

SAFE and SMART

Keeping Children Safe Online

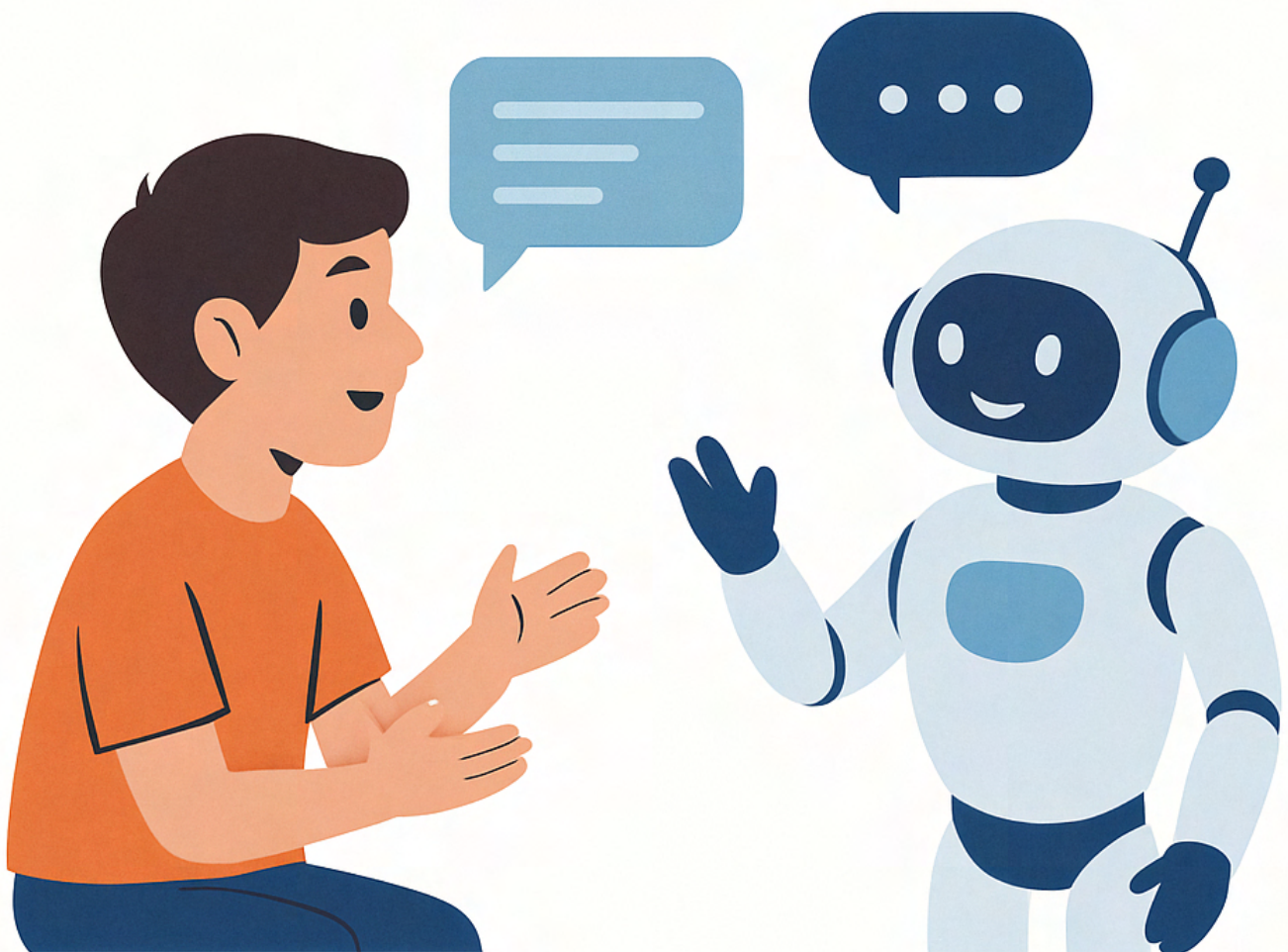
May 2025

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What are: COMPANION CHATBOTS

In early May 2025 Google announced that it is making Google Gemini, its AI Chatbot, available to users under the age of 13. This was an unusual, unexpected announcement, most GenAI websites and applications have a minimum age requirement, commonly 13 or 18, dependent on what the AI can be used for. But not only is Gemini available to under 13's, it's turned on by default.

