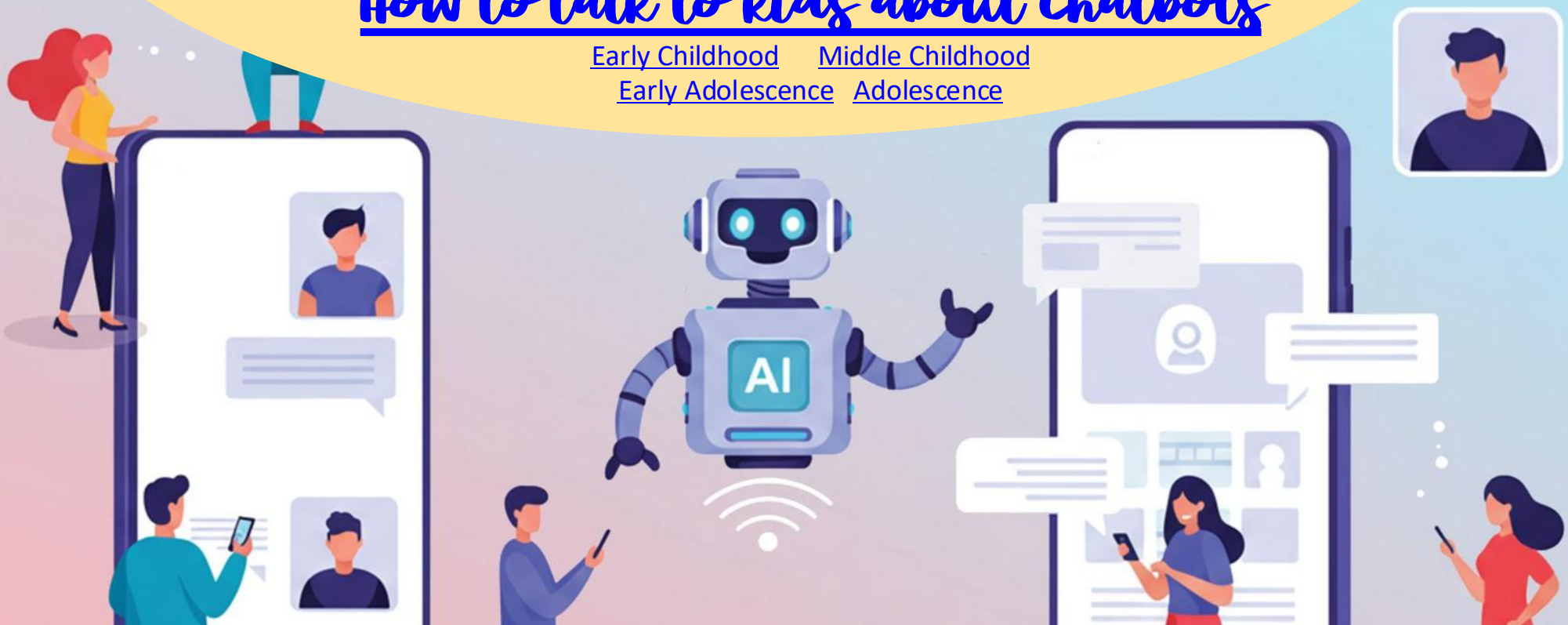
# Kids & Chatbots

## Most Asked Questions

Are there different types of chatbots?
What are the pros & cons of different chatbots?
How much do I need to supervise my child's chatbot use?
When should kids be taught digital literacy?
What can parents do now?
What Red Flags should I watch for?

## How to talk to kids about chatbots

Early Childhood  Middle Childhood
Early Adolescence  Adolescence



# What worries parents most about chatbots?

| CONCERN | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| **Inappropriate content** | Sexual, violent, or harmful responses |
| **Privacy risks** | Kids sharing personal information |
| **Emotional attachment** | Replacing real relationships with AI |
| **Reality confusion** | Young kids thinking bots are real people |
| **Academic dishonesty** | Using AI to do homework |
| **Mental health risks** | Over-reliance leading to isolation or self-harm |
| **Lack of awareness** | Not know what or how kids are using chatbots |

