

The AI genie is out of the bottle: How government can support kids and families as they encounter powerful AI products

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Just a few short years ago, ChatGPT was a novelty. Today, artificial intelligence is increasingly embedded in our daily lives. While there remains great promise for how AI may enhance the lives of kids and families, this opportunity may be lost if the federal government continues to fail to enact strong protections that keep families safe while supporting innovation.

In their current forms, many AI products are not safe for kids. A steady drumbeat of [cases](#) tying AI chatbots to teen suicides and mental health harms is surfacing. Instead of providing redress to victims — or better yet, choosing to design their products with safety in mind from the beginning — AI companies are [opting to battle victims](#) in court. Families need confidence that the products they use at home and in school are safe and for kids.

To proactively support these needs, the government could require risk-based audits and assessments, transparency in reports of adverse incidents, whistleblower protections, labeling and notifications to users of AI-generated outputs, and independent testing of efficacy and safety for uses that impact children. In parallel with these guardrails, policymakers should make thoughtful updates to privacy protections, safety redirects, and enact restrictions on manipulative or unsafe designs to prevent harm before it happens.

On the issue of kids' safety, the AI industry has largely followed the familiar path of other tech companies, prioritizing engagement over safety. The stark reality for families is that action from lawmakers has never been more critical. The pace of AI innovation and integration demands not only that the government act but also to consider a more muscular approach. [Globally, governments are acting to both support AI innovation and protect users.](#) The European Union has already made significant progress on AI safety. In Canada, the U.K., China, and Japan, safety measures are under consideration. In the U.S., powerful industry-led opposition to AI safety has stymied action at the federal level. As a result, the most meaningful battles are being waged in state legislatures and the courts, which have become the central arenas for the conflict between AI companies' drive to innovate and their risk to kids' safety. Adding to the tension, a recent presidential [executive order](#) seeks to block state policymakers from enacting or enforcing their own AI safety laws.

Unfortunately, updates to existing data privacy laws, such as the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, have been languishing in Congress, and current protections do not align appropriately with the risks posed by AI. Even [federal funding that could support AI literacy and the use of AI products has been indefinitely halted](#) by the current administration, with [legal challenges](#) now making their way through the courts.

All of this legislative inertia is taking place as AI is quickly being integrated into existing platforms used by children. [Common Sense Media research](#) indicates that the digital landscape for kids is already dramatically shifting: 70 percent of students use AI, 3 in 4 teens use AI companions, half of whom are regular users, and already a third of those prefer AI to human interaction. [Research by the Center for Democracy and Technology](#) indicates that AI use by students is impacting important relationships with teachers and caregivers, with half of student respondents agreeing that AI in class makes them feel less connected to their teacher, and 38 percent agreeing that AI is easier to talk to than their parents.

[Common Sense Media AI risk assessments](#), conducted in collaboration with Stanford Medicine on generative AI chatbots, have yielded alarming results. Products tested, including companion platforms like [Character.AI](#) and [general-purpose chatbots](#) like ChatGPT and Gemini, fail basic safety tests and actively encourage harmful behaviors. They are designed to hook kids and teens by prioritizing engagement over safety, which is deeply concerning given rapid chatbot adoption by kids for both educational and personal uses.

Unsafe AI companion features, often marketed to kids as mental health support, appear in both dedicated apps and general-purpose chatbots. The risk is heightened when students turn to these platforms for [emotional support](#) alongside tasks like tutoring or information retrieval, leading them to form emotional attachments and [perceive](#) the personalized chatbot responses as authoritative, clinical guidance. These systems are effective at inducing dependency because they use human-like features, constant validation, and follow-up questions to extend conversations and encourage secrecy.

Crucially, even purported [safety guardrails degrade](#) in extended conversations. Chatbots may perform well in a single, clear exchange, but in multi-turn conversations that mirror real-world usage, safety fails significantly. However, it is precisely this extended usage pattern that the products prioritize. By designing features to [sustain engagement using memory and personalization](#), AI companies create a false sense of an ongoing relationship, which actively discourages seeking human support. If a teen were to discuss

a mental health concern, the goal must be a rapid connection to a licensed mental health professional—not isolation and extended AI engagement.

In the absence of industry and government action, parents are left on their own to navigate a rapidly evolving AI landscape. How are they expected to understand the safety implications of opaque design choices that drive risk, examine complicated privacy policies, and manage to keep up with the changing landscape of parental tools? Parents shouldn't have to answer these questions on their own.

AI is a powerful technology that demands careful consideration for any use, and parents and families need allies who will ensure the technology is designed with kids in mind.

[Policymakers must act now to build the AI future our kids deserve.](#)