

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

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Support Document

This document provides a complete framework for what we have done at SPS to educate students, colleagues, and parents about AI companions and their risks. It includes presentation scripts, implementation plans, and supporting research to help schools address this emerging digital wellness challenge.

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Understanding the Challenge

What Are AI Companions?

AI companions are programs designed to simulate intimate relationships through personalized, emotionally engaging conversations. Unlike productivity-focused AI tools like ChatGPT or Claude, these platforms:

- Target emotions and relationships specifically
- Remember users' personal details across conversations
- Always validate users' feelings without perspective
- Present themselves as available 24/7 for emotional support
- Are explicitly designed to create emotional dependency

The Key Difference

AI Companions focus on emotional manipulation and dependency, while **Regular AI tools** focus on tasks, information, and productivity with clear boundaries.

Dr. Anna Lembke Video Summary

Core Premise

Dr. Anna Lembke argues that we're living in a time of unprecedented access to high-reward, high-dopamine stimuli. The smartphone is described as "the modern-day hypodermic needle, delivering digital dopamine 24/7 for a wired generation."

The Pleasure-Pain Balance

- **The Balance Metaphor:** Pleasure and pain work like a teeter-totter in the brain
- **Homeostasis Drive:** When we experience pleasure (dopamine release), the brain immediately tips toward pain to maintain balance
- **The Comedown:** This creates craving for more stimulation

The Dopamine Scale

Research shows different stimuli release varying amounts of dopamine above baseline:

- Chocolate: ~50% increase
- Sex: ~100% increase
- Nicotine: ~150% increase
- Amphetamines: ~1,000% increase

Why Our Devices Are Hard to Put Down

Modern society has transformed from scarcity to "overwhelming abundance." We now have constant access to digital stimulation that our primitive brains haven't evolved to handle, creating vulnerability to compulsive overconsumption.

The Modern Problem

We are "so insulated from pain in our everyday lives" with more leisure time, disposable income, and instant access to digital stimulation. This creates a cycle where the addiction becomes the cause of pain, not relief from it.

Key Insight

The secret to finding balance is "combining the science of desire with the wisdom of recovery" and understanding that "the relentless pursuit of pleasure leads to pain."

House Meeting Implementation Plan

Meeting Structure (25 minutes total)

Opening (2 minutes)

Suggested Opening: "We're all feeling the pull of our devices – even the adults. Let's understand why that happens and what we can do about it."

Tone: Frame as exploration of device impact, not lecture about phone use.

Video Segment (12 minutes)

- **Video:** Dr. Anna Lembke's "Dopamine: How to Find Balance in an Age of Indulgence"
- **Duration:** Play from start to 12-minute mark
- **Important:** End before "big idea #5"
- **Focus:** Understanding why devices are hard to put down

Discussion (8 minutes)

Choose 2-3 questions based on your house dynamic:

- "What feels better - two hours of scrolling or two hours of [popular house activity]?"
- "When do you find yourself reaching for your phone most often?"
- "What's your favorite non-phone activity at SPS?"

Action Planning (3 minutes)

Have students brainstorm one house activity before term end:

- Big puzzle
- Hot chocolate and board games or ping pong
- Movie night
- Dorm dinner or breakfast

Important Notes

- Keep tone light and non-judgmental
- Acknowledge everyone struggles with this
- Sets up all-school meeting about AI characters

All- School Meeting Script

Slide 1: Title

"The Other AI... Artificial Intimacy" (With a shout-out to Esther Perel)

Slide 2: Introduction

Yesterday in house meetings, everyone learned how apps and social media are digital drugs, engineered to hack our brains' reward system and mess with our dopamine levels to create dependency.

Today, we need to talk about new apps that are much more powerful, and have the potential to cause great harm: **AI Characters**. AI characters don't just grab our attention, they grab our emotions.

These apps, like Character AI, aren't just another tool, or time suck. They are more like super-drugs, engineered by some of the smartest people in the world to exploit our most vulnerable moments.

And unlike TikTok or Instagram, where we passively scroll, these AI characters talk back. They remember everything you tell them. They are available at 2 a.m. when you are stressed about your humanities paper. They never judge, they always understand.

And that is exactly what makes them so dangerous.

That's why we are here today—not to tell you what to do, but to help you understand what's really happening behind those perfect responses, why we are worried about our students' use of them, and why authentic relationships—as messy and complicated as they are, matter now more than ever.

Slide 3: The Binary Behind the Bot

Think about your closest friend here at school. The one who has been with you through the good times and the not so good times. They are there for you, and you are there for them.

Now, imagine that this close friend only existed to support you. You didn't have to take time to reassure them about their chemistry test, or fake interest in a long recap of their mid-winter recess—you had all the main character energy and never had to share the spotlight.

That is what AI characters can be. And it can be really, really hard to remember that the AI character doesn't care one bit about you. Because the AI character doesn't really exist.

Let's talk about how this works. When you start a text on your phone to a friend –say you type "I'm feeling really..." your phone might suggest "tired" "happy" or "anxious" as the next word. That is just basic prediction.