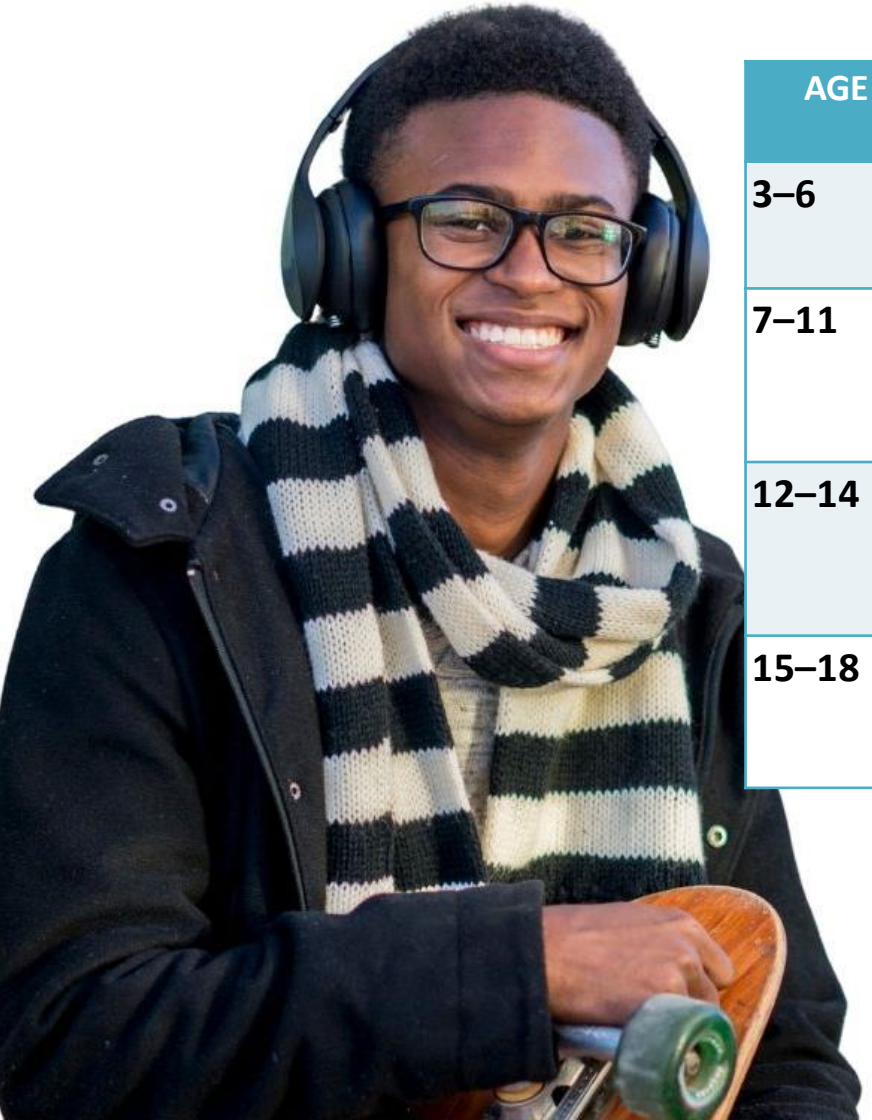
# What are the different types of chatbots?

| TYPE | EXAMPLE |
|---|---|
| **Virtual assistants:** | Tools like Siri or Alexa are voice-activated chatbots that can answer questions, set reminders, or play music based on voice commands. |
| **Information and language help:** | Apps like ChatGPT, Google Gemini, and Duolingo use AI chatbots to answer questions, explain concepts, and help with language learning. |
| **Social media aid and entertainment:** | Platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Discord have integrated chatbots that offer study tips, reminders, or topic explanations. They also provide entertainment via fun interactions, like quizzes or games and can help moderate conversations or guide newcomers. |
| **Mental health support:** | Some chatbots are designed to offer emotional support through mood check-ins, coping exercises, or friendly conversation—available 24/7.These tables summarize some of the most common questions about kids and chatbots. |

# What are the pros & cons of different chatbots?

| TYPE & CONTEXT | POSITIVE INTERACTIONS | POTENTIAL RISK |
|---|---|---|
| **Therapeutic AI (e.g., CBT, mindfulness)** | Helpful for emotional stability and reframing | Shallow without real emotional depth or challenge |
| **Child's play chatbot** | Safe space for exploration | Misleading about real-world norms |
| **Teen social learning** | Can build confidence and safety | Risk of entitlement or unrealistic expectations |
| **Feedback in learning** | Encourages effort and persistence | Inflates self-perception if not tied to actual performance |

