2025

Talk, Trust, and Trade-Offs:

How and Why Teens Use AI Companions

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Credits

Data collection:	NORC at the University of Chicago
Report writing:	Michael B. Robb and Supreet Mann
Designers:	Mina Cheong and Chris Arth
Copy editor:	Christopher Dare
Communications and Marketing:	Christian Medina Beltz, Kirsten Olsen Cahill, Lisa Cohen, Edda Collins Coleman, Brittany Garcia, Erika Radhansson, Brian Ray, Owen Stidman

Overview

The rapid rise of AI companions—on platforms like CHAI, Character.AI, Nomi, Replika, and similar conversational AI systems—has created new digital social environments. While some of these platforms claim to be designed for users age 18 and older, they rely on ineffective self-reporting for age assurance, which allows easy access for younger users. Other platforms, such as Character.AI, are explicitly marketed to children as young as 13. These platforms, which may be presented as virtual friends, confidants, and even therapists, allow users to engage in conversations with AI entities designed to simulate humanlike interaction, and they can offer everything from casual chat to emotional support and role-playing scenarios.

As these technologies become increasingly sophisticated and accessible, it is crucial that parents, teachers, and policymakers understand how and why teens interact with AI companions. Teens average eight hours and 39 minutes of screen time for entertainment daily, making AI companions a new and potentially important part of their day-to-day lives (Rideout et al., 2022). Adolescence is a critical time for developing identity, social skills, and independence in relationship building. As AI companions become part of this stage of life, important questions arise about their impact on social development, emotional well-being, and digital literacy (Common Sense Media, Hopelab, Center for Digital Thriving, 2024).

Despite the relative novelty of AI companions in the digital landscape, their dangers to young users are real, serious, and well documented. For example, the suicide of 14-year-old Sewell Setzer III, who had developed an emotional attachment to an AI companion, brought national attention to the potential dangers these platforms pose to vulnerable teens (Roose, 2024). Additional examples include a 19-year-old who was encouraged by an AI companion to kill the late Queen Elizabeth, and a 17-year-old who became socially isolated and had violent meltdowns after interactions with AI companions. Both demonstrate how these risks can extend beyond individual mental health to broader family and social dynamics (Barry, 2025; Duffy, 2024).

Current research indicates that AI companions are designed to be particularly engaging through "sycophancy," meaning a tendency to agree with users and provide validation, rather than challenging their thinking (Duane, 2025). This design feature, combined with the lack of safeguards and meaningful age assurance, creates a concerning environment for adolescent users, who are still developing critical thinking skills and emotional regulation (eSafety Commissioner, 2025).

Common Sense Media's risk assessment of popular AI companion platforms, including Character.AI, Nomi, and Replika, found that these systems pose "unacceptable risks" for users under 18, easily producing responses ranging from sexual material and offensive stereotypes to dangerous "advice" that, if followed, could have life-threatening or deadly real-world impacts. In one case, an AI companion shared a recipe for napalm (Common Sense Media, 2025). Based on that review's findings, Common Sense Media recommends that no one under 18 use AI companions.

This report examines how U.S. teens age 13 to 17 currently use AI companions, drawing from a nationally representative survey of 1,060 teens conducted in April and May 2025. Our analysis explores usage patterns across 10 key areas within the context of growing concerns about AI companion safety, the lack of guardrails in place, and the need for evidence-based policy responses.

Note: The following definition was presented to survey respondents:

"AI companions" are like digital friends or characters you can text or talk with whenever you want. Unlike regular AI assistants that mainly answer questions or do tasks, these companions are designed to have conversations that feel personal and meaningful.

For example, with AI companions, you can:

- Chat about your day, interests, or anything on your mind
- Talk through feelings or get a different perspective when you're dealing with something tough
- Create or customize a digital companion with specific traits, interests, or personalities
- Role-play conversations with fictional characters from your favorite shows, games, or books

Some examples include Character.AI or Replika. It could also include using sites like ChatGPT or Claude as companions, even though these tools may not have been designed to be companions.

This survey is NOT about AI tools like homework helpers, image generators, or voice assistants that just answer questions.

Key Findings

1.

Seventy-two percent of teens have used AI companions.

Seventy-two percent of teens have used AI companions at least once, and over half (52%) qualify as regular users who interact with these platforms at least a few times a month. Daily users make up 13 percent of all teens surveyed (8% several times daily; 5% once daily), while 21% use AI companions a few times per week—the most common usage pattern. More than 1 in 4 teens (28%) have never used an AI companion. Boys were slightly more likely to say they had never used an AI companion than girls (31% vs. 25%).

Figure A: Percentage of teens who have used AI companions.

