



What parents/carers need to know



What are AI Chatbots

AI chatbots are computer programs designed to talk and respond like humans.

They answer questions, hold conversations, and can sometimes create images or use voice and video. Many children already use them—around two-thirds of 9–17-year-olds. Popular types include general chatbots (e.g. ChatGPT, Google Gemini), companion-style chatbots that act like friends or partners (e.g. Replika, character.ai), and chatbots built into social media (e.g. Snapchat's My AI).

When used safely, chatbots can support learning and entertainment. However, they also bring important safeguarding risks.

Why can chatbots be risky for children?

Frequent chatbot use may signal wider issues, such as loneliness or a lack of trusted people to talk to. Key risks include:

- **Emotional dependency:** Children may form strong attachments, rely on chatbots for support, and withdraw from real-life relationships.
- **Reinforcing harmful ideas:** Chatbots may validate dangerous thoughts or behaviours (e.g. around self-harm or eating disorders) instead of challenging them.
- **Stereotypes and extremist views:** Because chatbots learn from internet data, they can repeat harmful stereotypes or uncritically echo extreme opinions.
- **Inappropriate content:** Some chatbots can engage in sexual conversations or generate explicit images, including illegal material.
- **Impact on development:** Long-term effects are still unclear, but there is concern about negative impacts on thinking skills and social/emotional development.
- **Privacy and data risks:** Children may share personal or sensitive information without understanding how it could be stored or misused.

How can parents/carers help at home?

- **Talk openly:** Discuss how chatbots work, how your child uses them, and the risks involved. Remind them AI is not a real person.
- **Set rules and limits:** Agree on clear boundaries, such as time limits and using chatbots only in shared spaces.
- **Encourage critical thinking:** Remind children that chatbots can be wrong. Help them check information with trusted sources.
- **Monitor use:** Keep an eye on online activity and use parental controls where available.
- **Check age ratings:** Use app ratings as a guide and block inappropriate apps when possible.
- **Prioritise privacy:** Explain why personal details (age, school, location) should never be shared.
- **Listen and support:** Reassure your child that they can talk to you without fear of getting into trouble.
- **Watch for warning signs:** These include secrecy, mood changes, withdrawal from others, excessive screen time, or tiredness from being online late.

Key message:

AI chatbots can be useful, but they are not risk-free. Open conversations, clear boundaries and ongoing support at home are essential to help children use them safely.

