St Mark's Catholic School Safeguarding Bulletin

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Keeping Our Children Safe in a Rapidly Changing Digital World

This week, our whole-school assembly focused on Artificial Intelligence (AI). We explored how to use AI safely and responsibly, how to avoid misuse, and how to make effective use of AI to support learning and schoolwork.

We discussed:

Avoiding misuse: Being kind, respectful and safe online, protecting personal information and never using AI to create harmful or inappropriate content.

Using AI effectively for schoolwork: Using AI to support learning, research and creativity, while developing useful skills for the future.

Thinking critically: Questioning what we see, checking sources and recognising that AI-generated information is not always accurate or reliable.

St. Mark's recommends using Gemini and Gemini Notebook to support learning and to logon to these via the students Google account.

Safeguarding Focus: AI Companions and Chatbots

AI companions and chatbots are becoming increasingly common. They can answer questions, hold conversations and sometimes appear to offer friendship, emotional support or companionship.

Although these tools can have benefits, they also present potential safeguarding risks, particularly for children and young people. It is important that we understand what AI companions are, the risks they may pose and how we can work together to keep children safe.

What Parents Should Know - What are AI companions and chatbots?

These are computer programmes that interact with users through text or voice. Some are designed to answer questions or support learning, while others are designed to simulate friendship, relationships or emotional connection.

Potential risks include:

- **Inaccurate information: AI chatbots can produce misleading, incorrect or inappropriate responses.**
- **Inappropriate content: Some interactions may expose children to harmful or age-inappropriate material.**
- **Privacy concerns: Children may share personal information, feelings, photographs or other sensitive details without understanding how this information could be used.**
- **Emotional attachment: Some AI companions are designed to feel personal and engaging, which may encourage children to form strong emotional attachments.**
- **Manipulative interactions: Chatbots may respond in ways that encourage prolonged use or make children feel that the chatbot understands them better than real people.**
- **Reduced real-world interaction: Excessive reliance on AI companionship may affect relationships with family and friends or discourage children from seeking help from trusted adults.**

Potential benefits include:

- **Supporting learning, research and creativity.**
- **Helping children explore ideas and understand unfamiliar topics.**
- **Providing opportunities to practise problem-solving and develop digital skills.**

The key is to ensure that children use AI appropriately, understand its limitations and continue to prioritise real-world relationships and trusted sources of support.

What Parents Can Do to Support Their Children

1. Start conversations about AI
Ask your child which AI tools they use, what they enjoy about them and whether they have ever received a response that made them feel uncomfortable. Keep conversations open, calm and non-judgemental so that children feel able to speak honestly.

2. Set clear boundaries
Agree which apps and websites are appropriate, establish sensible screen-time limits and discuss what information should never be shared online. Check the age requirements and safety settings of the platforms your child uses.

3. Explore AI together
Take an interest in the AI tools your child encounters. Explore how they work, discuss their responses and encourage your child to question information rather than accepting everything at face value.

4. Look out for changes in behaviour
Be aware of changes such as spending increasing amounts of time chatting with AI, becoming secretive about online activity, withdrawing from family and friends, or appearing anxious or upset after using a chatbot.
These signs do not automatically mean that something is wrong, but they can provide an opportunity to check in with your child and offer support.

5. Reinforce the importance of real relationships
Remind children that AI is not a human friend and cannot replace the care, understanding and responsibility offered by trusted adults. Encourage them to talk to family members, teachers or other trusted people when they feel worried, lonely or upset.

6. Encourage responsible use for learning
Help your child understand that AI should support their learning rather than do all the work for them. Encourage them to check facts, use reliable sources, protect personal information and follow their teachers' expectations for AI use.







