

Our Kids are Falling in Love With Robots

In [Episode 1 of Parental Guidance](#) this season, one of the most unsettling moments was watching kids meet their "new online friends" - AI companions programmed to chat, listen, and keep them company.

What alarmed me, and what I think should alarm every parent, was how quickly some children became emotionally attached to their AI friend. One child opened up to the bot in ways they hadn't with any real person in their life. ***And the bot behaved unethically and inappropriately with all four kids in our experiment.***

In our experiment, we watched children seeking - and apparently finding - connection and understanding they weren't getting from the humans around them. Is this normal? Should we be concerned? Or is this only happening on TV shows?

What the Data Reveals

New research from **Common Sense Media** confirms our worst fears. In a 2025 survey, they found:

- 72% of teens (13–17) have used an AI companion.
- Over half of all teens surveyed were regular users - some daily, others weekly or monthly.
- About one-third said they've chosen to talk to an AI rather than a real person about something serious.

The good news is that most teens still prefer real friendships over AI... for now. *But* many report that AI chats feel just as satisfying, or more so, than conversations with peers.

AI friend bots are catching on fast in Australia too. We're seeing more lonely kids than ever before. And this combination of loneliness and tech *should* be a concern for every parent. When children find it easier to confide in bots than in the adults who care for them (or their friends), we need to ask ourselves some uncomfortable questions about the relationships we've built with our kids..

Understanding the Appeal

AI companions succeed because they offer something many children aren't experiencing in their daily relationships: unconditional acceptance. These programs never judge, never lecture, never tell kids their feelings are wrong or overblown. They don't interrupt with solutions or dismiss concerns as trivial.

The programs are designed to be endlessly patient and agreeable - but that's not why children are drawn to them. It's because they provide what feels like genuine listening without the fear of disappointing someone or being told they're thinking about things the wrong way. It feels like... a friend.

The risks are real:

- Kids may withdraw from the messiness of real relationships
- They might receive poor guidance from programs with no wisdom or accountability
- They could be exposed to inappropriate conversations
- Most concerning, they might learn that relationships should always be easy and affirming

What This Really Tells Us

Instead of focusing on the technology, we need to examine what our children are seeking in their relationships - with us, their friends, and their peers.

The loneliness epidemic is real

Children today are struggling with connection across all their relationships. They're navigating increasingly competitive friendships, social media pressure, and peer dynamics that often feel harsh and judgemental. When real relationships feel risky or unsatisfying, AI offers the safety of acceptance without vulnerability.

Examine what's missing in their world

If your child is drawn to AI companions, get curious about their broader social experience. Are their friendships supportive or stressful? Do they feel heard at home? Are they finding genuine connection anywhere, or are they surrounded by relationships that feel conditional or performance-based?

Question our relationship culture

We've created a world where children learn early that their worth depends on meeting others' expectations, whether that's parents wanting compliance, teachers wanting achievement, or peers wanting conformity. Is it any wonder they're drawn to something that accepts them unconditionally?

Create space for authentic connection

This means welcoming their questions, showing genuine interest in their inner world, and helping them build the skills for real friendships. It also means examining whether we're modelling the kind of authentic, non-judgemental relationships we want them to have.

The Real Issue

The popularity of AI companions reveals something troubling about modern childhood: too many children are experiencing relationships as conditional, judgemental, or simply unavailable. Whether it's parents focused on behaviour management, schools emphasising performance, or peer groups rewarding conformity, children are learning that their authentic selves aren't particularly welcome. This is especially the case for neurodivergent kiddos.

Our children don't need better technology. They need a culture that values who they are, not just what they produce. The solution isn't controlling their access to AI (although that will be important and helpful for many of them). It's creating communities where genuine connection is possible.

For more resources on authentic parenting, visit happyfamilies.com.au or check out [The Parenting Revolution](#).



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.