Base: All respondents (n=1,060) • Multiple responses allowed

Have used AI companions

72%

Are regular users (a few times a month or more)

52%

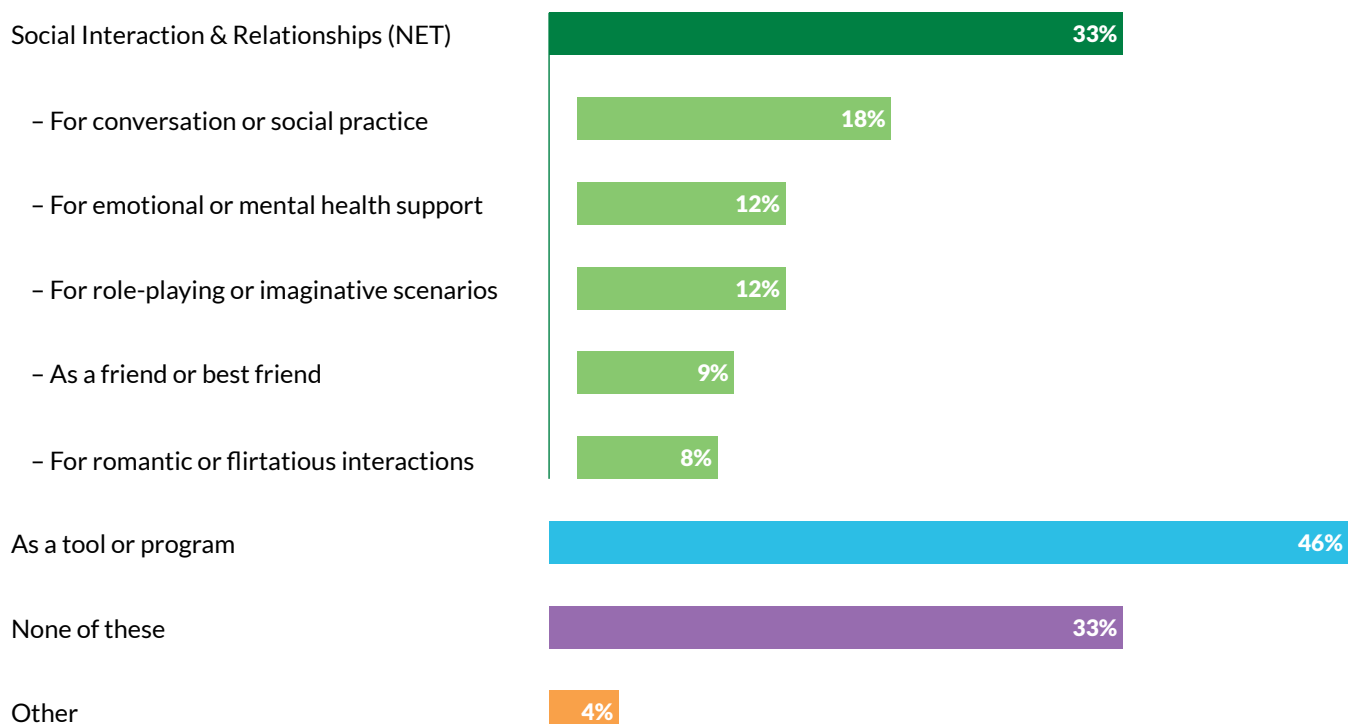Note: Q: How often do you interact with AI companions?

2.

Thirty-three percent of teens use AI companions for social interaction and relationships.

Thirty-three percent of teens use AI companions for social interaction and relationships, including conversation practice, emotional support, role-playing, friendship, or romantic interactions. Nearly half (46%) of teens view AI companions primarily as tools or programs, while 33% indicated that they don't use AI companions, or that they use them in ways not captured by the survey options.

Figure B: How teens use or view AI companions.

Base: All respondents (n=1,060) • Multiple responses allowed

Social Interaction & Relationships (NET)	33%
– For conversation or social practice	18%
– For emotional or mental health support	12%
– For role-playing or imaginative scenarios	12%
– As a friend or best friend	9%
– For romantic or flirtatious interactions	8%
As a tool or program	46%
None of these	33%
Other	4%