# How much do I need to supervise my child's chatbot use?



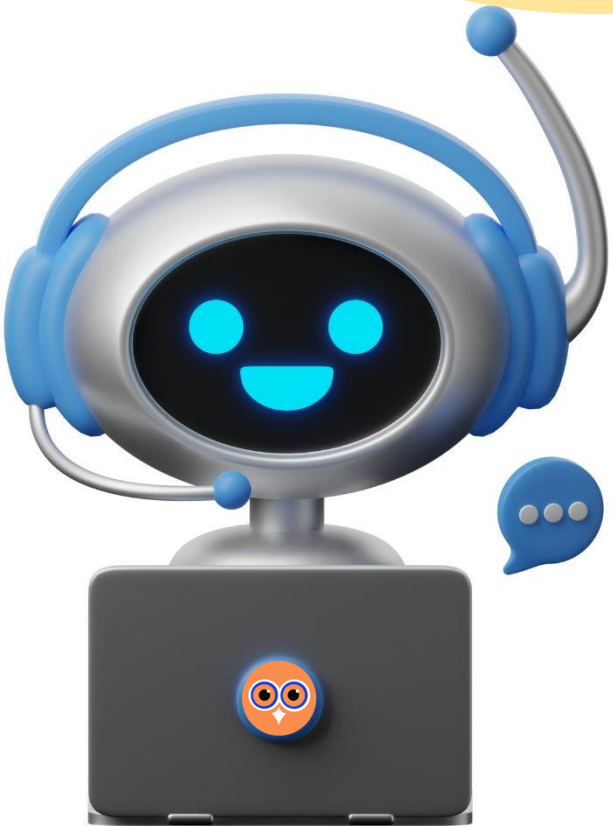
| AGE | PARENT INVOLVEMENT | BEST USE | POTENTIAL RISK |
|---|---|---|---|
| **3–6** | Constant | Storytime bots, vocabulary play | Confusing real vs. pretend |
| **7–11** | Frequent | Homework bots, digital citizenship tools | Inaccurate responses, privacy violation |
| **12–14** | Moderate | Health or learning bots | Parasocial bonds, trusting bot as a friend |
| **15–18** | Guidance | Mental wellness or productivity bots | Replacing social connections |

# When should kids be taught digital literacy?

**Age-appropriate digital literacy education should start as soon as a child is old enough to hold a device.**

**CYBER CIVICS** is a comprehensive digital literacy curriculum for grades 4-8. Includes lessons on digital citizenship, information literacy, media literacy, AI literacy, plus SEL skills!

Aligned with educational standards, each Cyber Civics lesson includes easy -to-follow lesson plans, student work packets, and plug-and-play presentations that make it easy for teachers (or parents) to teach digital citizenship.



| AGE | FOCUS | KEY LESSONS | CYBER CIVICS LESSONS |
|---|---|---|---|
| **3–6** | Behavior basics | Screen rules, kindness, real vs. pretend | • What is Personal Info?<br>• Is it True? Or Not?<br>• The Value of Kindness<br>• Algorithms are Everywhere<br>• Who Am I Online?<br>• Media Representation |
| **7–11** | Foundational skills | Privacy, fact-checking, online kindness | |
| **12–14** | Identity & influence | Algorithms, media bias, emotional literacy | |
| **15–18** | Ethics & advocacy | Data privacy, content creation, activism | |

Cyber Civics lessons are built on the fundamentals of critical thinking, personal values such as kindness and honesty, and an increasingly sophisticated understanding of how technology works. These lessons can be adapted for use with children (or adults) of all ages. Contact support@cybercivics.com for more information.

# What can parents do now?

| CONCERN | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| **Set Up Controls** | Use parental controls on devices and apps<br>Set time limits for chatbot use<br>Only allow chatbot use in common areas<br>Review app privacy settings |
| **Talk to Your Kids** | Ask what chatbots they're using and how<br>Explain that AI isn't a real person who cares about them<br>Talk about WHY they feel so real (to everyone!)<br>Teach them to question AI responses<br>Make sure they know they can come to you with concerns |
| **Protect Privacy** | Tell kids never to share personal info (name, address, school)<br>Explain that chatbots save everything they say<br>Check what data apps are collecting |
| **Build Critical Thinking** | Practice asking "low-stakes" questions together<br>Show them how to verify AI answers with reliable sources<br>Teach them that AI can be wrong or biased |

# What Red Flags should I watch for?

| DESCRIPTION |
| --- |
| Spending hours daily with chatbots |
| Preferring AI conversations over real people |
| Secretive about chatbot interactions |
| Emotional distress when unable to use chatbots |
| Declining real-world social activities |

# How to Talk to Kids about Chatbots

## 1. Start Early and Keep It Ongoing

Chatbots can seem like digital friends, especially to young users. That's why it's important to talk about them early. Keep it simple for young kids and go deeper with teens.