We live in a rapidly changing digital world, particularly in this new age of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI). In the December 2024 version of this newsletter we wrote about Artificial Intelligence Chatbots, but this is an area that's evolving quite quickly as we can see by the announcement from Google.

Not only that, chatbots with a specific function are also developing quickly, most notably so-called 'Companion Chatbots'. Examples of these would be chatbots such as Replika, Snapchat My AI, Character AI and many others.

So let's explore companion chatbots a little more: what are they, what are the potential positives and negatives and what's the advice?

But before we do that, just a quick note. Chatbots like Gemini, ChatGPT and others are not specifically 'companion' chatbots. I've mentioned Gemini here because:

1. It's now available to all ages (with stipulations which I'll mention towards the end of this article).
2. Some children will use Gemini as a companion chatbot because of its availability.

What are Companion Chatbots?

AI companion chatbots are computer programs designed to simulate real, human-like conversations. Unlike typical customer service bots that help answer queries or provide information, these chatbots aim to create more meaningful, personal interactions with the ability to understand, respond, and even initiate chats on a range of topics. Many chatbots are accessible through popular apps and platforms and can engage users in playful, supportive, or conversational interactions. Other companion chatbots are built for a specific purpose, such as over-18 flirtatious or sexualised conversations.

Can these chatbots be helpful?

Yes, when carefully used and monitored they can provide things such as:

- **Emotional support:** A judgement-free zone for children and young people to discuss things they might not be comfortable discussing with others.
- **Social skills:** Opportunities for those who may be shy, socially anxious, who have trouble forming friendships and used to practice conversational skills.
- **Educational benefits:** To assist with things like language development or promoting curiosity through engaging conversations.

What about the concerns?

As with everything there's always that careful balance and there are several significant concerns to be aware of, such as:

- **Exposure to inappropriate content:** Some AI companions have reportedly shared content unsuitable for children, including adult or explicit conversations. In relation to Google's Gemini announcement, Google warns that under 13's may be exposed to



content that may be inappropriate for their age.

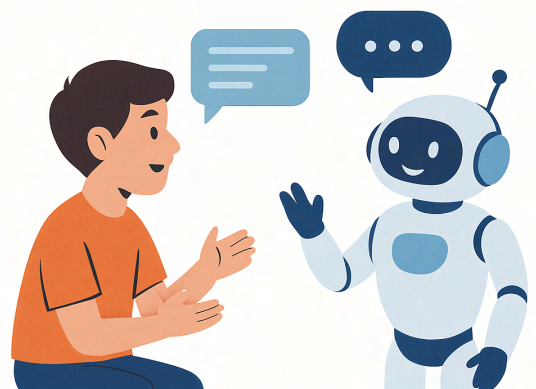
- **Privacy and data safety:** Chatbots can collect personal data, which poses concerns about how information is stored and potentially shared or used.
- **Dependency and isolation:** There is a risk that children might become overly reliant on their digital companions, potentially impacting their ability to form healthy, real-world relationships. Signs of dependency can include:
 - **Reduced interest** in spending time with family or friends.
 - **Preferring chatbot interactions** over real-life social activities.
 - Becoming visibly **upset or anxious** when unable to access their chatbot.
 - Talking excessively about the chatbot or **treating it as if it's human**.

If you notice these signs, try gently encouraging your child to engage in offline social activities or hobbies they previously enjoyed. If the attachment continues or becomes severe, consider discussing your concerns with a teacher, school counsellor, or professional for additional support.

- **Misinformation and accuracy:** Chatbots can sometimes share misleading or incorrect information, known as hallucinations, which children may accept as truth.
- **Ethical and emotional boundaries:** Questions have been raised about the appropriateness of children forming emotional bonds or an attachment with AI systems that simulate human emotions but do not truly understand or reciprocate them.

What is Google Gemini?