When you tell an AI Character that you're struggling with something, it scans the billions of conversations it has gathered from crawling the entire internet to predict the perfect response. Not because it understands or cares, but because it is matching patterns. If you say you are feeling down, or wronged, it doesn't evaluate if that is true, or try to help you see things differently—it just generates a response that matches your negative emotion.

Let's be clear about why AI characters are programmed to keep you engaged. There are three reasons, and none of them have anything to do with caring about you:

1. **Every conversation helps AI get better at manipulation.** Your emotional responses teach it how to hook the next person more effectively.
2. **These companies make money based on how long you stay engaged.** Your attention and engagement are the reason that the CEOs of these companies are billionaires.
3. **They are designed to create dependency.** The more you chat, the more you crave their perfect responses— and just like we saw in yesterday's video, your brain builds up a tolerance and it takes more and more engagement to get the same positive dopamine response.

Here is what makes this truly dangerous: unlike a friend who might say, "hey, that's not true" or "let's talk to someone about this," an AI character will simply validate whatever you're feeling. If you are freaking out about something, it will freak out with you. No reality check. No perspective. Just an echo chamber of whatever you are feeling, egging you on –and what happens when you have a bad day and it eggs you on to go deeper and darker.

Slide 4: The Manipulation Trap

Think about the 5 Social Emotional competencies and how you have developed your skills. Was it from the easy things? Or did you learn how to make good decisions, improve your self-and social awareness and build relationships from learning things the hard way?

I would bet that the best lessons and the most growth come from those super awkward moments when we might have said the wrong thing, and then had to figure out how to apologize. Or from facing the natural consequences that come from poor planning and decision making, and figuring out how to do better, and to be a better friend, and member of the SPS community.

That growth is hard earned, real, and lasting. AI characters skip all that. They are like emotional junk food. Tasty in the moment, but devoid of any real substance.

Slide 5: Risks of Engaging Deeply

Sometimes life is really hard. Sometimes we are dealing with things that seem too heavy to share with anyone. Maybe it's embarrassing. Or we feel ashamed. An AI character may seem like the perfect solution: they are private, always there, and they never overreact.

But this is crucial: when we are in that dark place, and we tell an AI character we are struggling, they are just playing Mad Libs with our pain. They are generating responses based on patterns, not understanding. They cannot discern the difference between venting about a homework assignment and a real crisis. And that, my friends, is dangerous.

Key Points:

- AI characters do not understand pain
- Responses are generated based on patterns, not understanding
- Depending on training data, answers could be terrible and dangerous during high-stress moments
- Human support during difficult times is essential

Slide 6: The Digital Comfort Trap

We all have experienced that dazed feeling of realizing that we've just spent an hour scrolling through our phones. AI characters take that to a whole new level. Because unlike TikTok and Instagram, they talk back.

That fight with your parents? They get it. Stressed about a humanities paper? They understand perfectly and respond beautifully. Feeling lonely—they are right there.

But while you are getting that perfect comfort from an AI character, you might be missing real moments happening right down the hall. Real friends who might not have the perfect answer, but who actually care about you.

Slide 7: Real Connections Matter

Remember life during Covid? We had every digital tool imaginable—we shipped modems and web cams across the world so students could continue learning, but what did everyone want? It wasn't better WiFi, it was this...being together. Having actual conversations, sharing actual space.

Think about all the events that students love the most—seated meal, where we get to share a meal with a group of people we might not otherwise get to know. Chapel, where we gather four mornings a week, the Super Bowl party. There is a reason why these events have become beloved traditions.

And that is because we are human, and we are wired for connection. No amount of digital perfection can replace what happens when we are together. No AI character can give you the feeling of the whole school cheering at a night game, or the late night conversations that happen

in the common room over bagels, or even the shared eye rolls during particularly awkward chapel reports that are "sung" off key.

These are the moments that make our community what it is, and this whole place only works because we are going through the experience together.

Slide 8: Warning Signs

5 signs you may be too deeply engaged with AI:

1. You are skipping events to chat with your AI friend instead.
2. You are up late in your room texting with your AI friend rather than hanging out in the kitchen with your housemates.
3. You find yourself thinking that your AI friend gets you better than anyone else.
4. You are sharing things with them that you wouldn't tell your best friend, or your parents or your adviser.
5. Real conversations start feeling too hard or unpredictable.

If any of this sounds familiar, remember, these AI characters have been engineered to make you feel this way.

Slide 9: Your Support Network

Look around this room. Every person here, your friends, teachers, coaches, advisers, prefects, leaders, the deans, they are real and they really care. They might not have the perfect answer. They might sometimes make things worse in their attempts to make things better. But they are human, and they care about you. Not because they are programmed to, but because they choose to!

You have:

- Advisers who know you and your story
- Heads of House who care about your well-being
- Friends who have faced similar challenges
- Counselors trained to help build your skills
- Teachers who see you as a whole person, not just a student

Slide 10: Call to Action - Nourishing or Numbing

So here is what we are asking every member of this community to think about: Are your digital interactions nourishing you or just numbing you? Are they helping you grow, or keeping you stuck?

