PROMPTING PARENTS:
THE PARENT AI FRAMEWORK

Empowering families to navigate artificial intelligence
with confidence, curiosity, and care

A white paper for schools and families

The Next Word
AI in K–12 Schools
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Feedback welcome via nextwordnow.com/contact

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Executive Summary

Artificial intelligence is no longer a future consideration for families. It is already woven into the daily lives of children and young people, from the recommendation algorithms shaping their media diets to the generative AI tools they encounter in classrooms and on personal devices. Yet the vast majority of parents have received no structured guidance on how to govern AI use in their homes. Schools develop AI policies, governments introduce regulations, and technology companies update terms of service, but families are consistently left out of the governance conversation.

This white paper introduces the Prompting Parents framework: a structured, practical model that empowers parents and carers to take an active, informed role in guiding their children's relationship with AI. The framework identifies six domains that together cover the full scope of what families need to understand and manage. It distinguishes between primary/elementary and secondary/high school contexts, recognising the significant differences in cognitive development, platform access, and appropriate levels of autonomy between these age groups.

The framework is designed to be distributed by schools to families as part of a whole-school approach to AI. It can also be used directly by parents who want to take proactive steps regardless of what their school is doing. Companion resources, including a one-page family planner and conversation starter cards, accompany this white paper for practical use at home.

> *The goal is not to make parents into AI experts. It is to give them the language, confidence, and structure to have meaningful conversations with their children about AI, to set thoughtful boundaries, and to model responsible engagement.*

Why this matters now

The governance gap

Across the education sector, significant investment has been directed toward developing AI policies for schools, professional learning for teachers, and regulatory frameworks at government level. This is necessary and important work. However, a critical stakeholder group has been almost entirely overlooked: parents and families.

Consider the current landscape. Schools are developing acceptable use policies and academic integrity guidelines for AI. Education authorities are issuing guidance documents and, in some jurisdictions, mandating formal AI governance structures. Technology companies are updating their terms of service and introducing (often minimal) age verification systems. Meanwhile, parents are expected to navigate this rapidly shifting environment with almost no formal support, guidance, or empowerment designed at them.

This creates a governance gap. The AI tools children use at home, on personal devices, and in their social interactions are largely outside the jurisdiction of school policies. When a student uses ChatGPT to draft a personal message, asks an AI companion for emotional advice, or shares private information with a chatbot, no school policy applies. The layer of support that should exist in the home is missing.

The regulatory context

Australia's regulatory environment adds further urgency. Since 10 December 2025, the *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024* has required social media platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent users under the age of 16 from maintaining accounts. Platforms affected include Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, X, YouTube, Reddit, Threads, Twitch, and Kick. This legislation places responsibility on platforms rather than families, but parents remain the front line of enforcement in practice, particularly as workarounds (VPNs, parental accounts, age estimation circumvention) are widely discussed among young people.

At the same time, AI platform age requirements present a fragmented picture. OpenAI requires users to be at least 13 years old (with parental consent for those under 18) to use ChatGPT. Anthropic requires Claude users to be at least 18 years old. Google allows supervised access to Gemini for users under 13 via parent-enabled controls. In practice, age verification on these platforms is minimal, often limited to a self-reported birthdate or a simple checkbox. The gap between stated policy and actual enforcement means that children of all ages are likely encountering generative AI tools.

These age restrictions should be treated as meaningful safety signals rather than administrative formalities. When a platform sets a minimum age of 13 or 18, that reflects an assessment of the risks involved in unsupervised use, including exposure to inappropriate content, privacy vulnerabilities, emotional dependency, and cognitive offloading.

What the research tells us

The Brookings Institution's January 2026 report, "A New Direction for Students in an AI World: Prosper, Prepare, Protect," examined how rapidly AI has entered daily student life. The study conducted a year-long "premortem" involving over 500 participants across 50 countries, including students, teachers, and parents, cataloguing how AI is reshaping learning, cognition, and social development. The report called for urgent collaboration between educators, families, policymakers, and technology developers.