It's known as a 'multimodal AI model' and it's capable of doing a lot of things, but all this means is that Gemini can generate not only text, but also other types of data like images, audio and video. You may have seen TV



advertises where people are talking to Gemini, asking what it can do.

As mentioned at the start of this article Google is now rolling out Gemini to users under 13 years of age, and it's turned on by default. However, according to Google it's only going to be available to younger users if the child's Google account is managed via the Google Family Link app, meaning that parents/carers have overall control and can turn it off if they wish.

To turn off access to Gemini all you have to do is open up the Google Family Link app ([or website](#)), go to Controls - Gemini, then disable the Gemini Apps feature.

You can find out much more about managing your child's access to Gemini and considerations before allowing access [HERE](#).

Practical Tips

To help manage your child's interactions with AI companion chatbots:

1. **Start conversations early:** Regularly discuss with your child what they're doing online, including the apps and chatbots they interact with.
2. **Do your research:** Investigate any chatbot app or service your child wants to use. Check reviews, age ratings, and safety guidelines. Internet Matters and Common Sense Media are great sources of information for parents.
3. **Set clear boundaries:** Create household rules about appropriate apps, duration of use, and suitable locations for device usage.



4. **Prioritise privacy:** Teach your child about the importance of protecting personal information and what details they should never share online.

Summary

Generative AI isn't going away, it's just going to get bigger and bigger. There are significant benefits as well as risks and only you as the parent can make the decision as to whether this is okay for your child or not.

What's important is that you get a range of opinions to get an overall balance. Sites such as Common Sense Media and Internet Matters are great sources of advice and guidance. Just recently Common Sense Media carried out a risk assessment into companion AI chatbots which you can view [HERE](#), where they have assessed the risks for children as 'Unacceptable', but it's your decision.

If you're unsure perhaps use it yourself or with your child so that you can have those all-important discussions.



What is:

ONLINE INFLUENCE?

It will come as no surprise to anyone that children and young people can be influenced by what they see and hear online. Anything from misogynistic language, attitudes, challenges, sharing explicit content and much more. But why? What is it about behind a screen that can be so influential?

The answer is that there are lots of reasons ranging from brain and cognitive development, psychological reasons such as disinhibition, the way apps and games are designed and more, so in this part of the newsletter we'll explore some of these.

The Brain and Cognitive Development

Children and teenagers are still developing cognitively, socially, and emotionally—and this plays a major role in how they respond to online content. One key part of the brain involved is the **prefrontal cortex**, which is responsible for decision-making, impulse control, and understanding long-term consequences. This part of the brain continues developing into a person's mid-twenties.



Because of this, young people are more likely to:

- **Act impulsively** when they see exciting or emotionally charged content.

- **Struggle with critical thinking**, making them more susceptible to misinformation or online manipulation.
- **Be heavily influenced by peer approval**, including likes, comments, and follower counts.

Understanding that a child's brain is still "under construction" helps explain why online content—especially content that is emotional, visual, or repetitive—can have a stronger and more lasting impact.

Psychological Influence

Many of the ways children are affected by online content are psychological in nature—meaning they influence how young people think, feel, and behave.

For example:

- **Online Disinhibition:** The anonymity, invisibility, and asynchronicity of being behind a screen can lead children to behave in ways they wouldn't face-to-face. This may include oversharing personal information, using inappropriate language, engaging in cyberbullying, or trusting strangers more easily. Because children often don't perceive immediate consequences, they may underestimate the risks of their actions online.
- **Parasocial Relationships:** A parasocial relationship is a one-sided emotional connection a person forms with someone they follow online, such as a YouTuber, gamer, or influencer. These figures may seem relatable or trustworthy to children, but the relationship is not reciprocal. These attachments can strongly shape a child's self-image, expectations, or behaviour—sometimes encouraging consumerism, risk-taking, or unrealistic lifestyle comparisons.



Persuasive Design Techniques

Online platforms and apps are often deliberately designed to capture attention and keep users engaged. These persuasive design techniques tap into brain psychology and behavioural science to deliberately increase engagement, such as watching more videos, never-ending scrolling, increasing time on games etc., for example:

- **Infinite scrolling:** Makes it easy to keep consuming content without natural stopping points.
- **Push notifications:** Trigger immediate attention and draw users back to apps repeatedly.
- **Reward systems:** Likes, shares, and streaks provide social validation and trigger the brain's dopamine response.
- **Personalised content feeds:** Use of algorithms to keep children engaged with content that matches their interests—sometimes at the cost of balance or safety.

