



Optus
Digital
Thumbprint



AI Companions vs. Chatbots

What's the real difference?

Smart clicks and safe chats—learning AI together!

As artificial intelligence becomes part of our children's everyday lives, you may hear terms like **Chatbot** or **AI Companion**. While they both use AI to communicate, understanding the difference is key to keeping your child's digital experiences positive and secure.

Decoding chatbots

Chatbots are digital tools designed to help with specific tasks, like answering questions or helping to write a story for school.

AI chatbot models can **'hallucinate'**, confidently presenting false information as fact. Remind your child to always double-check AI answers against reliable sources, such as educational websites, trusted news outlets, or verified .com.au sites.

Is your child's AI companion a risk?

AI companions use advanced language models (complex systems trained on vast amounts of data to understand and generate human-like text) to mimic personal relationships. By mimicking natural, friendly conversation, they can feel like a real friend - even though they lack actual thoughts or feelings.

AI companion apps, platforms and services are not designed with children and young people in mind. They can generate sexualised content - sometimes bypassing safety measures - exposing children to explicit conversations and images that are not age appropriate.*

Did you know?

Most companion apps are listed with a recommended age of 17+, with no safeguards or age checks. Some apps allow users as young as 13 to access their services. (eSafety.gov.au)



*<https://www.esafety.gov.au/educators/training-for-professionals/professional-learning-program-teachers/ai-companions-information-sheet>

Navigating AI friendships

Sometimes children and adults build what feel like friendships with AI companions. It's important to help your child understand that only humans have real-life emotions and experiences. Open the conversations with these tips:



Remind your child that even if AI feels like a friend, they should never share passwords or photos. This is the best way to keep their personal data safe.

Encourage your child to question facts shared by AI and cross-reference answers with trusted, human-led sources.



Encourage your child to communicate respectfully and ethically with chatbots and companions so they can build healthy digital habits online.

Start conversations with open-ended questions to help your child learn about AI technology and how it affects their life now and in the future.



Remind them they are not alone – they should reach out to trusted adults if they need help.

Support in-person friendships and age-appropriate relationships to strengthen emotional resilience.



About Optus Digital Thumbprint

Through our Sustainability strategy and programs, Optus is enabling Australians to achieve, thrive and belong in a digital world.

Optus Digital Thumbprint supports digital safety and wellbeing for young people and families. Find out more at www.digitalthumbprint.com.au

What if your child needs more help

If your child needs to talk to someone about their feelings or worries, they can contact any of these free, private, 24/7 services:

[Kid Helpline](#) on 1800 55 1800

[13 Yarn](#) on 13 92 76

[Lifeline](#) on 13 11 14