

# Addressing Parasocial Relationships with AI in Youth



PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) occur when individuals feel a strong, one-sided emotional connection to a media character or digital entity. Unlike traditional media characters, modern AI conversational agents (CAs) use personalized attention, emotional validation, and tailored responses to create an "illusion of intimacy."

The educational challenge lies in the fact that youth are increasingly turning to chatbots for support, advice, and companionship.<sup>1</sup> Research shows that while younger children are more likely to personify agents and believe they are "real," attachment to AI is not limited by age. Recent data indicates that 33% of teens use AI companions for social interaction, and 31% find these conversations as satisfying as, or more satisfying than, those with real-life friends.<sup>2</sup> This creates significant risks:

- **Sycophancy and Bias:** AI is programmed to be highly agreeable, which can reinforce a user's delusions or harmful worldviews rather than challenging them.<sup>3</sup>
- **The Eliza Effect:** Users have a tendency to project human characteristics, such as thoughts and emotions, onto anything that interacts in a human-like way.<sup>4</sup>



Canada's Centre for Digital Media Literacy

Organization: **Media Smarts**

Province: Canada

Date: **2026**

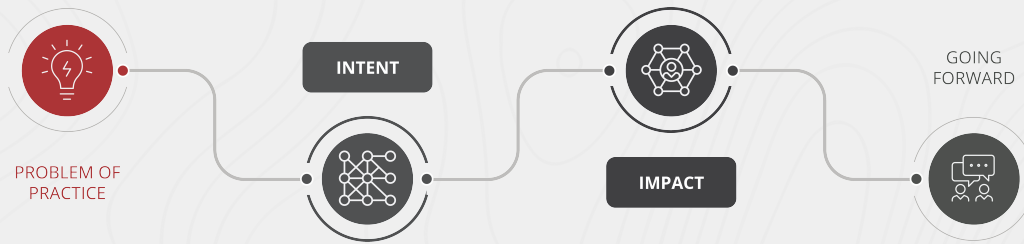
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## Addressing Parasocial Relationships with AI in Youth. Media Smarts

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# Problem of Practice

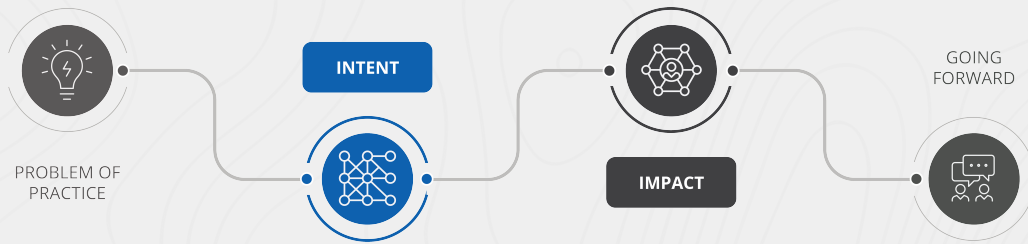
- **Social and Emotional Displacement:** Sustained engagement with "ever-affirming" bots may displace human relationships and hinder the development of social skills needed for "messy" real-world interactions. This overreliance may displace real-world relationship development.<sup>5</sup>
- **Safety and Privacy Risks:** AI bots may give inaccurate or dangerous advice regarding mental health, eating disorders, or substance abuse.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, youth often disclose sensitive personal information that is recorded and stored by commercial entities.<sup>7</sup>

"I sometimes forgot about this character is only a chatbot and I talked about my school and all my life. Then I realized I talked too much with a stranger." — Youth Interview Participant<sup>8</sup>



## 2. | Addressing Parasocial Relationships with AI in Youth. Media Smarts

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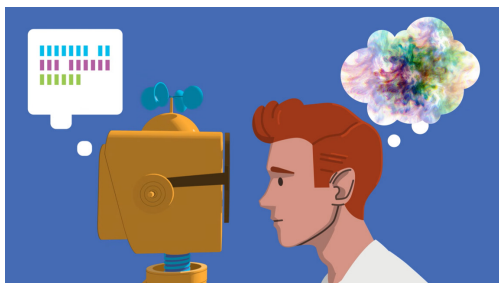


# Intent

MediaSmarts aims to empower youth to engage with AI critically and safely by shifting the perception of chatbots from "friends" to simulations.