While these tools are effective from a product design perspective, they can make it hard for young people to disengage, increasing the risk of overuse or negative psychological effects.



Do Criminals and Commercial Organisations Use Psychological Influence?

Yes, criminals exploit psychological vulnerabilities in children and young people to groom, deceive, or exploit them. Common techniques include:

- **Building trust through emotional manipulation:** Offenders may use flattery, empathy, or fake identities to establish a bond (mimicking parasocial relationships).
- **Exploiting online disinhibition:** They rely on children sharing more than they normally would because of perceived anonymity.
- **Creating urgency or fear:** Scammers or abusers may use threats, shame, or countdowns (e.g., “this will disappear in 10 seconds”) to rush decisions or silence children.
- **Reward and reciprocity:** Groomers may offer compliments, in-game items, or money to draw children into unhealthy exchanges.

Commercial organisations, games and app designers and more can use **persuasive design** and **emotional marketing** to keep children engaged and influence their choices. Examples include:

- **Social validation loops:** Encouraging behaviour through likes, followers, streaks, and badges that trigger dopamine release.
- **FOMO (Fear of Missing Out):** Limited-time offers or exclusive content prompt impulsive clicks or purchases.
- **Personalised advertising:** Based on data collected from browsing habits, ads are tailored to target known interests and vulnerabilities.
- **Influencer marketing:** Children may trust influencers as if they are friends, not realising they’re being paid to promote products or behaviours.

All of this makes things difficult for parents as we have such little control over much of it, but there are things we can look out for and things we can do.

Things Parents Should Look Out For:

- Sudden **behavioural changes** influenced by online personalities.
- Excessive **imitation of influencers'** habits, language, or behaviours.
- Strong **emotional reactions** tied to online interactions or content.
- **Narrowing of interests** due to algorithm-driven content suggestions.



Practical Tips for Parents:





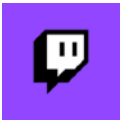


- **Open Dialogue:** Maintain ongoing, judgement-free conversations about their online experiences.
- **Critical Thinking:** Teach your child to critically evaluate online content and question the motivations behind what they see or hear.
- **Diversify Content:** Encourage your child to explore a variety of content to avoid algorithmic echo chambers.
- **Set Healthy Boundaries:** Agree on rules for screen time, appropriate apps, and device-free zones.
- **Be Informed and Engaged:** Follow the online personalities or influencers your child is interested in to better understand their appeal and potential influence.
- **Diversify Content:** Encourage your child to explore a variety of content to avoid algorithmic echo chambers.
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Common Apps

This is not an exhaustive list, but tends to be the more popular apps used by children and young people.

Age requirements are set within the terms and conditions of the app provider, don't be confused by ratings in the app stores which can be different.

| App | Age | Comments |
|---|-----|--|
|  | 13 | Discord - is a voice, video and text chat app that's used by tens of millions of people aged 13+ to tap and hang out with communities or their friends. Parental settings can be found HERE . |
|  | 13 | Instagram - is a photo and video sharing app where people can upload photos, videos and messages to share with others. Parental settings can be found HERE . |
|  | 13 | Snapchat - is a very popular app that lets users swop pictures and videos (Snaps) with others which are meant to disappear after they are viewed. There is also a messaging feature. Parental settings can be found HERE . |
|  | 13 | TikTok - is a social media app that allows users to create, watch and share short videos shot on mobile devices or webcams. Parental settings can be found HERE . |
|  | 13 | Twitch - is where people come together to chat and interact live. Think YouTube, but it is live rather than pre-recorded. Parental settings can be found HERE . |
|  | 13 | WhatsApp - is a messaging app which uses text, images, video and voice record features to connect with others. Parental settings can be found HERE |
|  | 18 | Reddit - is a network of communities (called subreddits) where people can share information, their interests and hobbies. Reddit is an 18+ app, there are no parental controls. |