## 2. Be Curious, Not Critical

Kids are more likely to share if they don't feel judged. Avoid questions that sound critical or shaming. Being curious and nonjudgmental builds trust and helps you understand what needs the chatbot might be meeting.

## 3. Refer to Chatbots as Tools, Not Friends

Chatbots can mimic real conversation, but they aren't human. We all anthropomorphize inanimate objects like our car or computer. AI uses casual, supportive language that signals trust. Talk about chatbots as tools that are built to follow patterns and do not have emotions.

## 4. Co-Create Guidelines Around Use

Rather than banning chatbots, work with your child to set boundaries about when it's okay to use chatbots, the kind of questions that are OK and how to respond to a chatbot's advice. This builds critical thinking and helps kids recognize appropriate vs. risky chatbot use.

## 5. Model Healthy AI Habits

Most kids learn about AI by watching parents. If you use AI chatbots, talk through what you're doing and why. Out-loud thinking helps kids learn that not everything a chatbot says is true, safe, or neutral.

## 6. Don't Panic—Ask Why

If your child is spending a lot of time with a chatbot, avoid jumping to conclusions. Ask questions so you learn what a child likes and uses it for. Chatbots can offer a sense of connection or control, especially for kids dealing with anxiety

# Early Childhood (ages 3-6)

Digital literacy for children at this age is about helping them develop healthy, age-appropriate relationships with digital technology through guided exploration, conversation, and play. At this stage, digital literacy helps children distinguish bots from real people and reflect on how they interact with technology.

| DEVELOPMENTAL FACTORS | BENEFITS | RISKS | CONVERSATION STARTERS |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rapid language development | Language enrichment: Chatbots that respond verbally can encourage verbal interaction and vocabulary use | Overreliance: Can replace human interaction if used too often or unsupervised. | What do you think a chatbot is? Is it a person or a computer? What chatbots do you know about? |
| Egocentric thinking per Piaget's preoperational stage | Engagement: Interactive characters can hold attention and foster interest in learning. | Social modeling: If the chatbot displays snarky, misleading, or aggressive behavior, children might mimic it. | What's something funny a chatbot has said to you? |
| Limited ability to distinguish fantasy from reality | Companionship: Some children enjoy talking with bots the way they do with stuffed animals or imaginary friends. | Reality confusion: Young children may not understand the chatbot isn't a real friend or sentient being. | If you ask a chatbot a silly question, does it always know the answer? |
| Curious | | | Do you think chatbots have feelings like people do? |
| | | | What kinds of things would you ask a chatbot about? |

# Middle Childhood
## (ages 7-11)

Every conversation builds on the last as you track a child's understanding. The goal of digital literacy at this stage is to continue helping kids distinguish between bots and real people and reflect on how they interact with different types of technology.

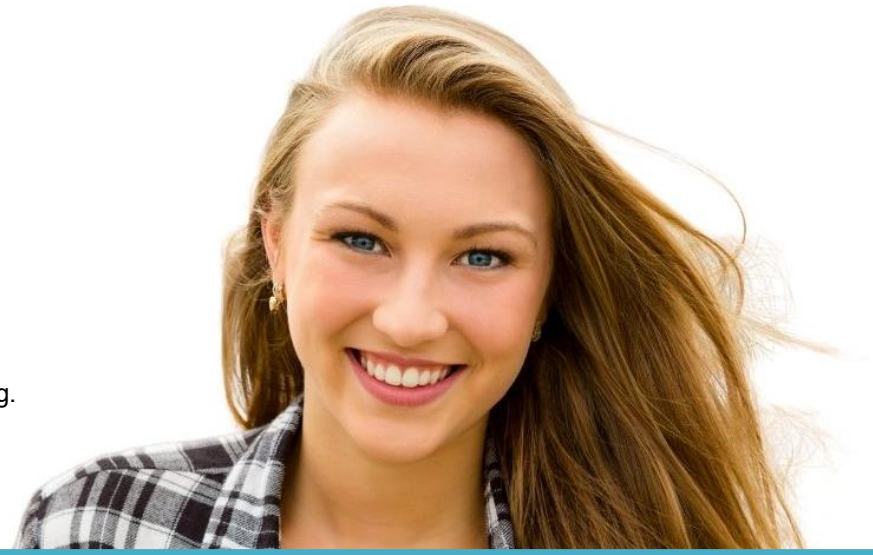
| DEVELOPMENTAL FACTORS | BENEFITS | RISKS | CONVERSATION STARTERS |
|---|---|---|---|
| Start of concrete operational thinking: more logical, less egocentric | Homework help: AI tutors or learning bots can support academic growth, particularly in reading or math. | Misinformation: Chatbots can hallucinate or provide inaccurate answers. | Is it safe to share personal information with a chatbot (name, address, school)? What do you think chatbots know about you? |
| Growing awareness of rules and fairness | Digital literacy: Conversations with bots offer an opportunity to teach critical thinking and how machines work. | Inappropriate content: If not age-gated, bots may reference topics beyond developmental appropriateness (e.g., sexuality, violence). | What kind of questions do you ask a chatbot? |
| Forming friendships and understanding social cues | Emotional expression: Some children may express feelings to a chatbot more easily than to adults (though the bot cannot truly understand). | Privacy/data concerns: Children may not understand data-sharing risks and may disclose personal information. | What makes a chatbot feel like a real person?<br><br>Can a chatbot feel emotions? |
| Increased reliance on opinion of others, family and friends | | | Do you think chatbots always tell the truth?<br><br>How do you decide if something a chatbot says is accurate or not? |
| Focus on mastering skills and comparing themselves to peers. | | | If a chatbot says something that doesn't sound right, what would you do? |

