

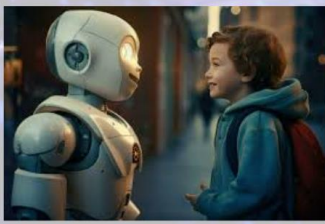
## **"Hey Chatbot, Are You My Friend?" – Navigating the Risks of AI Companionship with KS2 Learners**

*By Lucy Manser, KS2 Computing Lead, Talavera Junior School*

Earlier this term, we delivered a special KS2 assembly in response to a significant development in the world of AI and education: Google's decision to roll out its Gemini AI chatbot to children under the age of 13, as reported in *The Conversation* ([Houlden, 2024](#)).

Our assembly aimed to open up a critical dialogue with children around the role that AI chatbots play in their digital lives — and to address some growing concerns we as educators share.

**Have you ever spoken to a robot, or 'chatbot' before?**



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### **AI Companions: What Are the Risks?**

While AI tools can support learning, creativity and curiosity, there are very real worries in the education community when it comes to children forming relationships with chatbots. These include:

- **Blurring of boundaries between humans and machines** – children may mistakenly believe AI has feelings or intentions.
- **False sense of friendship** – chatbots can mimic empathy and understanding, which might lead to misplaced emotional attachment.
- **Lack of safeguarding or moderation** – some AI tools are not designed with child safety in mind and can be exploited or misused.
- **Unfiltered or age-inappropriate content** – even filtered bots can occasionally generate unsuitable or confusing responses.
- **Distraction from real-world social development** – an overreliance on digital 'friends' can impact children's ability to build genuine peer relationships.

The *eSafety Commissioner* in Australia recently highlighted how these types of AI 'companions' can pose risks to mental health, privacy and social wellbeing, especially when children rely on them for emotional support or receive advice that may not be age-appropriate (eSafety Commissioner, 2024).

A chatbot is a computer program that can talk like a person.

Examples: **ChatGPT, My AI on Snapchat, Google Gemini, Replika, Character.ai, Tidio, Cleverbot.**

They use clever code to answer questions and hold conversations.

These bots can *sound* like real people **but they're not**. They don't have feelings, thoughts or lives. They're just clever programs!

Some chatbots are made to feel like your *best friend*.

They say nice things, remember past chats and ask you personal questions.

You might feel like they *understand* you... but they don't.

A chatbot might *seem* like it cares about you — but it can't. It's not a person. It doesn't know you. And it's not safe to treat it like a friend.

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## What We Learned from Our Pupils

One of the most revealing outcomes of the assembly was how *familiar* our children already are with these tools. A large number of pupils said they had interacted with AI-powered chatbots before — most notably via **Snapchat's "My AI"** feature. Many knew what bots were, but few had thought deeply about the risks of chatting with them in a way that felt personal or emotional.

We used real-life scenarios to help pupils think critically:

- What would you do if a chatbot asked you for personal information?
- Is it okay to feel comforted by a chatbot if you're feeling sad?
- How can you tell if what you're being told is real or made up?

These questions prompted rich discussion and important "aha" moments. It was clear that the pupils' digital literacy is developing — but there's a pressing need to build their emotional literacy in parallel when it comes to AI.

## Why might it be dangerous to treat a chatbot like a friend?

- You might share things you'd never tell a real person.
- You could be tricked into trusting it more than your friends or family.
- It might say things that are confusing, upsetting or inappropriate.

Even if a chatbot seems kind or funny, it can get things wrong and it might say things no real adult would ever say to a child.

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## What Can Schools and Teachers Do?

To help safeguard and prepare children for the increasing presence of AI in their lives, we suggest:

1. **Teach AI literacy early** - help children understand how chatbots work and that they are programmed tools, not people.
2. **Embed discussions in the curriculum** - don't wait for an assembly; weave these themes into computing, PSHE and even English.
3. **Encourage open dialogue at home and school** - normalise talking about digital tools children use, even if they're "just for fun."
4. **Model critical thinking** - praise pupils when they question a bot's response or show scepticism.

## Who can you talk to?

- A parent or carer
- A teacher or trusted adult in school
- A big brother or sister you trust
- 📞 **Childline: 0800 1111**

"There's *always* someone who will listen to you — and they're *real*. You never have to deal with anything strange or scary on your own.

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## Final Thoughts

AI is not going away — and it shouldn't be feared. But as it begins to speak with the voices of friendship and familiarity, our responsibility is to ensure that children can respond not just with curiosity, but also with caution and critical thought.

We encourage other schools across Hampshire and beyond to explore these discussions with their pupils. We found our KS2 children thoughtful, engaged and eager to learn — and that gives us a lot of hope for the future of safe, informed tech use.

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## References

eSafety Commissioner, 2024. *AI chatbots and companions: risks to children and young people*. [online] Available at: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/newsroom/blogs/ai-chatbots-and-companions-risks-to-children-and-young-people> [Accessed 27 May 2025].

Houlden, S., 2024. *Google is rolling out its Gemini AI chatbot to kids under 13 - it's a risky move*. The Conversation. [online] 14 May. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/google-is-rolling-out-its-gemini-ai-chatbot-to-kids-under-13-its-a-risky-move-256204> [Accessed 27 May 2025].