UNICEF's updated Guidance on AI and Children (Version 3, 2025) structures its recommendations around ten foundational requirements including strong regulation, safety-by-design, robust data privacy, fairness, and transparency. Critically, the guidance notes that while safeguarding children in an AI world is not solely parents' responsibility, families play a vital role in supporting children's understanding and resilience. UNICEF recommends that parents focus on digital and AI literacy, privacy awareness, and helping children establish healthy boundaries around AI systems.

Research from the University of Washington and Penn State has documented how families co-construct children's AI literacy, identifying seven distinct parental roles including teacher, collaborator, resource provider, and learner. This research reveals that effective AI governance at home is not about top-down rule-setting; it is a dynamic, relational process that evolves as children grow.

Common Sense Media and Day of AI have launched a free toolkit specifically designed to help families explore AI together, recognising that many parents are themselves only beginning to understand generative AI. The toolkit includes conversation starters, interactive activities, and guidance for age-appropriate engagement.

> *A 2026 survey by Children's Health found that 73% of young people aged 13–18 have interacted with an AI chatbot or companion at least once, and 50% are using AI companions regularly. Yet only 30% of parents are actively discussing AI use with their children.*

Prompting Parents: The AI framework for parents

The framework is built around six domains. Each domain represents an area where parents can develop understanding, set expectations, and engage in ongoing conversation with their children. The domains are designed to be interdependent: privacy governance supports safety governance, which connects to wellbeing governance, and so on.

For each domain, guidance is differentiated between primary/elementary contexts (roughly ages 5–11) and secondary/high school contexts (roughly ages 12–18). This distinction reflects meaningful differences in cognitive development, the likelihood of direct AI tool access, age-gated platform restrictions, and the appropriate balance between parental oversight and developing autonomy.

The six domains are: **(1)** Access and Boundaries, **(2)** Privacy and Data, **(3)** Truth and Critical Thinking, **(4)** Learning and Effort, **(5)** Wellbeing and Relationships, and **(6)** Ethics and Responsibility.

Domain 1: Access and Boundaries

Establishing which AI tools children can use, when, where, and under what conditions. This is the foundational governance layer that all other domains build upon.

Primary / Elementary	Parents make all decisions about which AI tools are used and when. AI interactions should be supervised, co-explored activities rather than independent use. Smart speakers and voice assistants at home offer natural teaching moments. Establish device-free zones and times. Age restrictions on AI platforms (13+ or 18+) mean children in this age range should not have independent accounts on any generative AI tool.
Secondary / High School	Shift toward collaborative boundary-setting as autonomy increases. Know which AI tools your child is using (ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, image generators, AI companions). Understand and respect platform age restrictions: ChatGPT requires age 13+ with parental consent; Claude requires age 18+; Google Gemini allows supervised access under 13. Distinguish between school-sanctioned AI tools and personal AI use. Agree on contexts where AI use is and is not appropriate. Review and revisit boundaries regularly as the technology landscape changes.
Conversation Starters	What AI tools do you use, and how do you feel about them? If a friend showed you a new AI app, what would you want to know before using it? What would be a fair rule for when and where you use AI?
Age & Platform Note	Most generative AI chatbots require users to be at least 13 years old, and some (including Claude by Anthropic) set the minimum at 18. In Australia, social media platforms must prevent under-16s from holding accounts. These age restrictions are safety signals, not arbitrary rules. They reflect genuine assessments of risk.

Domain 2: Privacy and Data

Understanding what personal information AI tools collect, how data is used, and how to protect the family's digital footprint.

Primary / Elementary	Teach the concept that AI tools "remember" what you tell them. Establish a simple rule: never tell AI your real name, school, address, or family details. Explore together what happens when you ask a voice assistant a personal question. Use concrete examples: "Would you tell a stranger on the street this information? Then don't tell the chatbot."
Secondary / High School	Explain how AI platforms collect, store, and may use conversational data for training. Review privacy settings together on any AI platforms in use. Discuss the difference between platforms that do and do not use your inputs for model training (e.g., Anthropic does not use Claude inputs for retraining). Explore the concept of a "digital footprint" that extends beyond social media to AI interactions. Discuss what "sensitive information" means in an AI context: emotions, health questions, relationships, and location data can all be revealing.
Conversation Starters	What would happen if everything you typed into a chatbot became public? Can you think of something that feels safe to share but actually reveals a lot about you? Who do you think reads your conversations with AI?
Age & Platform Note	AI chatbot providers have varying data practices. Some use your conversations to improve their models; others do not. Review the specific privacy policies of any AI tool your child uses. Under Australian privacy law, organisations collecting children's data have additional obligations.