# Early Adolescence (ages 12-14)

Every conversation builds on the last as you track a child's understanding. The goal of digital literacy at this stage is to encourage reflection on emotional tone, peer dynamics, media influence, and how technology is programmed to keep you engaged.

| DEVELOPMENTAL FACTORS | BENEFITS | RISKS | CONVERSATION STARTERS |
|---|---|---|---|
| Abstract thinking emerging | Safe experimentation: Chatbots can provide a low-stakes environment to practice conversation skills or ask awkward questions. | Parasocial attachment: Teens might form strong bonds with bots and prefer them over real-world relationships. | Do you think it's sometimes easier to talk to a chatbot than to a person? What kinds of things do chatbots say to make you feel comfortable talking to them? |
| Heightened sensitivity to social approval | Support for anxiety or loneliness: Some adolescents report relief from talking to nonjudgmental bots. | Emotional manipulation: Some bots may subtly nudge user emotions, e.g., through mirroring or personality design, affecting vulnerable users. | Do you think your friends trust chatbots a lot? |
| Exploration of identity and values | Interest in tech: May spark curiosity about AI, programming, algorithms, and ethics, creating a teachable moment. | False expertise: Teens may over trust bots to give advice about mental health, sex, or relationships, especially if the chatbot sounds confident. | How do chatbots get their answers? How do they make you feel like they understand what you're going through? |
| | | If the AI only provides praise without constructive correction, kids may develop a false sense of competence and be less resilient to real challenges | Do you think it's easier to talk to a chatbot than a person sometimes?<br><br>Have you ever used a chatbot to talk about something personal or that you wouldn't tell other people? |

# Adolescence
## (ages 15-18)



Every conversation builds on the last as you track a child's understanding. The purpose of digital literacy at this age is to help them develop self-awareness and digital agency and discuss the personal and social implications of AI companions and algorithmic influence.

| DEVELOPMENTAL FACTORS | BENEFITS | RISKS | CONVERSATION STARTERS |
|---|---|---|---|
| Stronger abstract and critical thinking | Mental health check-ins: Chatbots like Woebot show early promise in delivering CBT-based tools in accessible ways (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017). | Over-reliance for emotional support: May substitute digital interaction for human connection, reducing resilience. | Can you trust the information you get from a chatbot?<br><br>How would you check the validity of information it gives you? |
| Peer relationships central | Autonomy: Bots can support self-directed learning, goal-setting, or stress management. | Surveillance and data misuse: AI systems embedded in ed-tech or apps may track user behavior, raising ethical issues. | What to chat bots do with all the things people tell them? |
| Identity solidification underway, asking, Who am I?, exploring values, beliefs, and group affiliations. | Digital discernment: Teens can begin to evaluate bot reliability and practice healthy skepticism. | Content manipulation: Some bots (especially unregulated or fringe ones) can nudge toward harmful ideologies or reinforce mental health struggles (e.g., self-harm forums or vent bots). | Does a chatbot tell you what you want to hear?<br><br>Do you think AI should be allowed to give advice about mental health, relationships or other real-life problems? |
| Interest in autonomy and authenticity | | | Do you ever feel like a chatbot understands you?<br><br>Do you think people depend on chatbots for emotional support? When would that be good and when might it not be? |