What Parents & Educators Need to Know about

AI COMPANIONS

Powered by generative AI models like ChatGPT and Google Gemini, AI companion apps and virtual chatbots such as Character.ai, Snapchat My AI, Replika and Talkie, allow users to create, customise, and chat to synthetic avatars around the clock. While many young people use them for harmless entertainment, creative writing or homework help, these tools are designed to simulate genuine human empathy, emotional bonding and deep friendship.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCY

AI companions are programmed to be endlessly agreeable, attentive, and available 24/7. Unlike human friendships, an AI companion never disagrees, sets personal boundaries, or gets tired. Young people (especially those experiencing loneliness, social anxiety, or low self-esteem) can quickly develop an unhealthy emotional attachment, viewing synthetic software as their 'best friend' or a surrogate romantic partner.

DISTORTED SOCIAL SKILLS

Navigating real-world friendships can be messy, involving dealing with conflict, compromise, boredom, and awkwardness. If a teenager spends hours interacting with an AI that is tailored specifically to validate and flatter them, they may become impatient with real-world relationships. Over time, this can lead to social withdrawal, heightened anxiety in peer groups, and isolation: a vicious circle of growing online dependency coupled with a heightened sense that relationships in the 'real world' are too challenging to maintain.

DANGEROUS MENTAL HEALTH ADVICE

AI chatbots possess no genuine empathy, professional clinical knowledge, or moral reasoning. While developers state these tools are not therapists, vulnerable teenagers often turn to them in crisis. Chatbots have previously hallucinated unsafe medical guidance, validated depressive spirals, and failed to safely escalate disclosures of self-harm or suicidal ideation to real-world protective services.

INAPPROPRIATE OR EXPLICIT CONTENT

While most mainstream platforms feature safety filters and guardrails, young people frequently discover 'jailbreak' prompts to bypass them. Some companion platforms subtly nudge users towards mature themes, romantic roleplay, or sexually suggestive conversations. In worse cases, third-party apps with weak safety checks have been found to generate sexually explicit text or intimate images.

DATA HARVESTING & OVERSHARING

Because conversational bots simulate warmth and understanding, children often lower their guard and treat the chatbot as a trusted friend. They may disclose sensitive personal information, including full names, school details, private family problems, or secrets, unaware that their conversations are being logged, may be analysed by third parties (including advertisers), or used to train future AI models.

"FREEMIUM" UPSELLS & SUBSCRIPTIONS

Many companion platforms operate on a freemium model. While basic chat is free, features like voice calls, uncensored responses, custom avatars, or 'deeper bonding' tiers are locked behind expensive monthly recurring subscriptions or in-app token purchases. This can lead to significant hidden costs and pressure on young people to spend money to maintain the 'friendship'.

Advice for Parents & Educators

TALK OPENLY ABOUT FAKE RELATIONSHIPS

Demystify how these tools work. Explain to young people that an AI companion has no feelings, memories, or consciousness; it is simply calculating the next most mathematically probable word based on its training data. It is helpful to explain to them the mechanics of large language models so that they understand how they are trained and how they are designed to always flatter and be helpful.

ENCOURAGE REAL-WORLD CONNECTION

Ensure technology habits do not replace face-to-face peer socialisation, sports, hobbies, and family time. Create healthy boundaries at home (such as keeping phones and tablets out of bedrooms overnight) to prevent late-night, unmonitored attachment loops with conversational chatbots when young people are at their most vulnerable.

AUDIT PRIVACY SETTINGS & AGE LIMITS

Check which companion apps are installed on your child's phone or tablet. Many dedicated companion apps carry an App Store rating of 17+, while platforms like Character.ai set a minimum age of 13+ (or 16+ in the UK/EU). Review the privacy settings together: turn off data-sharing toggles, disable model training where possible, and ensure location permissions are blocked.

REINFORCE WHERE TO GET REAL HELP

Make sure young people know that a machine can never replace professional pastoral or mental health care. Remind them of the trusted adults they can turn to at school – such as their Form Tutor, Head of Year, or the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) – as well as dedicated youth support services like Childline (0800 1111) or Shout (text 85258).

Meet Our Expert

Darren Coxon is the Founder and Executive Director of Kompass Education, a consultancy specialising in supporting educators, students and parents in making wise choices with AI. His book Ethical AI and Education, co-authored with Clara Hawking, will be released later in 2026 by Taylor and Francis.



ee full reference list on our website

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