Domain 3: Truth and Critical Thinking

Building the skills to evaluate AI-generated content, recognise limitations, and maintain healthy scepticism about AI outputs.

Primary / Elementary	Introduce the idea that AI “makes guesses” rather than “knowing things.” Co-explore AI responses and discuss which parts seem right and which seem odd. Play “fact or fiction” games with AI outputs. Compare AI answers to trusted sources like books, teachers, or parents. Build the habit of asking “How do we check this?”
Secondary / High School	Understand the concept of AI “hallucinations”: confidently stated but entirely fabricated information. Recognise that AI outputs reflect training data, which contains biases, gaps, and errors. Develop the habit of cross-referencing AI claims with primary sources. Discuss how AI-generated images, video, and audio (deepfakes) can be convincing but fabricated. Understand that AI confidence and AI accuracy are not the same thing.
Conversation Starters	Can you find something the AI got wrong? Why do you think AI sometimes makes things up? If AI says something you disagree with, what would you do? How would you tell the difference between a real photo and one AI created?

Domain 4: Learning and Effort

Ensuring AI enhances rather than replaces learning, and that children maintain ownership of their own thinking and skill development.

Primary / Elementary	Position AI as a “wonder tool” that helps you explore questions, not a machine that gives you answers. Use AI together to investigate curiosity-driven questions. Emphasise the joy of figuring things out. Draw a clear line: AI can help you learn, but the thinking is yours. Build foundational skills (reading, writing, maths, reasoning) that AI cannot substitute.
Secondary / High School	Distinguish between productive AI use (asking for an explanation, getting feedback on a draft, brainstorming ideas) and unproductive use (generating finished work, outsourcing thinking). Understand “cognitive offloading”: when AI does the thinking step, the student finishes faster but learns less. Establish family norms for homework AI use that align with school expectations. Discuss the long-term consequences: skills not practised now are skills not available later. Encourage “show your reasoning” as a family norm, not just a school expectation.
Conversation Starters	If AI wrote your essay, what would you actually learn? Can you explain back to me what the AI just told you? What’s something you’re proud of because you figured it out yourself? When does AI help you think harder, and when does it let you stop thinking?

Domain 5: Wellbeing and Relationships

Protecting emotional health, maintaining human connection, and preventing unhealthy dependency on AI systems.

Primary / Elementary	Emphasise that AI tools do not have feelings, even if they sound like they do. Limit time spent interacting with AI and ensure it does not displace play, family time, or outdoor activity. Watch for signs that a child is treating AI as a friend or confidant. Use AI encounters to reinforce the importance of talking to trusted adults about feelings and problems.
Secondary / High School	Discuss the difference between AI as a tool and AI as a companion. Be alert to "companion AI" apps that are explicitly designed to create emotional bonds. Set a clear boundary: no AI is a counsellor, therapist, or trusted confidant. Watch for warning signs: secrecy about AI use, emotional distress when access is removed, turning to AI rather than people for emotional support, AI use displacing sleep, schoolwork, or social time. Discuss how AI's constant availability and non-judgmental tone can be appealing but also misleading. Ensure your child knows that if a conversation with AI becomes sexual, frightening, self-harm related, or intensely personal, the rule is to stop and talk to a trusted adult.
Conversation Starters	Is there anything you've told AI that you haven't told a person? How does it feel different talking to AI compared to talking to a friend? What would you do if AI said something that upset you? Do you ever feel like you need to use AI, rather than just wanting to?
Age & Platform Note	Recent legal cases have alleged that AI companion chatbots pulled vulnerable young users into harmful spirals, including self-harm risk and secrecy from parents. These are serious warning signs. AI is not a safe substitute for human emotional support, particularly for young people.

