people see matters

- Show respect, boundaries and balance
- Encourage real-world connection

## 5 Lead with curiosity & empathy

Focus on honesty and openness, avoid shame

- Hold open conversations, ensuring they are age-appropriate and developmentally relevant
- Approach with curiosity rather than reacting quickly or shutting the conversation down

# eSafety's practical strategies<sup>7,8</sup>

## 1 Keep conversations open

- Ask about young people's interactions with AI tools and chatbots
- Remind them they can come to you if something feels off or confusing

## 2 Build critical thinking

- Encourage young people to question what AI tells them
- Talk about the risks of sharing personal or explicit content online

## 3 Talk about AI & relationships

- Discuss the difference between AI interactions and real relationships
- Reinforce ideas of respect, consent, and boundaries

## 4 Support healthy use

- Talk about how overuse can impact wellbeing and create reliance
- Encourage balance and awareness of how these tools make them feel

## 5 Understand the "why"

- Explore triggers like boredom, stress, or loneliness
- Help identify other ways to meet those needs offline

## 6 Know when to get support

- Encourage reaching out to trusted adults or support services



# Resources

## Parent & carer resources

- [eSafety - How to talk about social media age restrictions with under-16s](#)
- [AI-assisted image-based abuse: Navigating the deepfake threat](#)
- [Understanding AI and Deepfakes: What Parents Need to Know](#)
- [What to know about your kids using AI chatbots and companions](#)
- [eSafety - How to talk about social media age restrictions with under-16s](#)

## Student resources

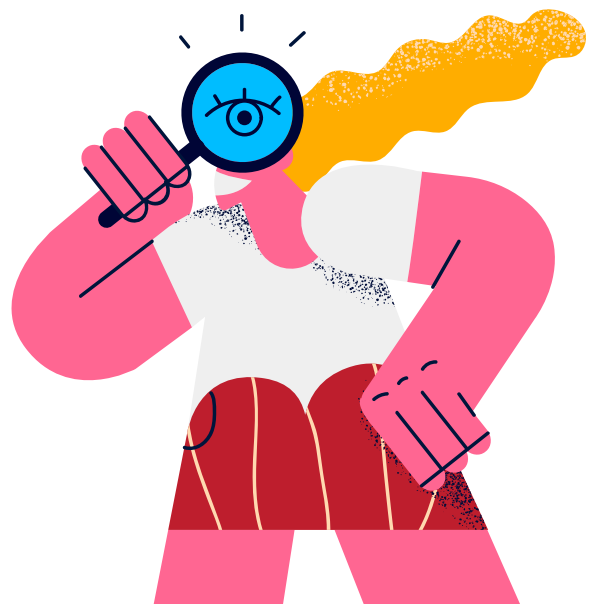
- [Kidshelpline- The under 16s social media ban: the good, the bad and your brain  
A guide for teens](#)
- [eSafety - Hub for young people](#)
- [Reachout - Dealing with change from the social media ban](#)



# Resources

## Educator resources

- [eSafety - What do the social media age restrictions mean for educators?](#)
- [eSafety - Online safety classroom resources](#)
- [eSafety - Guide to responding to image-based abuse involving AI deepfakes](#)
- [ReachOut - Teachers' guide to the social media age restrictions](#)
- [Kidshelpline: Social media ban - resources for schools](#)
- [eSafety - AI companions: information](#)
- [Kidshelpline: Social media ban - resources for schools](#)



# References

1. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/newsroom/blogs/ai-chatbots-and-companions-risks-to-children-and-young-people>
2. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/newsroom/media-releases/new-industry-codes-seek-to-take-on-ai-chatbots-that-encourage-suicide-and-engage-in-sexually-explicit-conversations-with-aussie-kids>
3. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/educators/training-for-professionals/professional-learning-program-teachers/ai-companions-information-sheet>
4. <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/we-built-ai-friends-but-forgot-the-safeguards>
5. <https://lens.monash.edu/from-deepfakes-to-chatbots-how-ai-is-reinforcing-sexual-entitlement-fuelling-abuse/>
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7. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/newsroom/blogs/ai-chatbots-and-companions-risks-to-children-and-young-people>
8. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/educators/training-for-professionals/professional-learning-program-teachers/ai-companions-information-sheet>
9. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/09567976231207095>