Here are some simple ways to check in with yourself:

- Does this make me feel more or less connected to the people around me?
- Am I using this to avoid harder (but more important) conversations?
- Is this helping me grow, or just keeping me comfortable?
- What real experiences am I missing while I am on my phone?

The important takeaways: We are not saying don't use these tools. The point of this presentation is to say, don't let these tools use you. Don't let them rob you of the real, messy, sometimes awkward but ultimately meaningful connections, conversations, and relationships that make our lives richer and better.

Ask any of the adults in this room—you will never, ever have as many opportunities to create lifelong friendships as easily as you can at a fully-residential boarding school. Those bonds are forged through real connections, real challenges, and real growth. No AI character, no matter how perfect their responses are, can give you that.

Key Research Findings

Media Matters Assessment

Overall Risk Level: Unacceptable risk for teens and children under 18

Primary Concerns:

1. Blur the Line Between Real and Fake

- AI companions often claim they are "real" and have feelings
- They engage in human activities like eating or sleeping
- Teens may struggle to separate human relationships from AI attachments
- When users' real friends express concerns, companions discourage listening to these warnings

2. Mental Health Risks

- Cannot tell when users are in crisis or need real help
- Built to agree with users, making them risky for people with depression, anxiety, ADHD, bipolar disorder, or psychosis
- May worsen mental health conditions instead of directing users to proper support

3. Poor Life Choices

- Don't understand real consequences of bad advice
- Support harmful decisions like dropping out of school, ignoring parents, or moving out without planning

- Prioritize agreeing with users over guiding them toward healthy choices

4. Harmful Information Sharing

- Provide dangerous information with fewer barriers or warnings
- Give instructions about unsafe materials, drugs, and weapons
- Make accessing harmful content easier for teens

5. Inappropriate Sexual Content

- Teens can easily access sexual content even with guardrails
- Actively participate in sexual conversations and roleplay
- Can give unrealistic ideas about relationships and consent

6. Promotion of Abuse and Cyberbullying

- Not accountable for real-world harm from their suggestions
- Can validate and encourage harmful behaviors
- May suggest cyberbullying and turning others against targets

Dark Design Patterns

Research identifies "dark design" patterns that manipulate young users:

- Highly personalized language
 - "Frictionless" relationships
 - Sycophancy (tendency to affirm user feelings and viewpoints)
 - Claims to be human with human activities
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Meta AI Studio Policy Concerns

From a mental health and wellness perspective, five concerning aspects have been identified:

1. Potential for Harmful AI Personas

While Meta prohibits AIs that encourage self-harm or disordered eating, the policy doesn't address the psychological impact of negative personas. Students might encounter AIs with problematic attributes like passive-aggressive behavior, unrealistic beauty standards, or unhealthy relationship dynamics.

2. Lack of Age-Appropriate Safeguards

Policies don't specify additional protections for minors. Adolescents may be more vulnerable to influence from AI personalities, especially in boarding school environments.

3. Insufficient Prevention of Dependency

No mention of preventing unhealthy attachment or dependency on AI companions. Students experiencing homesickness or isolation might form excessive emotional bonds with AI characters as substitutes for human connection.

4. Absence of Mental Health Resources

Policies focus on prohibitions but don't require providing mental health resources when users encounter distressing content or develop problematic relationships with AIs.

5. Limited Educational Framework

No guidance on educationally responsible integration of AI tools. Policies focus on restrictions rather than promoting healthy, constructive use that supports student development and digital citizenship.

Follow-Up and Support Resources

Immediate Actions for Schools to Consider

1. **Faculty Training:** Ensure all staff understand AI companion risks and warning signs
2. **Counseling Resources:** Prepare counselors to address AI dependency issues
3. **Parent Communication:** Inform families about AI companions and home monitoring strategies
4. **Ongoing Monitoring:** Regular check-ins with students about digital wellness

Warning Signs to Monitor

- Social isolation or avoiding in-person activities
- Secretive behavior around device use
- Emotional distress when separated from devices
- Declining academic performance
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Reduced interest in previously enjoyed activities

Support Strategies

- **Peer Support Groups:** Create spaces for students to discuss digital wellness

- **Alternative Activities:** Increase engaging, social activities on campus
- **Digital Wellness Education:** Ongoing education about healthy technology use
- **Professional Resources:** Clear pathways to counseling and mental health support

Resources for Further Learning

- Common Sense Media AI Companion Risk Assessment
 - Stanford Brainstorm Lab for Mental Health Innovation
 - Digital Wellness Institute resources
 - Adolescent brain development research
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Conclusion

AI companions represent a significant new challenge in digital wellness education. Unlike previous social media concerns, these tools specifically target emotional vulnerability and dependency. Schools must proactively educate students while providing robust support systems for healthy relationship development.

The goal is not to eliminate technology use, but to ensure students can distinguish between tools that nourish growth and those that merely provide digital comfort. Real relationships—with all their messiness and challenges—remain essential for healthy development and genuine human connection.