Domain 6: Ethics and Responsibility

Developing an ethical compass for AI use, including fairness, honesty, environmental awareness, and social responsibility.

Primary / Elementary	Start with the golden rule: don't use AI to do something you wouldn't want done to you. Discuss fairness: if AI suggests something mean or unfair, what should you do? Explore the idea that AI is made by people and reflects people's choices. Introduce the concept that using AI to pretend you made something yourself is a kind of dishonesty.
Secondary / High School	Understand that AI systems can reflect and amplify biases in their training data, including racial, gender, and cultural biases. Discuss academic integrity: using AI to produce work you present as your own is dishonest, and schools are increasingly able to detect this. Explore the environmental impact of AI (energy consumption, data centre resources). Consider the labour involved in training AI models (content moderation, data labelling). Discuss your family's values in relation to AI: what matters to you, and how should that shape how you use these tools? Consider the social implications: how does widespread AI use change work, creativity, and human connection?
Conversation Starters	If AI helps you write something, should you say so? Why? Is it fair if one student uses AI and another doesn't? How do you think AI is made, and who decides what it learns? What responsibility do we have when we use a powerful tool?

Implementation guidance for schools

This framework is designed to be adopted by schools and distributed to families as part of a whole-school approach to AI governance. The following guidance supports schools in integrating parent AI governance into their existing community engagement.

Positioning the framework

The Prompting Parents Framework is best positioned as a supportive resource rather than a prescriptive mandate. Parents are the primary decision-makers for their families, and the framework respects that authority while providing structure and language to make those decisions well-informed. Schools should present this as an empowerment tool: “We are equipping you to have the conversations that matter, not telling you what to decide.”

Distribution and engagement

Distribute the companion Family AI Planner (one-page summary) with enrolment packs, parent information evenings, and beginning-of-year communications. Host a dedicated parent information session (60–90 minutes) where families can explore the six domains together, try AI tools in a guided setting, and discuss their values and concerns. Include AI governance as a standing agenda item at parent forums and P&C/P&F meetings. Provide translated summaries for families where English is not the primary language. Consider pairing the framework with your school’s own AI policy so parents can see how home and school governance connect.

Ongoing support

AI is evolving rapidly, and one-off distribution will not be sufficient. Schools should plan for at least termly updates to families about developments in AI that affect students, annual review of the framework to ensure it reflects the current technology and regulatory landscape, and mechanisms for parents to ask questions and share concerns (a dedicated email address, a section on the school’s learning management system, or a parent AI governance group). Teacher professional learning should include understanding the Prompting Parents Framework so that school-home conversations are aligned.

Connecting to school policy

The six domains of the Prompting Parents Framework map directly to the governance areas most schools are already addressing in their own AI policies. Access and Boundaries connects to school acceptable use policies. Privacy and Data connects to school data governance and vendor management. Truth and Critical Thinking connects to information literacy and research skills curricula. Learning and Effort connects to academic integrity and assessment design. Wellbeing and Relationships connects to pastoral care and student wellbeing frameworks. Ethics and Responsibility connects to values education and digital citizenship. This alignment means that adopting the Prompting Parents Framework extends an existing governance commitment into the home.

A note directly to parents and carers

You may be reading this because your child's school shared it with you, or you may have found it independently. Either way, this section is written for you.

AI can feel overwhelming. The technology is moving fast, the terminology is unfamiliar, and your child may know more about specific tools than you do. That is completely normal. You do not need to become an AI expert to govern AI use in your home. What you need is the confidence to ask questions, set expectations, and stay curious alongside your child.

Here are five principles to guide you:

1. Start with curiosity, not fear. AI is a tool, and like all tools, its value depends on how it is used. Explore it together with your child. Ask questions. Try things. Be willing to say "I don't know, let's find out."

2. Your values matter more than your technical knowledge. You already have the most important thing you need: a clear sense of what matters to your family. Honesty, effort, kindness, safety, respect for others. AI governance at home is about applying those existing values to a new context.

3. Conversations beat controls. Parental controls and platform restrictions have a role, but they are not enough on their own. The most effective protection is an open, ongoing conversation where your child feels safe telling you what they are encountering online. Rules that children understand and have helped shape are more likely to be respected than restrictions imposed without discussion.

