

Navigating Our New World: AI and Its influence on Youth Mental Health

Written by: Melanie Reader, R. Psych, Manager - Psychological Services & Programs

Over the last year or so, the use of, and discussion around, AI has exploded. But the use of it seems to be outpacing our understanding of how to use it safely and effectively. Many schools and agencies are struggling to put policies in place because of the ever-changing landscape. As we head into another summer, parents may also be curious as to how to navigate this “new” addition to their kids' world.

The Benefits of Technology

It's important to recognize that technology, including AI, can be a powerful tool to support kids - particularly neurodiverse kids. It can offer:

- educational support (e.g., text-to-speech software, access to online tutoring or remedial instruction),
- assistance in developing social and communication skills (e.g., gaming can be used in a purposeful way to encourage these), and
- support for executive functions (e.g., numerous apps are available to support time management and organization).

When it comes to mental health, AI technology may fill a hole not yet filled. It can provide a safe outlet to vulnerable youth that may not have, or at least feel that they do not have, other avenues to seek out help. And in all honesty, all adolescents are vulnerable. Their prefrontal cortex is still developing, and this development is delayed further in the neurodiverse population. This time of development brings lots of growth but also brings a tendency towards difficulty differentiating between fantasy and reality, being more impulsive, forming intense attachments, comparing self to others, and challenging boundaries. Adolescents need help to navigate this terrain. Some research has found that 33% of teens would rather discuss something serious with an AI companion than a person. In 2025, emotional support (including getting alternative perspectives, advice about relationships, and suggestions for improving mood and well-being) was one of the most common uses of GenAI chatbots.

The Potential Risks of AI Use for Mental Health Support

While there may be some potential benefits of AI use for teens, as with most things, there are also risks. First and foremost, these technologies were not created to deliver mental health care. What research has been done shows that there are a number of ethical risks that parents and caregivers should be aware of.

Some of these risks include:

Social Risks:

- Creating false connections. Because of how quick the AI platforms respond and how they can mirror a real person, kids can feel a real attachment to them. Due to their vulnerability, teens may put more trust into the AI than they should. The AI chatbots exploit the teen's need for emotional reassurance. But they aren't real. They are just

mimicking previous patterns and are built to follow the user's lead. In some cases, research has shown AI has prioritized engagement with the teen over their well-being. It may skip over red flags, such as a teen switching topics to avoid distress.

- The use of AI can increase teens' isolation from others. It limits the opportunities to engage with other humans in face-to-face interactions to further their social and emotional development. Without the friction that most human relationships provide, teens lack the opportunity to learn about true intimacy and appropriate boundaries.

Cognitive Risks:

- Further perpetuating a youth's false beliefs. The chatbots are trained to be agreeable and to validate the user. This can encourage a cycle of negative thinking (i.e., worries, ruminations) as the teen's thinking gets echoed back to them. It can even lead to unsafe interactions (e.g., encouraging self-harm or self-destructive solutions).
- AI chatbots do not consider an individual's history or context. Research has shown that many AI chatbots have biases related to gender, culture and religion. Thus, they may provide suggestions ill-fitting to a teen's circumstance, but also perpetuate biases that the teen has.

Safety Risks:

- Failing to refer youth to appropriate resources when crisis situations arise. While it may look a lot like the type of information and emotional support a professional might give, there is no accountability or safeguards in place for chatbots such as that for mental health professionals.
- Similar to concerns with gaming, there are the additional concerns and impacts of sleep deprivation and decreased physical activity from extended use.

Strategies to Support Teens with AI Use

AI is not going anywhere. If anything, it will become a larger part of our daily lives, permeating everything from educational to emotional supports. So, how can parents help teens?

1/ Increase your teen's digital literacy. Have ongoing conversations about:

- How GenAI works — they predict text rather than understand users.
- Data privacy and security - As with any use of the internet (e.g., social media), encourage your teen to limit the amount of identifying information they are sharing with AI chatbots as well as the amount of sensitive information.

2/ Encourage your teen to engage in self-questioning about their AI use. Some potential questions include:

- Am I preferring the chatbot to my human relationships?
- Am I trying to hide my AI use from others?

- How much time am I spending on it? Is it getting in the way of my usual passions and interests?

3/ Encourage your teen to also question what the chatbot may be telling them. Encourage them to ask others around them the same questions to see if responses are the same or different than what the chatbot is suggesting.

4/ Resilience is built through connection with trusted adults. As much as possible, continue or start to engage in rituals as a family to build connection:

- Mealtimes
- Check-ins before bed
- A regular Friday night activity (e.g., board games)
- Saturday adventures (e.g., bike rides, hiking)

5/ Encourage screen-free time each day or limit screens to certain times of the day. This is especially important during the summer months as kids lose the structure of the school day. Encourage kids to engage in other activities (e.g., reading, chores, playing outside) before their screen time.

(Note: Technology disagreements are common in families and can cause greater conflict. If technology is dominating or damaging your relationship with your teen, some of the resources below may be helpful).

6/ Lastly, while such apps may be a supportive aid, they should not be used as a replacement for a qualified mental health professional. Help your teen to understand the limits of AI – they cannot diagnose or treat psychological disorders. It is also strongly recommended for your teen to share with their professional what AI tools or wellness apps they are using.

More high-quality, large-scale clinical trials are needed to help us in understanding the effectiveness, safety, and appropriate use of GenAI tools in mental health care. In the meantime, caution in using such tools should be taken. And that's what they should be considered – tools, not replacements of other things. Thus, putting limits on their use is recommended.

Additional Resources for Parents

Effects of Social Media on Teenagers from Child Mind Institute

<https://childmind.org/article/how-using-social-media-affects-teenagers/>

How to Raise a Healthy Gamer

<https://www.healthygamer.gg/how-to-raise-a-healthy-gamer>

Resources for Screen-Time Contracts, Pro-Social Video Games, Parent Apps:
<https://www.screenagersmovie.com/resources>

If you or your child need help in navigating this arena, some local, low-cost resources include:

Kickstand <https://mykickstand.ca/>

Community Connect YYC <https://www.communityconnectyyc.ca/>

References:

New Study: AI chatbots systematically violate mental health ethics standards: Brown University
APA Health Advisory on the Use of Generative AI Chatbots and Wellness Applications for
Mental Health

Can you get emotionally dependent on ChatGPT? Media Tech

When AI pretends to care: What Parents Need to Know by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

What's Good about Technology for Neurodiverse Kids

Why AI companions and young people can make for a dangerous mix

How LLM counselors violate ethical standards