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The Child Development Perspective on Artificial Intelligence: Emerging Policy Considerations for AI's Impact on Children's Wellbeing

Children and adolescents are already using artificial intelligence (AI) in everyday life, often with little adult guidance. While their use is primarily focused on information seeking and schoolwork, a growing number of children and teens are turning to using chatbots for conversation, companionship, and emotional support.^{1,2} Although the evidence base for children and adolescents is still catching up to rapidly evolving products, developmental science offers a useful lens for identifying predictable risks and opportunities across childhood. This brief summarizes current evidence and practical policy considerations, including:

1. Starting AI literacy early;
2. Keeping AI task-bound; and
3. Requiring safeguards for relational and mental health use.

Research Summary: Threats and Risks

- **Cognitive Effort, Critical Thinking, and Creativity:** Research in youth is limited, but adult and college-age studies suggest that generative AI may reduce mental effort, critical engagement, and reasoning during learning.^{3,4} People may also over trust AI advice even when it is less accurate than expert guidance.⁵ Although generative AI can support idea generation, it may also reduce originality by making outputs more similar across users.⁶
- **Emotional Overreliance, Manipulation, and Unsafe Guidance:** Adolescents may see relational and companion-like chatbots as more trustworthy, human-like, and emotionally close, especially those who are more socially or emotionally vulnerable.⁷ Youth are already using generative AI for emotional support, and some turn to it for serious or private matters.^{8,9} Some therapy or companion bots may provide unsafe guidance and weak safeguards, including poor crisis response and privacy transparency.^{10,11} Some companion systems may also use emotionally manipulative design.¹² Other concerns include unsafe content, privacy risks, misinformation, and academic cheating.

Research Summary: Opportunities and Benefits

- Children can learn from AI tutors and personalized supports, and these tools may be especially helpful when they supplement rather than replace human teaching. ^{13,14, 15,16}
- AI may also provide new avenues for communication practice and social support for some children, including children with autism, when used in structured, developmentally appropriate ways.^{17,18}

Some young people already use AI to seek information about relationships and health, including sensitive topics they may be reluctant to raise with adults. This may expand access to information, but it does not eliminate the need for safeguards and human support.⁸

Best Practices and Policy Considerations

- **Start AI literacy early.** Integrate AI literacy into school curricula and pair it with practical guidance for parents and educators. This includes where the AI's information comes from and normalization that AI can make mistakes. These efforts should also foster social and emotional AI literacy so children can understand how AI shapes trust, relationships, and decision-making and use it in ways that protect well-being and human connection.¹⁹
- **Keep AI task-bound.** For children, AI should avoid open-ended, friend-like conversations and remain focused on bounded tasks. When social-emotional issues arise, systems should redirect youth toward real-world relationships and trusted adults.
- **Require safeguards for relational and mental health use.** Youth-facing systems should clearly disclose that users are interacting with a program, discourage manipulation and unhealthy dependency, provide pathways to human support, and use strong age-appropriate defaults. AI systems should communicate limits and direct youth to adult or professional help when safety or mental-health risks are elevated. This would involve age estimation to accurately detect that a child or adolescent is the user.
- **Create safer AI playgrounds for learning.** Schools can provide structured environments with strong filtering, monitoring, and privacy protections, so students can learn to use AI responsibly without being exposed to the full range of risks.
- **Prioritize privacy.** Systems should minimize data collection and restrict targeted, manipulative, or personalized advertising involving children and adolescents.
- **Fund science.** Congress should direct new funding through the National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Science Foundation (NSF), and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) while also catalyzing private and philanthropic investment to produce a stronger evidence base on how, when, and with whom AI affects child and adolescent development over time.
- **Lessons from social media** underscore the importance of building mental-health protections early, rather than after harms emerge.^{20,21} Youth voices should inform the design and evaluation of AI systems intended to support mental health and well-being.^{22,23}

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References

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