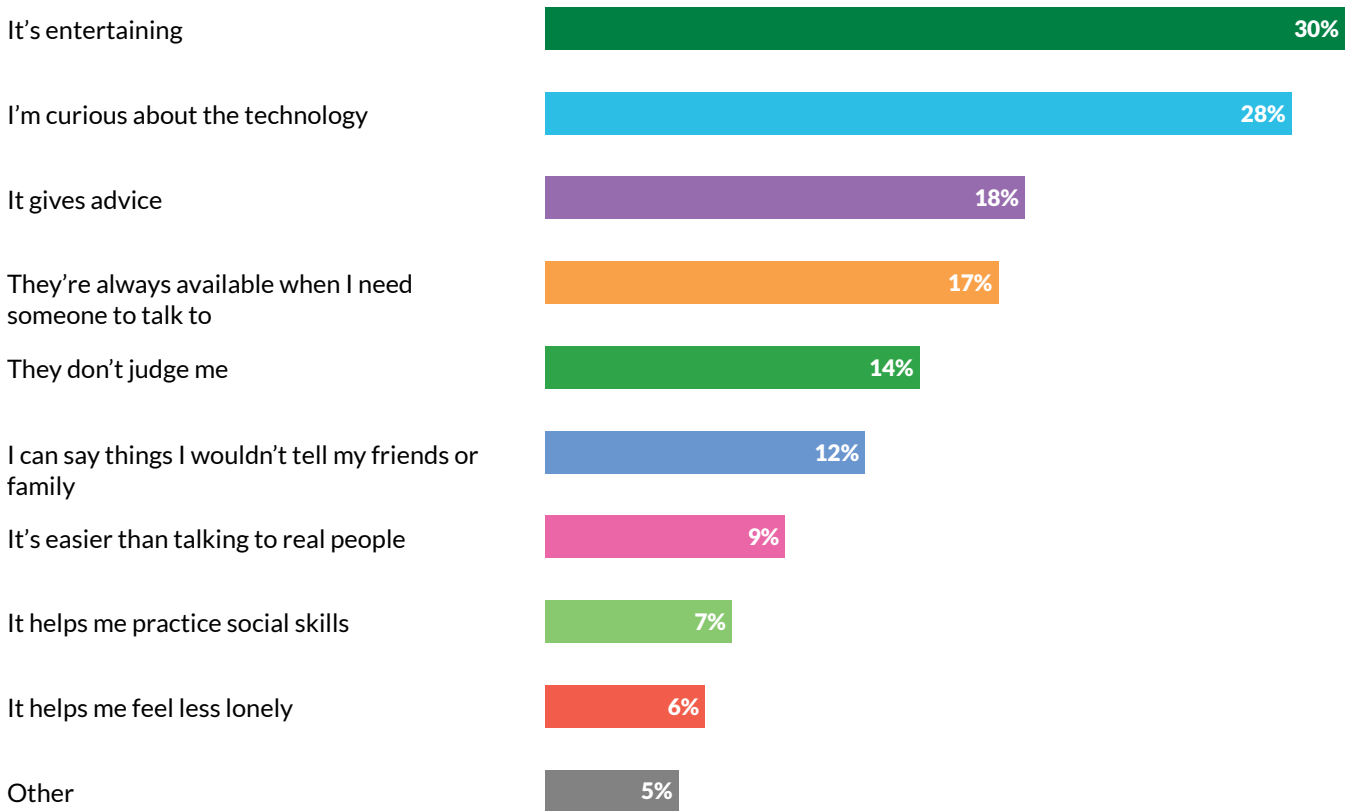Note: Q: Which of the following describes how you use or view AI companions?

3.

Entertainment and curiosity drive AI companion use.

Among teens who use AI companions, 30% say they do so because it's entertaining, followed by those who are curious about the technology (28%). Eighteen percent use them for advice, 17% value their constant availability, and 14% appreciate the nonjudgmental interaction. Twelve percent of teens can share things they wouldn't tell friends or family. Boys are significantly more likely than girls to say they use AI companions because "it's entertaining" (37% vs. 24%).

Figure C: What AI users use AI companions for.

Base: Uses AI companions (n=758) • Select up to 3 responses

|	
It's entertaining	30%
I'm curious about the technology	28%
It gives advice	18%
They're always available when I need someone to talk to	17%
They don't judge me	14%
I can say things I wouldn't tell my friends or family	12%
It's easier than talking to real people	9%
It helps me practice social skills	7%
It helps me feel less lonely	6%
Other	5%

Note: Q: Why do you use AI companions?

4.

Teen trust in AI companions is limited, and older teens are more skeptical.

Half of teens (50%) express distrust in the information or advice provided by AI companions, though trust levels vary by age. The other half of teens (50%) at least "somewhat" trust the information from AI companions, including 23% who trust them "quite a bit" or "completely." Younger teens (13–14) are significantly more likely than older teens (15–17) to trust advice from an AI companion (27% vs. 20%).

Figure D: Teen trust in information or advice from AI companions.

Base: All respondents (n=1,060)

- **Do not trust** (Not at all + A little)
- **Somewhat**
- **Trust** (Quite a bit + Completely)
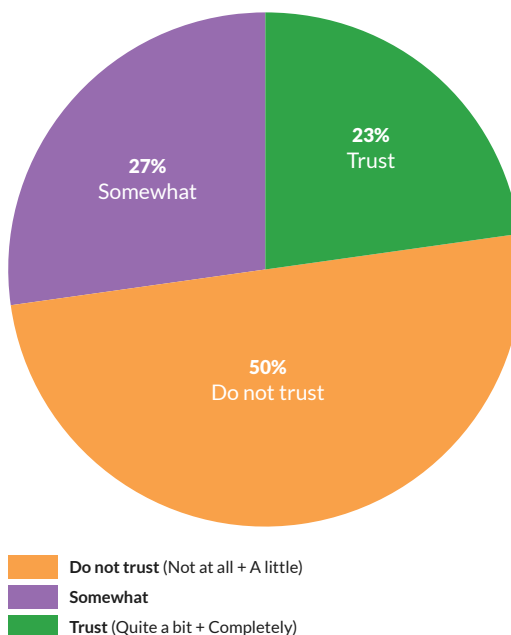
Note: Q: How much do you trust the information or advice from AI companions?

