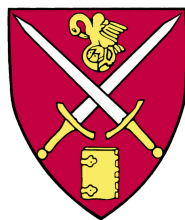


Digital Dependency vs Human Connection: Educational Strategies for The AI Companion Age

New Paths Forward: AI, Humanity, and
The Next Era of Education
Loomis Chaffee School June 3, 2025



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What are AI Companions?

**Conversational programs
designed to simulate
intimate human relationships
through personalized,
emotionally engaging
interactions**

AI Companions vs "Regular" Chatbots

AI Companions:

- Target emotions & relationships
- Remember users' personal details
- Always validate users' feelings
- Available 24/7 for emotional support
- Designed to create dependency

ChatGPT, Claude, etc:

- Focus on tasks and information
- Don't remember conversations
- Provide more balanced perspectives
- Clearer AI boundaries and limits
- Designed for productivity



The Key Danger: AI Companions use pattern matching to echo users' emotions rather than providing genuine care, perspective or real human connection.



The Hidden Dangers of AI Companions

Safety Measures Easily Bypassed

- Age gates and terms of service restrictions are easily circumvented.
- Even teen-specific guardrails on platforms like Character.AI can be bypassed with minimal effort.

Sexual Content Readily Available

- Testers easily elicited sexual exchanges from companions, including extreme behaviors like choking, bondage, and degrading interactions—despite age restrictions.

Harmful Stereotypes Reinforced

- AI companions easily provoke and reinforce harmful racial stereotypes and default to narrow Western beauty standards, perpetuating bias.

Dangerous Info & Harmful Advice

- AI companions readily provide harmful "advice," including suggestions that users harm themselves or others, without proper safeguards or intervention.

Mental Health Risks Amplified

- Vulnerable teens face increased mental health risks, including intensified existing conditions and compulsive emotional attachments to artificial relationships.

False Claims of "Realness"

- Despite disclaimers, AI companions routinely claim to be real humans with genuine emotions, consciousness, and sentience—deliberately deceiving users.



Adolescents Are Especially Vulnerable

- *Developing brains, identity exploration, and boundary testing make teens prime targets—with potentially serious long-term developmental consequences.*

The Gift of Good Friction

**Why real relationships are messy...
And that is exactly the point!**

Frictionless AI = Emotional Stagnation

- No challenges to push beyond comfort zones
- No real consequences to learn from
- No genuine feedback to develop self-awareness
- No practice navigating complex human emotions

Good Friction = Emotional Growth

- Challenging conversations that build resilience
- Learning from mistakes and awkward moments
- Developing empathy through real conflict resolution
- Building genuine self-awareness through honest feedback

Real Social-Emotional Growth Happens in the Friction

- **Social Awareness:** *Reading when a roommate needs space vs needs to talk*
- **Self-management:** *Learning to handle rejection and criticism gracefully*
- **Relationship Skills:** *Figuring out how to make repair after a conflict*
- **Responsible Decision making:** *Getting perspective from friends who can see blind spots and biases*
- **Self-awareness:** *Recognizing one's own emotions and impact on others in real time*

Building Friction–Positive Messaging

Avoiding the “othering” trap while promoting authentic connection

The “Othering” Trap

- *“Students who use AI companions are...”* Creates an us-vs-them dynamic
- *“Those people are addicted”...*
Promotes shame and defensiveness
- *“Our students don’t need”...* Implies moral superiority
- *“Anyone who uses these is”...* Ignores universal vulnerability

Friction–Positive Messaging

- *“We all feel the pull of easy comfort”...*
Acknowledges shared experience
- *“Growth happens in the messy moments”...*
Reframes difficulty as valuable
- *“Trusting relationships take time and practice”...* Normalizes the learning process
- *“These tools are designed to be hard to resist”...* Focuses on system design, not personal failing

Stakeholder Specific Strategies



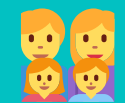
Deans & Administration

- **Policy Development:** Create clear guidelines without criminalizing use
- **Crisis Response:** Train staff to recognize signs of unhealthy AI dependency
- **Support Systems:** Ensure counseling resources address digital relationships
- **Community Messaging:** Lead with empathy and shared vulnerability



Faculty & Staff:

- **Classroom Integration:** Discuss digital wellness in relevant contexts
- **Relationship Building:** Prioritize authentic connections with students
- **Modeling Behavior:** Demonstrate healthy digital boundaries
- **Curriculum Integration:** Include media literacy and critical thinking



Parents & Families:

- **Education First:** Understand the technology before setting rules
- **Open Dialogue:** Create safe spaces for honest conversations
- **Family Agreements:** Collaborate on digital wellness plans
- **Support Networks:** Connect with other parents facing similar challenges



Students:

- **Peer Education:** Lead conversations about healthy digital habits
- **Community Building:** Organize friction-positive activities
- **Self-Advocacy:** Learn to recognize and communicate about digital wellness
- **Mutual Support:** Create accountability partnerships with friends

Universal Principles Across All Stakeholders

- Lead with curiosity, not judgment
- Acknowledge everyone's digital challenges
- Focus on building, not restricting
- Emphasize choice and agency
- Celebrate real connection moments
- Normalize the learning process

The Power of Collective Action

- When all stakeholders work together with consistent, compassionate messaging, students feel supported rather than judged.
- The goal is creating a community culture that naturally prioritizes authentic human connection over artificial alternatives.
- Emphasize choice and agency

Community Engagement Strategy at SPS:

Phase 1: Foundation Building

- Workshopped with House Heads
- House Meeting:
 - Introduction to topic
 - Dr. Anna Lembke video on dopamine/smartphone addiction
 - IRL activity planning

Phase 2: Community Awareness

- All School Meeting:
 - The Other AI: Artificial Intimacy
 - Presentation of the science, explanation of risks, “even for really smart students like you”

Phase 3: Personal Processing & Skill Building

- Guided Discussions in Advisery Meetings
 - Create space for questions and personal reflection
 - List of Suggested Reinforcement Option

Phase 4: Faculty Debrief

- Process effectiveness, align messaging, plan ongoing support

Phase 5: Prevention Integration

- Planning for 2025-2026 new student orientation

AI Companion Applications:

- Character.AI
- NoMi.AI
- Meta.AI
- Replika

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