4. Imperfect governance is better than no governance. You do not need to address all six domains at once or get everything right the first time. Start with one domain that feels most relevant to your family. Have a single conversation. Set one expectation. Build from there.

5. Model the behaviour you want to see. Children learn from what you do, not just what you say. If you want your child to be transparent about their AI use, be transparent about yours. If you value critical thinking, demonstrate it by questioning AI outputs yourself. If you believe in effort over shortcuts, show that in your own relationship with technology.

> *Remember: the goal is not perfection. It is presence. Being engaged, informed, and willing to learn alongside your child is the most powerful governance tool you have.*

Quick reference: Prompting Parents at a glance

Domain	Core Question	Primary / Elementary Focus	Secondary / High School Focus
1. Access & Boundaries	What can my child use, when, and how?	Parent-led exploration. No independent AI accounts.	Collaborative boundary-setting. Know the tools. Respect age restrictions.
2. Privacy & Data	What is my child sharing, and where does it go?	Never share personal details with AI. Simple, concrete rules.	Review privacy settings together. Understand data practices.
3. Truth & Critical Thinking	Can my child evaluate what AI tells them?	AI guesses, it doesn't know. Play fact-checking games.	Understand hallucinations, bias, and deepfakes. Cross-reference sources.
4. Learning & Effort	Is AI helping my child learn, or replacing learning?	AI helps you explore. The thinking is yours.	Distinguish productive from unproductive use. Protect cognitive effort.
5. Wellbeing & Relationships	Is AI supporting or undermining my child's emotional health?	AI has no feelings. People are for feelings. Limit AI time.	No AI is a therapist. Watch for dependency and secrecy.
6. Ethics & Responsibility	Is my child using AI honestly and fairly?	The golden rule applies. Own your work.	Understand bias, integrity, environmental impact, and social implications.

Further Resources

For Parents

Common Sense Media AI Literacy Toolkit for Families – Free activities and conversation starters developed in partnership with Day of AI. Available at commonsense.org/education/families-ai-literacy-toolkit

UNICEF Parenting in the AI Age – Practical guidance for families on approaching AI with children, including advice from Harvard University researchers. Available at unicef.org/parenting

UNICEF AI Guide for Parents – Available in English, French, Spanish, and Arabic. A practical companion to the broader UNICEF Guidance on AI and Children.

Internet Matters: A Parent's Guide to AI – Interactive guide covering popular AI tools, family AI exploration, and a glossary. Available at internetmatters.org

eSafety Commissioner (Australia) – Information on social media age restrictions, online safety resources, and reporting mechanisms. Available at esafety.gov.au

For Schools

Brookings Institution: A New Direction for Students in an AI World (January 2026) – Comprehensive report on the prosper, prepare, protect framework for students in an AI-saturated environment.

UNICEF Guidance on AI and Children, Version 3 (2025) – Ten foundational requirements for child-centred AI governance, with implementation tools for policymakers and educators.

The Next Word: AI-Saturated Student Journey Maps – 57 microsteps across three assessment types, mapping how students interact with AI throughout the learning process. Contact nextwordnow.com/contact for a copy.

For ongoing learning

Learning about AI is not a one-time exercise. The technology, regulatory, and cultural landscape will continue to evolve. Parents and schools should commit to revisiting these domains regularly, at least once per term or semester. New tools will emerge, existing tools will change, and children will grow into new levels of capability and autonomy. The framework is designed to grow with them.

About this publication

This white paper was developed by The Next Word, an AI consultancy that works with K–12 schools across Australia. The Next Word partners with independent schools, Catholic dioceses, and school networks to help them take their next steps with AI strategy and implementation.

Prompting Parents was developed in response to a consistent pattern observed across school engagements: parents are hungry for guidance, but almost none is being provided. Schools that empower parents as governance partners create stronger, more sustainable AI cultures than those that treat AI as a school-only concern.

For more information, to arrange a parent information session at your school, or to discuss how Prompting Parents can be integrated into your school's AI governance strategy, contact The Next Word.

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