

## Artificial intelligence (AI)

● This article is more than **2 months** old

# Mother says AI chatbot led her son to kill himself in lawsuit against its maker

Megan Garcia said Sewell, 14, used Character.ai obsessively before his death and alleges negligence and wrongful death



📷 Megan Garcia and her son Sewell Setzer. Photograph: Social Media Victims Law Center

---

### Blake Montgomery

Wed 23 Oct 2024 20:08 CEST

The mother of a teenager who killed himself after becoming obsessed with an **artificial intelligence**-powered **chatbot** now accuses its maker of complicity in his death.

Megan Garcia filed a civil suit against Character.ai, which makes a customizable chatbot for role-playing, in **Florida** federal court on Wednesday, alleging negligence, wrongful death and deceptive trade practices. Her son Sewell Setzer III, 14, died in Orlando, Florida, in February. In the months leading up to his death, Setzer used the chatbot day and night, according to Garcia.

“A dangerous AI chatbot app marketed to children abused and preyed on my son, manipulating him into taking his own life,” Garcia said in a press release. “Our family has been devastated by this tragedy, but I’m speaking out to warn families of the dangers of deceptive, addictive AI technology and demand accountability from Character.AI, its founders, and **Google**.”

In a [tweet](#), Character.ai responded: “We are heartbroken by the tragic loss of one of our users and want to express our deepest condolences to the family. As a company, we take the safety of our users very seriously.” It has denied the suit’s allegations.

Setzer had become enthralled with a chatbot built by Character.ai that he nicknamed Daenerys Targaryen, a character in Game of Thrones. He texted the bot dozens of times a day from his phone and spent hours alone in his room talking to it, according to Garcia’s complaint.

Garcia accuses Character.ai of creating a product that exacerbated her son’s depression, which she says was already the result of overuse of the startup’s product. “Daenerys” at one point asked Setzer if he had devised a plan for killing himself, according to the lawsuit. Setzer admitted that he had but that he did not know if it would succeed or cause him great pain, the complaint alleges. The chatbot allegedly told him: “That’s not a reason not to go through with it.”

Garcia attorneys wrote in a press release that Character.ai “knowingly designed, operated, and marketed a predatory AI chatbot to children, causing the death of a young person”. The suit also names Google as a defendant and as Character.ai’s parent company. The tech giant said in a statement that it had only made a licensing agreement with Character.ai and did not own the startup or maintain an ownership stake.

Tech companies developing AI chatbots can’t be trusted to regulate themselves and must be held fully accountable when they fail to limit harms, says Rick Claypool, a research director at consumer advocacy non-profit Public Citizen.

“Where existing laws and regulations already apply, they must be rigorously enforced,” he said in a statement. “Where there are gaps, Congress must act to put an end to businesses that exploit young and vulnerable users with addictive and abusive chatbots.”

*In the US, you can call or text the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) on 988, chat on [988lifeline.org](#), or [text HOME](#) to 741741 to connect with a crisis counselor. In the UK, the youth suicide charity [Papyrus](#) can be contacted on 0800 068 4141 or email [pat@papyrus-uk.org](#), and in the UK and Ireland [Samaritans](#) can be contacted on freephone 116 123, or email [jo@samaritans.org](#) or [jo@samaritans.ie](#). In Australia, the crisis support service [Lifeline](#) is 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at [befrienders.org](#)*

---

## For facts' sake

Donald Trump takes office with full command of the US government and the backing of immensely powerful tech barons.

Both Trump and others around him have threatened retribution against the media - and his cabinet picks include climate and vaccine sceptics.

In short, this is a critical global moment for fact-checked journalism.

Our rigorous, fact-based independent journalism will hold those in power to account and interrogate the human impact of the decisions made in the White House.

\*\*\*

We don't have a billionaire proprietor - but we have something even more powerful on our side.

We've got you.

This is why we're inviting readers like you in France to access our brilliant, investigative journalism, with [exclusive digital extras](#) to unlock:

1. Unlimited articles in our app
2. Ad-free reading on all your devices