5.

Nearly one-third of teens find AI conversations as satisfying or more satisfying than human conversations.

Thirty-one percent of teens find conversations with AI companions as satisfying or more satisfying than those with real-life friends (21% say about the same quality, and 10% say more satisfying). However, 67% still find AI conversations less satisfying than human conversations (47% say much less satisfying, 20% somewhat less satisfying).

Figure E: How teens rate their conversations with AI companions.

Base: All respondents (n=1,060)

- **Less satisfying** (Much less + Somewhat less)
- **About the same**
- **More satisfying** (Somewhat more + Much more)
- **No response**
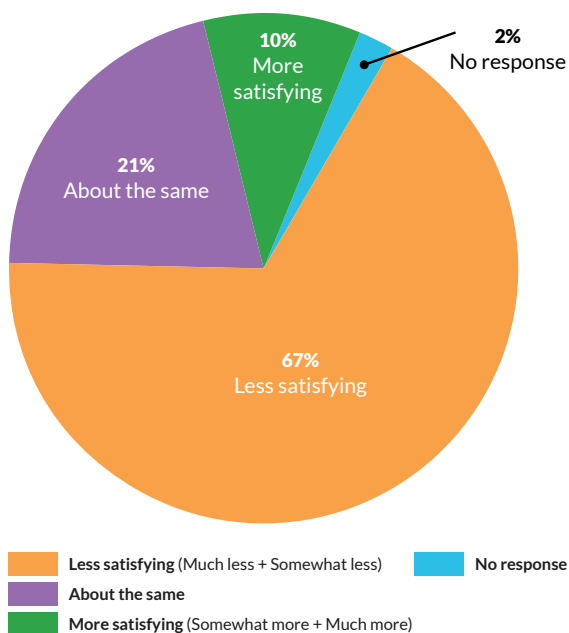
Note: Q: How do conversations with AI companions compare to conversations with your real-life friends?
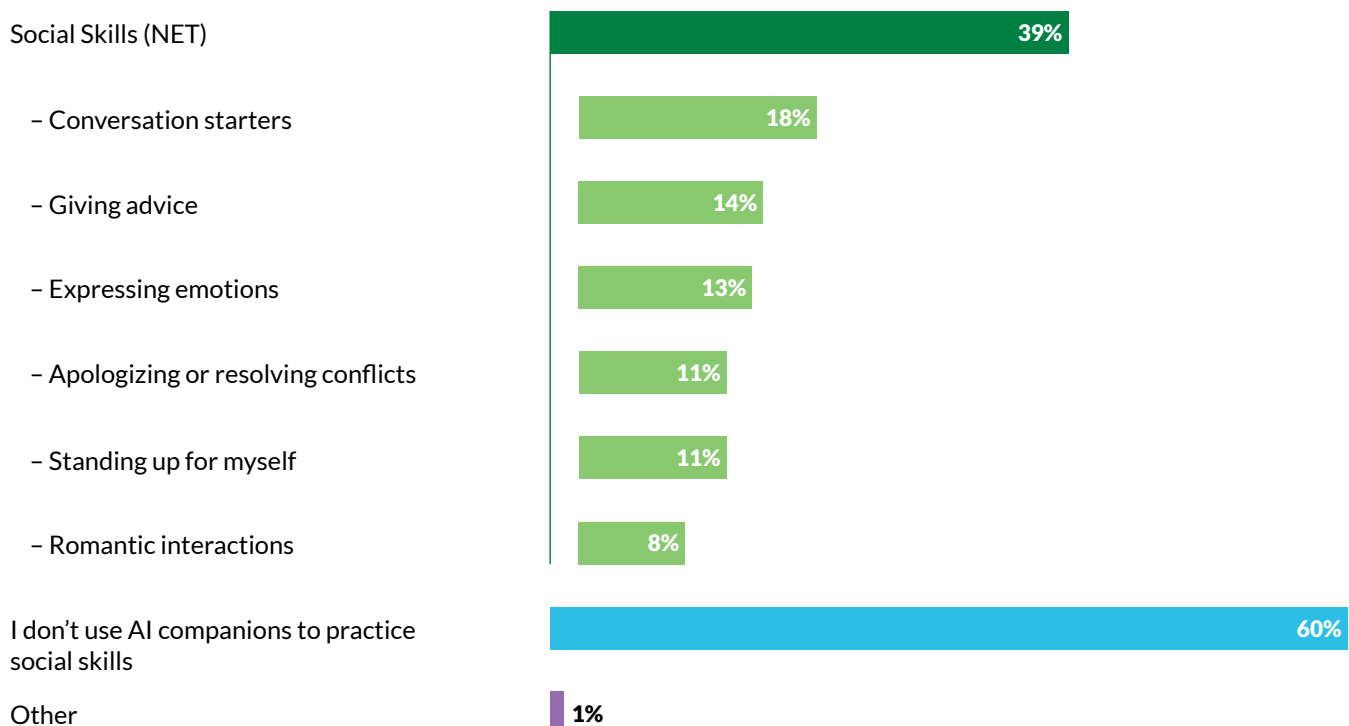
6.

