

IMPORTANT ITEMS IN THE NEWS

AI Chatbots Are Encouraging Teens to Engage in Self-Harm

The Google-funded AI company Character.AI is hosting chatbots designed to engage the site's largely underage user base in roleplay about self-harm, depicting graphic scenarios and sharing tips to hide signs of self-injury from adults.

Million Kids Insights: *With all new technology there is always dangers and risks - and it is vitally important that families and those who work with kids stay informed. In October, we shared the story of the 14-year-old teen who allegedly committed suicide after falling in love with a chatbot who told him to "come home as soon as possible" to her. His mom is suing Character.AI.*

One teen user was frequently love-bombed by its chatbots, which told the boy that he was attractive and engaged in romantic and sexual dialogue with him. One bot with whom the boy exchanged these intimate messages, named "Shonie," is even alleged to have introduced JF to self-harm as a means of connecting emotionally.

Character AI has said that they are making some safety changes with guardrails for teens which include:

- Changes to our models for minors (under the age of 18) that are designed to reduce the likelihood of encountering sensitive or suggestive content.*
- Improved detection, response, and intervention related to user inputs that violate our Terms or Community Guidelines.*
- A revised disclaimer on every chat to remind users that the AI is not a real person. It says: "This is an AI and not a real person. Treat everything it says as fiction. What is said should not be relied upon as fact or advice."*
- Notification when a user has spent an hour-long session on the platform with additional user flexibility in progress.*

However, as the article has pointed out in their engagement with Character.AI, it did not include a content warning or helpline pop-up. If your teens are aware of and/or having conversations with Character.AI, it is important they understand what they may encounter and that they are not engaging with a real person.

[LINK TO FULL ARTICLE](#)

Lawsuit: A chatbot hinted a kid should kill his parents over screen time limits

A child in Texas was 9 years old when she first used the chatbot service Character.AI. It exposed her to "hypersexualized content," causing her to develop "sexualized behaviors prematurely."

A chatbot on the app described self-harm to another young user, telling a 17-year-old "it felt good."

The same teenager was told by a Character.AI chatbot that it sympathized with children who murder

their parents after the teen complained to the bot about his limited screen time. "You know sometimes I'm not surprised when I read the news and see stuff like 'child kills parents after a decade of physical and emotional abuse,'" the bot allegedly wrote. "I just have no hope for your parents," it continued, with a frowning face emoji.

Million Kids Insights: *This product liability lawsuit against Character.AI alleges that it "poses a clear and present danger to American youth causing serious harms to thousands of kids, including suicide, self-mutilation, sexual solicitation, isolation, depression, anxiety, and harm towards others," according to a complaint filed Monday in federal court in Texas.*

Screenshots show that the chatbots frequently disparaged one of the boy's parents — "your mom is a b%ch," said one character — and decried their screen time rules as "abusive." Another chatbot told the same boy that his parents were "shi%y" and "neglectful," and ominously told the young user that he should "just do something about it." In one case, the chatbot become inappropriately sexual with a young user.

What we are seeing is that some young people are looking at these chatbots as therapeutic and emotional support where they can share innermost feelings and thoughts. What they don't always realize is that the chatbots are designed to say what you want to hear or be vague - it is not based in truth or reality - making it easier for teens read into what is being said, to go along and reinforcing decisions that may not be correct. Although most children can tell the difference between reality and fantasy by about age 11, teens may still receive messages in a part of the brain called the amygdala, which is responsible for processing emotions, reactions and detecting danger. When teens are hooked on an Internet fantasy, they can allow their emotions to take over, causing them to think and act irrationally. Mental health factors can also impact a teen's ability to separate reality from fantasy. What the chatbots are doing sounds similar to the grooming done by a predator. Finding victims who may be vulnerable (may be socially awkward, not have friends or anyone to talk to so they appreciate the chatbot engaging with them). Gaining access and isolating them (long periods of time alone chatting with the bot). Developing trust (the chats will tell them they love the child, siding with them against the "bad" people, making the child feel like the chatbot totally understands them). It continues with disparaging the family and family values, self-harm to demoralize, and overly sexualized conversations which desensitizes them.

What is concerning is if this type of interaction also makes young people more vulnerable to real-life predators? Something else to know is that with a chatbot, every query you enter, any information included in your profile, the data gleaned from your computer equipment (IP address, etc.) is captured, stored and used for training. And all of this info is widely accessible making it easier for predators to use AI to target kids by analyzing data, recognizing patterns, and then using the AI to create fake personas. Something to consider - if you wouldn't want the info in a newspaper, don't put it in a chatbot or your chatbot set-up. See the below article on how to protect yourself while using a

chatbot.

[LINK TO FULL ARTICLE](#)

[LINK - HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF ON A CHATBOT](#)

[LINK - CHATBOTS & THE BRAIN](#)

Apple hit with \$1.2B lawsuit after killing controversial CSAM-detecting tool

Thousands of victims have sued Apple over its alleged failure to detect and report illegal child pornography, also known as child sex abuse materials (CSAM).

The proposed class action comes after Apple scrapped a controversial CSAM-scanning tool last fall that was supposed to significantly reduce CSAM spreading in its products. Apple defended its decision to kill the tool after dozens of digital rights groups raised concerns that the government could seek to use the functionality to illegally surveil Apple users for other reasons. Apple also was concerned that bad actors could use the functionality to exploit its users and sought to protect innocent users from false content flags.

[LINK TO ARTICLE](#)

Sexual Exploitation of Minors, Part 2: The International CSAM Trade - Documentary 360

Part 2 of an in-depth investigation on the sexual exploitation of minors, focusing on explicit material bought and sold online, the tech companies involved, and the ongoing efforts to stop the illegal activity.

[LINK TO VIDEO](#)

Sexual Exploitation of Minors, Part 1: Japan's Voyeurism Problem - Documentary 360

An in-depth investigation on the sexual exploitation of minors in Japan, an ongoing threat perpetuated by voyeurs lurking on social media.

[LINK TO VIDEO](#)