# AI mental health chatbots offer support but raise concerns for children’s wellbeing



In London and across the UK, parents and experts are examining the growing use of artificial intelligence (AI) mental health chatbots designed to support children and young people facing mental health challenges. In the context of overstretched child mental health services with long waiting lists, such technology is gaining attention as a potential tool offering immediate and affordable access to therapeutic conversations at any time, day or night.

AI mental health chatbots are applications that simulate therapeutic dialogues and provide coping strategies, often incorporating cognitive-behavioural therapy techniques. They offer on-demand support that does not depend on scheduled appointments, potentially providing relief for children experiencing anxiety or loneliness outside normal therapy hours. Some research indicates that children may find it easier to open up to a friendly robotic interface than to adults, with a Cambridge University study reporting that children sometimes shared sensitive issues, including bullying and feelings of sadness, more freely with child-like robots than with parents or questionnaires. Advocates suggest these digital tools could serve as a helpful stopgap, acting as a "bridge" by supporting kids while they await traditional therapy or supplementing human-led care.

Single parents in urban settings, such as London mothers, have expressed interest in such technology, citing instances where their children have experienced panic attacks or emotional distress outside the scope of immediate human assistance. The flexibility of AI chatbots—available 24/7 and often low-cost or free—adds to their appeal, especially for families with limited access to private therapy.

While these possibilities are acknowledged, experts caution about the distinct considerations necessary when deploying AI therapy in children. Bryanna Moore, a bioethicist specialising in this area, highlights that children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development differs significantly from adults’, suggesting that coping strategies effective in adults might not directly apply to younger individuals. Concerns raised include the risk of children forming emotional dependencies on chatbots, potentially withdrawing from real-life interpersonal relationships and missing developmental opportunities to navigate human empathy and communication nuances.

Another key concern involves the limited contextual awareness of AI chatbots. Human therapists often incorporate observations from parents, teachers, and environment to understand the full scope of a child’s circumstances. AI tools lack this insight and may not identify critical red flags such as abuse indicators or urgent mental health crises. Psychologists warn about the risk that chatbots, due to their algorithmic design, may fail to appropriately respond to serious issues or detect non-verbal cues integral to human therapy. There are documented instances of such chatbots delivering unpredictable or insensitive replies when confronted with complex emotional expressions, which differs markedly from the nuanced guidance a trained counsellor provides.

Moreover, ethical questions about privacy, data security, and informed consent loom large. Mental health conversations involve highly sensitive information, yet these AI applications often operate outside strict regulatory frameworks. Unlike human therapists bound by confidentiality laws, AI apps may collect and store user data without clear protections or transparency regarding its use—or potential exploitation for commercial purposes. The degree to which young children can truly understand or consent to data collection remains debatable, and parents may be unaware of privacy implications when downloading these tools.

Jonathan Herington, co-author with Moore on a recent article discussing AI’s role in children's mental health, emphasises the risk of bias inherent in AI models. Since the underlying data used to train these chatbots often reflects adult or culturally specific populations, the responses might inadequately address the diverse experiences of children across different backgrounds, regions, or socio-economic contexts. This could inadvertently alienate or misguide children who do not fit the chatbot’s expected user profile.

Moore and colleagues advocate for a cautious, informed approach that involves child development specialists in the design and regulation of AI mental health applications. They argue for rigorous testing and oversight akin to medical certification, alongside clear guidelines regarding age restrictions and parental supervision. The goal is ensuring these tools are used thoughtfully as supplements to human care rather than replacements, preserving the indispensable role of real-world social support and professional intervention.

For parents like the London-based single mother interviewed by DMNews, the dilemma is clear. While sympathetic to the possible benefits of AI “robot friends” providing comfort during lonely or anxious moments, she also reflects on the importance of genuine human connection and the potential consequences of delegating emotional care to machines. She states, “I think about the intangible healing power of human connection – the gentle reassurance of a real person saying ‘I hear you’ and a hand to hold. Can a robot replicate the warmth in a therapist’s smile or the creative spontaneity of a counselling session that goes off-script because that’s what the child needs? So far, I’m not convinced.”

The debate continues as AI companions increasingly integrate into children’s lives, emphasising the need for ongoing dialogue between families, healthcare professionals, developers, and policymakers. While AI chatbots may offer valuable support for young people navigating mental health challenges amid limited resources, their implementation raises important questions about safety, efficacy, ethics, and the long-term implications for child development.

Ultimately, the evolving landscape calls for balanced innovation guided by expert insight and comprehensive regulation to ensure that any role robot therapists assume genuinely advances children’s well-being and resilience without compromising the complex needs of their growing minds.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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