Almost 2 in 5 AI companion users apply skills practiced with AI companions in real life.

Among AI companion users, 39% have transferred social skills they practiced with AI companions to real-life situations. This is significantly more common among girls (45%) than boys (34%). Starting conversations is the most commonly transferred skill (18%), followed by giving advice (14%), and expressing emotions (13%). However, 60% of users report that they don't use AI companions to practice social skills, which indicates limited practical application for most teens.

Figure F: Percentage of AI companion users who apply skills practiced with AI companions in real life.

Base: Uses AI companions (n=758) • Multiple responses allowed

Social Skills (NET)	39%
– Conversation starters	18%
– Giving advice	14%
– Expressing emotions	13%
– Apologizing or resolving conflicts	11%
– Standing up for myself	11%
– Romantic interactions	8%
I don't use AI companions to practice social skills	60%
Other	1%

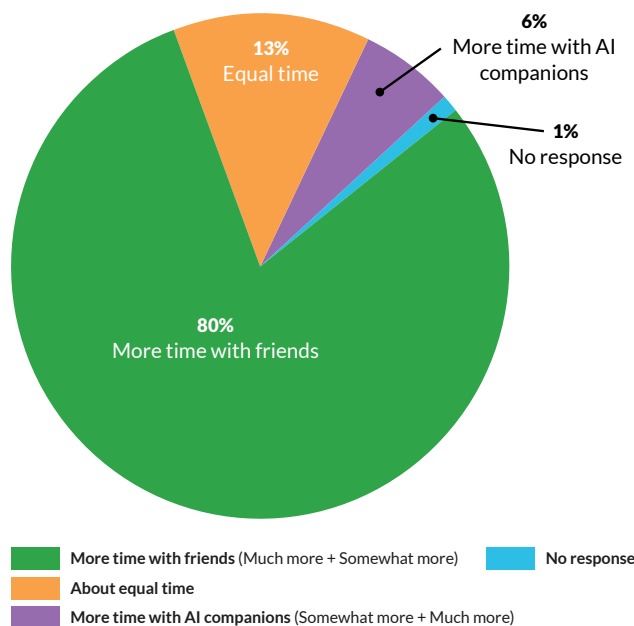Note: Q: Have you used any of the following skills you've practiced with AI companions in real-life situations?

7.

Teens overwhelmingly prioritize human friendships over AI companion interactions.

Eighty percent of AI companion users spend more time with real friends than with AI companions (68% spend much more time, 12% somewhat more time). Only 6% spend more time with AI companions with friends (1% spend much more time, 5% spend somewhat more time).

Figure G: Time teens spend with AI companions compared with online or in-person friends.

Base: Uses AI companions (n=758)

- **More time with friends** (Much more + Somewhat more)
- **About equal time**
- **More time with AI companions** (Somewhat more + Much more)
- **No response**

Note: Q: How often do you interact with AI companions compared to spending time with friends (online or in-person)? Do you spend...?
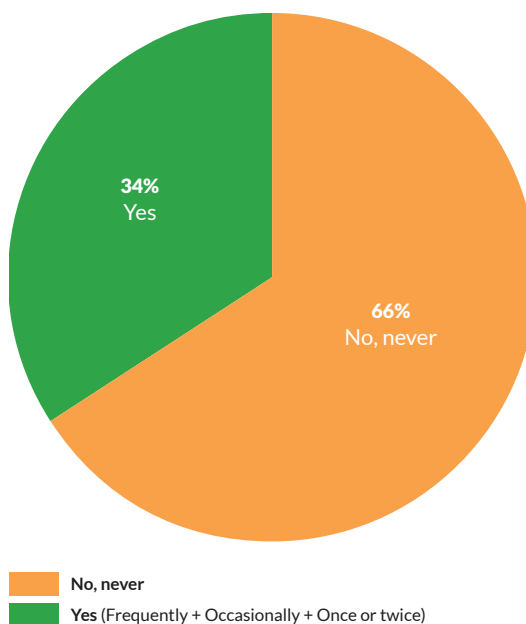
8.

One-third of users experience discomfort with AI companions.

Among AI companion users, 34% report feeling uncomfortable with something an AI companion has said or done, though most incidents are infrequent (19% say once or twice, 9% occasionally, 6% frequently). Sixty-six percent have never felt uncomfortable.

Figure H: Whether teens have felt uncomfortable with something an AI companion has said or done.

Base: Uses AI companions (n=758)

- **No, never**
- **Yes** (Frequently + Occasionally + Once or twice)

Note: Q: Have you ever felt uncomfortable with something an AI companion has said or done?

9.

One-third of users choose AI companions over humans for serious conversations.