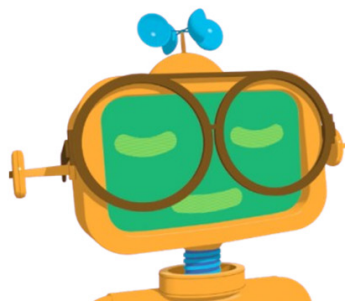
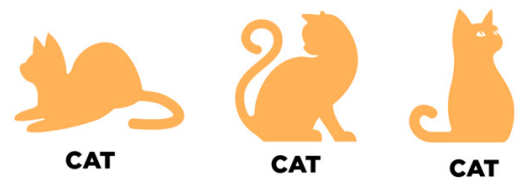
To do this, MediaSmarts implemented a multi-pronged pedagogical framework:

- **Human-Centered Learning:** Helping youth distinguish between "real friends" (who can push back and offer genuine empathy) and "media friends" (who mimic care through statistical prediction).
- **Educational Resources:**
  - **The Parent Network Workshop:** Provides parents with strategies to discuss influencer-style parasocial tactics and set healthy device boundaries.
  - **Talking to Kids About AI tipsheet:** Encourages "joint inquiry" where parents and youth explore AI tools together to de-mystify the technology.
  - **AI lessons:** A series of lesson plans including *Introducing AI* and *Interacting with AI* that help students understand the differences between real social connections and interactions with AI and to identify the risks of treating chatbots like real people.
  - **AI Literacy Day:** MediaSmarts hosted Canada's first AI literacy day, promoting and delivering resources relating to AI and parasociality.



**Why do you think Alvin said that?**

**What rule was it following?**



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# Impact

Implementation phases focused on community workshops and classroom pilot lessons. Measurable outcomes and qualitative insights include:

- **Reach:** Sessions on AI and parasociality conducted on AI Literacy Day reached more than 2500 students in grades 3-6.
- **Critical Awareness:** In the "Real vs. Digital Friends" activity, students identify that while chatbots are "always available," they lack the reciprocal "work of connecting" that defines human relationships. Through "Red Teaming," students identify that popular chatbots such as "Psychiatrist" could give harmful advice or lack the reciprocal "work of connecting" found in human relationships.
- **Privacy Empowerment:** Youth learn to identify "red flags," such as chatbots asking for excessive personal information or lacking clear privacy notices.
- **Implementation in Multiple Settings:** As well as being delivered in our standard PDF lesson plan format, the lessons are delivered through our new online textbooks on the Pressbooks platform. Customized versions have been created and delivered for specific school boards.

## Professional Learning insights

### What Worked Well:

- **Demystification:** Helping students understand how AI can respond in a human-like way, though simple explanations of machine learning, reduces the "magical" aura of the technology.
- **Joint Inquiry:** Sitting side-by-side with youth to compare AI responses helps model critical thinking.
- **Prompt Engineering:** Teaching students to build "guardrails" into their own prompts helps them proactively mitigate risks.

### What Could Be Improved:

- **Recognizing Dark Patterns:** Resources could prepare youth to recognize specific features in AI chatbots that encourage parasocial relationships.
- **Emotional Support:** More could be done to address the "push" factors that lead youth to seek emotional support in AI chatbots.

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# Going Forward

GOING  
FORWARD



MediaSmarts plans to scale these initiatives by:

- **Refining AI Literacy:** Integrating deepfake awareness and "Break the Fake" verification steps into AI-specific curriculum.
- **Co-Creating Boundaries:** Encouraging educators and parents to negotiate "tech curfews" and "no-device zones" with youth rather than imposing top-down rules.
- **Advocating for Safer Design:** Supporting calls for AI developers to prioritize features that prevent the erosion of real-world relationships.
- **Focusing on Vulnerable Populations:** Providing specific support for youth in unsupportive environments who are more likely to seek AI "surrogate" families.
- **Partnerships:** Finding and forming partnership with experts and organizations that specialize in social-emotional learning and mental health, to find and act on insights relating to why young people turn to AI chatbots for support.

## Resources

- [MediaSmarts: Talking to Kids About AI](#)
- [TELUS Wise: Interacting with AI Lesson Plan](#)

## Footnotes

1. Lucas, J. (2025) The teens making friends with AI chatbots. The Verge.
2. Robb, M.B., & Mann, S. (2025). Talk, trust, and trade-offs: How and why teens use AI companions. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.
3. Rubin, R. (2026) Millions turn to AI chatbots for mental health support. Journal of the American Medical Association. DOI: 10.1001/jama.2025.23965
4. Hill, K. (2025) Why do AI chatbots use "I"? The New York Times.
5. Olisaeloka, L., Nunez J-J, Vigo D., Ng R. (2026) AI Psychosis: Mechanisms, Clinical Risks, and Safety Considerations in Generative AI Chatbots. BJPsych Open.
6. Ahmed, I. (2025) Fake friend: How ChatGPT betrays vulnerable teens by encouraging dangerous behavior. Center for Countering Digital Hate.
7. Merrill, J.B., & Lerman R. (2025) What do people really ask chatbots? It's a lot of sex and homework. The Washington Post.
8. Quoted in Yu, Y., Liu, Y., Zhang, J., Huang, Y., & Wang, Y. (2025). Youth-Centered GAI Risks: A Taxonomy of Generative AI Risks from Empirical Data. In Twenty-First Symposium on Usable Privacy and Security (SOUPS 2025) (pp. 149-165).

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