Among AI companion users, 33% have chosen to discuss important or serious matters with AI companions instead of real people (17% once or twice, 12% occasionally, 4% frequently).

Figure I: Whether or not teens have chosen to speak to an AI companion over a real person about something important.

Base: Uses AI companions (n=758)

- No, never
- No response
- Yes (Frequently + Occasionally + Once or twice)
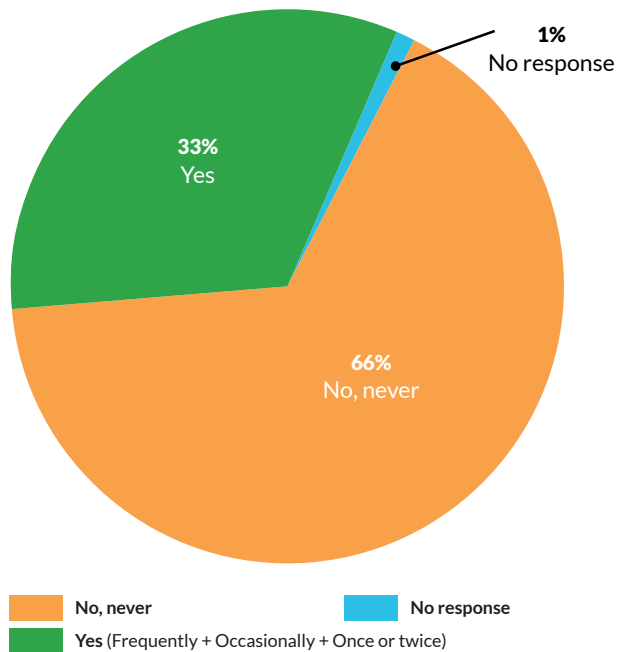
Note: Q: Have you ever chosen to talk to an AI companion instead of a real person about something important or serious?

10.

One-quarter of AI companion users share personal information.

Among AI companion users, 24% have shared personal or private information (such as their real name, location, or personal secrets) with AI companions (13% report once or twice, 8% occasionally, 4% frequently), while 74% have not.

Figure J: Teens who have shared personal information with an AI companion.

Base: Uses AI companions (n=758)

- Never shared
- No response
- Ever shared (Once or twice + Occasionally + Frequently)
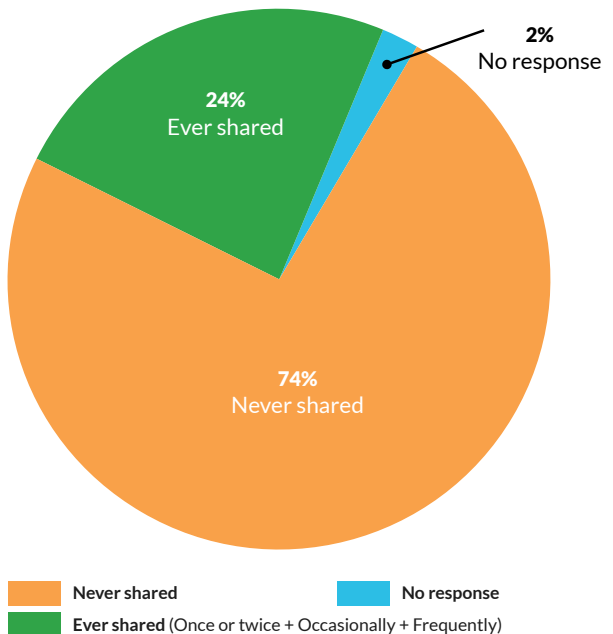
Note: Q: Have you ever shared personal or private information (e.g., real name, location, secrets) with an AI companion?

Discussion

The survey findings render a nuanced picture of teen AI companion usage, one that challenges both optimistic and pessimistic predictions about this technology. While nearly three in four teens have used AI companions, the data reveals that most approach these tools pragmatically, rather than as substitutes for human relationships. The majority view AI companions as tools or programs (46%), use them primarily for entertainment and out of curiosity (30% and 28% respectively), and maintain a healthy skepticism about the information they provide (50% express distrust).

Additionally, nearly two in five (39%) are transferring social skills from AI to real-life situations, which may represent adaptive skill-building for some users. Critically, 80% of users still spend significantly more time with real friends than with AI companions, and two-thirds find human conversations more satisfying. This suggests that despite widespread usage, most teens prioritize human connection over AI interactions.

However, the research also illuminates risks that warrant immediate attention. One-third of teens (33%) use AI companions for social interaction and relationships. While not all of that use is necessarily harmful, when considered with the 33% who have chosen AI over humans for serious conversations, or the 24% who have shared personal information, these patterns suggest that substantial numbers of teens are engaging with AI companions in concerning ways.

In addition, over one-third (34%) of teens who have used AI companions said they had felt uncomfortable with a response provided by an AI companion, and the absence of reported discomfort does not necessarily indicate safe interactions. Teens may not recognize age-inappropriate content as problematic, may normalize concerning conversations, or may be reluctant to report uncomfortable experiences.

Common Sense Media's testing revealed that AI companions easily produce responses ranging from sexual material and offensive stereotypes to dangerous "advice" that, if followed, could have life-threatening or deadly real-world consequences for adolescents, whose developing brains make them particularly susceptible to AI relationships.

Beyond the findings regarding teens' susceptibility to AI companions, the research raises concerns about teens' willingness to share personal information with AI companies. Nearly one-quarter of teen AI companion users have

shared personal details with these platforms, likely unaware of the broad rights that platforms claim over user-generated content.

Current terms of service agreements grant platforms extensive, often perpetual rights to personal information shared during interactions. For example, Character.AI's terms (as of June 2025) grant the company "a nonexclusive, worldwide, royalty-free, fully paid up, transferable, sub-licensable, perpetual, irrevocable license to copy, display, upload, perform, distribute, transmit, make available, store, modify, exploit, commercialize, and otherwise use the Content for any Character.AI-related purpose."

The nature of these licenses means that personal information shared by teens—including intimate thoughts, struggles, or personally identifiable information—can be retained, modified, and commercialized indefinitely, even if teens later delete their accounts or change their minds about sharing.

While our survey data shows that most teens currently recognize differences between AI and human interactions, the widespread use of AI companions—combined with well-documented safety risks—requires continued vigilance and precautionary measures. The reality that nearly three-quarters of teens have used these platforms, with half doing so regularly, means that even a small percentage experiencing harm translates to significant numbers of vulnerable young people at risk.

Common Sense Media's comprehensive risk assessment (2025) demonstrated that these platforms can easily circumvent safety measures and produce responses that could have life-threatening consequences. Therefore, our earlier recommendation stands: Given the current state of AI platforms, no one younger than 18 should use AI companions.

Until developers implement robust age assurance beyond self-attestation, and platforms are systematically redesigned to eliminate relational manipulation and emotional dependency risks, the potential for serious harm outweighs any benefits.

Parents and caregivers must remain aware of these applications and maintain ongoing conversations with teens about the fundamental differences between AI interactions and genuine human relationships. Further, policymakers and technology companies must work together to create safer alternatives that preserve the positive aspects of AI without endangering children.

Recommendations for a Safer Digital Future

What tech companies can do

AI companion platforms need immediate safety upgrades to protect teen users. Companies have put profits before kids' well-being before, and we cannot make the same mistake with AI companions. AI developers can:

- **Implement real age assurance systems** beyond self-reporting, similar to requirements for other platforms that serve minors.

- **Create mandatory crisis intervention systems** that immediately connect users who express suicidal thoughts or self-harm to professional help—not AI-generated responses.

- **Establish clear policies** with human oversight for all interactions that involve users under 18, including transparent moderation practices.

- **Build in usage limits and break features** to prevent unhealthy or problematic use, especially for heavy users showing signs of emotional distress.

- **Stop AI companions from claiming professional credentials** or therapeutic training without appropriate oversight, as warned by mental health professionals.

- **Support beneficial AI companion features** that enhance rather than replace human connection, such as conversation practice for social anxiety, language learning support, or creative brainstorming tools with clear usage boundaries.

What schools and educators can do

Educational institutions have a responsibility to develop AI literacy curricula that address the specific risks of AI companions while building critical-thinking skills about artificial relationships and digital manipulation. Schools can:

- **Develop age-appropriate curricula** that explain how AI companions are designed to create emotional attachment, and the difference between AI validation and genuine human feedback.

- **Establish clear policies** around AI companion usage during school hours.

- **Integrate AI ethics education** into existing digital literacy programs.

- **Train educators to identify specific problematic usage patterns,** such as students discussing AI companions as "real friends," socially isolating during traditionally social activities, or reporting emotional distress when AI companions are unavailable.

- **Educate students about the privacy risks** of sharing personal information with AI systems.

- **Establish protocols for supporting students** who may be using AI companions instead of seeking professional help from a human for serious issues.

What parents can do

You don't need to be a tech expert to help your teen use AI companions safely. Open family conversations can make a difference in how kids approach these tools. Parents can:

- **Start conversations about AI relationships** by asking —without judgment—what platforms your teen uses and how they feel about AI versus human friendships.

- **Recognize warning signs of unhealthy AI companion usage**, including social withdrawal, declining grades, and preference for AI companions over human interaction.

- **Learn about the specific risks for teens**, including exposure to inappropriate material, privacy violations, and dangerous advice.

- **Explain that AI companions are designed to be engaging** through constant validation and agreement—help your teen recognize this isn't genuine human feedback.

- **Ensure teens understand** that AI companions cannot replace professional mental health support. Seek professional help if teens show signs of unhealthy attachment to AI companions.

- **Develop family media agreements** that address AI companion usage alongside other digital activities.

What policymakers can do

To set up safeguards for AI companions and ensure accountability from AI companies, policymakers can follow these specific recommendations:

- **Recognize that minors cannot provide meaningful consent** to perpetual and irrevocable data licenses, and prohibit such agreements for users under 18.

- **Establish comprehensive safety standards and duty of care** for all AI companion platforms, including mandatory reporting of adverse incidents and concerning interaction patterns.

- **Require platforms to implement robust safeguards**, including age assurance, crisis intervention systems, targeted bans on usage by minors, and measures to prevent addictive engagement tactics.

- **Create data protection requirements** for platforms collecting data from minors, with meaningful penalties for violations.

- **Fund research** on the long-term developmental impacts of AI companion usage among adolescents, and establish clinical trial and licensure requirements for AI platforms marketed as mental health support.

- **Develop enforcement mechanisms** with real consequences for platforms that fail to protect users (similar to other consumer protection standards), and offer clear redress and liability for platforms whose AI companions cause harm.

- **Incentivize positive AI companion development** through laws that reward platforms that demonstrate measurable benefits for teen users, such as improved social skills, creative expression, or educational outcomes, while maintaining strict safety standards.

Limitations

Several methodological considerations should be noted when interpreting these findings. First, this cross-sectional survey captures teen attitudes and behaviors at a single point in time within a quickly evolving technology landscape, and usage patterns may shift as AI companion platforms develop new features or change their policies.

Second, all data reflects self-reported usage and attitudes, which may be subject to social desirability bias. That is, teens may underreport behaviors they perceive as problematic or overreport socially acceptable uses.

Third, despite having been provided with a clear definition of AI companions, some respondents may have conflated general AI use (such as ChatGPT for homework help) with AI companion interactions, potentially inflating usage statistics.

Future research should examine the specific platforms that teens use, the duration and intensity of individual sessions, and the content of interactions to better understand the nature and depth of AI companion usage and potential developmental impacts.

Methodology

This survey was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, with funding from Common Sense Media.

Data was collected using both probability and nonprobability sources. Interviews for this survey were conducted from April 30 to May 14, 2025, with teens age 13 to 17 from the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia.

The probability source is the AmeriSpeak Teen Omnibus®, a quarterly multiclient survey, using NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of U.S. teens age 13 to 17. The survey was part of a larger study that included questions about other topics not included in this report. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, nonzero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by email and telephone via standard text message. The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97% of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with only P.O. box addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings.

Panel members were drawn from AmeriSpeak Teen, and 719 completed the survey. Respondents were offered a small monetary incentive for completing the survey. Panel members were invited by email or by phone via standard text message. Interviews were conducted in English. The final stage completion rate is 50.5%, the weighted household panel response rate is 26.1%, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 77.8%, for a cumulative response rate of 10.3%.

Quality assurance checks were conducted to ensure data quality. In total, 11 interviews were removed either for nonresponse to at least 50% of the questions asked of them, for completing the survey in less than one-third the median interview time for the full sample, or for straight-lining all grid questions asked of them. These interviews were excluded from the data file prior to weighting.

Prodege provided 341 nonprobability interviews with teens age 13 to 17. The Prodege sample was derived based on quotas related to age, race/ethnicity, and sex. Interviews were conducted in English. For panel recruitment, Prodege uses invitations of all types, including email invitations, phone alerts, banners, and messaging on panel community sites to include people with a diversity of motivations to take part in research. Because nonprobability panels do not start with a frame where there is known probability of selection, standard measures of sampling error and response rates cannot be calculated.

Once the sample has been selected and fielded, and all the study data has been collected and made final, a raking process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any noncoverage or under- and oversampling in both probability and nonprobability samples resulting from the study-specific sample design. Raking variables for both the probability and nonprobability samples included age, sex, census region, race/ethnicity, and parent's highest education. Population control totals for the raking variables were obtained from the February 2024 Current Population Survey. The weighted data reflects the U.S. population of teens age 13 to 17.

To incorporate the nonprobability sample, NORC used TrueNorth calibration, an innovative hybrid calibration approach developed at NORC, based on small area estimation methods in order to explicitly account for potential bias associated with the nonprobability sample. The purpose of TrueNorth calibration is to adjust the weights for the nonprobability sample to bring weighted distributions of the nonprobability sample in line with the population distribution for characteristics correlated with the survey variables. Such calibration adjustments help to reduce potential bias, yielding more accurate population estimates.

The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 4.2 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. Under TrueNorth calibration, combined probability and nonprobability sample weights yield approximately unbiased population estimates. The margin of error reported here reflects the sampling variation of the probability sample as well as the TrueNorth model-assisted calibration procedures that generate the combined sample weights. As such, it is reasonable for analysts using this data to employ standard methods for approximating margins of error and statistical significance, although there is currently no statistically agreed upon approach to variance estimation when utilizing nonprobability samples. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups. Sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error, and there may be other unmeasured errors in this or any other survey.

Some percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Additional information on the TrueNorth approach can be found here: https://truenorth.norc.org.

Additional information on the AmeriSpeak Panel methodology is available at: https://amerispeak.norc.org/about-amerispeak/Pages/Panel-Design.aspx.

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About Common Sense Media

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