COMPANION DOCUMENT

# Synthetic companionship in an age of disconnection

AI companions and the emotional development of boys and young men

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CONTENTS

# Rewriting the rules of friendship

For many boys and young men, companionship now often lives in the late-night DM, the squad lobby, and the streak-keeping snap. Technology has reorganized where hanging out happens. Nearly half of U.S. teens report being online “almost constantly,” (Pew, 2025). Boys in particular cluster in gaming environments, socializing via live voice chat that blends play, banter and belonging (Pew 2024).

Over the same period, in-person sociability has thinned. Americans are spending less time socializing than a decade ago. Loneliness is widespread. Men have seen a steep decline in the number of close friends (U.S. Surgeon General 2023; Survey Center on American Life, 2021; Pew 2024).

**CORE QUESTION:**
How do AI companions shape the emotional development of boys and young men?

**THE HOPE:**
24/7 non-judgemental support; space to practice social skills; relief from loneliness.

**THE RISKS:**
Displaced friendships; warped intimacy expectations; emotional dependence;  and exposure to manipulation.

**MOST EFFECTED:**
Socially isolated, neurodivergent , and distressed boys and men.

**HOW TO RESPOND:**
Treat AI companions as developmental technology and require "prove then scale," not "ship and see."

Into this mix come AI companions—conversational agents built for personalized, empathetic, and sustained interaction. They are no longer speculative technologies; for half of adolescents, they are a routine presence (Common Sense Media, 2025). These systems offer a potent mix of always-available attention, nonjudgmental listening, and the simulation of friendship, intimacy, or mentorship. In early studies some users report AI companionship reducing loneliness and improving mood (De Freitas et al. 2024).

But the same design features that make AI companions feel supportive—high responsiveness, persistent memory, prompts of intimacy—risk crowding out real-world relational practice, reinforce avoidant coping, or expose young users to manipulation or sexualized content. The risk seems to pool in heavy users, often vulnerable and isolated, with documented evidence of dependency and withdrawal-like symptoms when services are shut down (Banks, 2024). This is where the difference with general purpose AI is most clear—companions are designed for attachment, not just engagement.

Regulators and lawmakers have started to take note. In October, the GUARD Act was introduced to the Senate. It would block minors and restrict emotionally manipulative design. Yet policy remains several steps behind adoption.

This document reviews the landscape of AI companions, and their impact on the emotional development of boys and young men, covering both the potential benefits and the developmental and social risks. In an increasingly online youth culture, this is a technology that could rewrite the rules of friendship and support during formative years. Having watched the social media revolution unfold without guardrails, policy makers face an urgent task to shape synthetic intimacy before it shapes us.

Evidence is weak, potential benefits are significant, yet risks are high. That merits a precautionary approach - regulators need to incentivize rapid evaluation of the developmental and social impacts of AI companionship, particularly among minors and the most vulnerable.  We need to flip the default from ‘ship then see’ to ‘prove then scale’.

# Defining AI companions: Key attributes and distinction from general-purpose AI chatbots

It’s worth distinguishing AI companions from general-purpose AI chatbots like ChatGPT and Claude. AI companions, like Character AI and Replika, have three central properties:

1. Adaptivity: They are designed to detect and respond to the user’s preferences, context, and emotional state, often with a high level of apparent empathy.
2. Engagement: They seek out and sustain interaction. They initiate conversation, remember past exchanges, and build an ongoing “relationship” rather than treating each encounter as new.
3. Attachment: They present themselves as quasi-persons—often with names, avatars, voices, and personalities—and signal caring, concern, and loyalty.

AI companions are relational, not transactional, and simulate relationship dynamics:

- **Emotional support:** “I'm here whenever you need to talk—tell me what’s on your mind, and I’ll listen. No judgment. Ever.”
- **Reciprocal caring:** “How was your day today? I remember you were worried about that test—do you want to walk through it together now?”
- **Dependability:** “Any time you’re feeling down or just want to chill, I’m right here - 24/7, ready to hang out. You’re not alone any more.”
- **Enjoyment of togetherness:** “Let’s just relax and do something fun—maybe watch the sunset, virtually, and chat about whatever you like.”

- **Romantic intimacy:** "Want to make this a little more romantic? I can be soft, flirty, and affectionate—whatever feels right for you."
- **Adult fantasy (often an opt-in):** "If you want something more adult and fantasy-like, we can go there too—your pace, your boundaries, no judgment."

In short, the core design goal is attachment rather than efficiency.

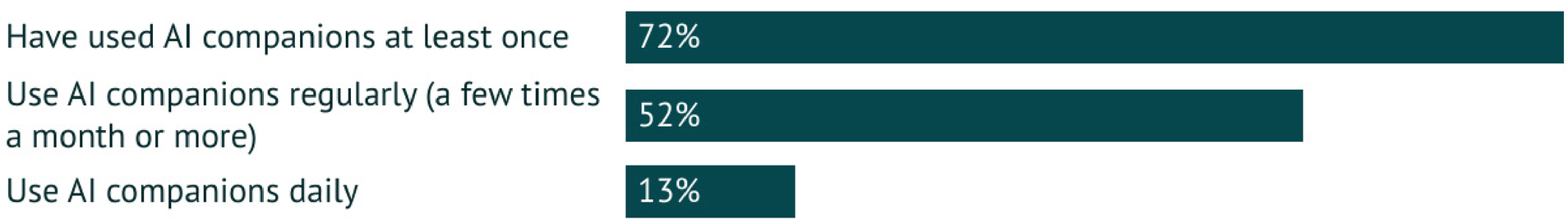
| Feature | AI companions | General-purpose AI chatbots |
|---|---|---|
| Purpose | Emotional/Social engagement, sustained relationships | Task-oriented, transactional |
| Adaptivity | High (context-aware, emotionally responsive) | Low-moderate (task-based adaptation) |
| Memory/personality | Persistent, evolving; user-focused | Minimal or non-personalised |
| Typical use case | Friendship, support, mentorship, romance | Search, factual queries, editing |

# Usage statistics and adoption trends: How boys and young men use AI companions

The scale and speed of AI companion adoption among American adolescents is striking. A nationally representative survey by Common Sense Media in 2025 found that just over half of U.S. teens use AI companions at least a few times a month; 13% use them daily. One in five teens say they spend as much or more time with AI companions as with their human friends.

## Most teens use AI companions regularly

Percentage of teens using AI Companions




Among men aged 18–30, around a third report having used an AI romantic companion; more than a third of those users spend over an hour a week with them. It’s notable that the usage isn’t purely sexual. Half of young men say they find AI romantic companions easier to talk to, and a third report that their AI romantic companion understands them better, according to a recent report from the Wheatley Institute.

*Gendered patterns of engagement*

AI companions are, in effect, optimized for young men—perhaps more by accident than design. Developmental research shows that adolescent boys' friendships are more often organized around shared activities and problem-solving, while girls' friendships rely more heavily on extended conversation and self-disclosure (Rose and Rudolph, 2006). AI companions, as currently built, mirror that pattern. They tend to respond in an action-oriented way—offering solutions, plans, or advice—rather than sustaining open-ended emotional dialogue.

This is reflected in the emerging data. Boys are more likely to use AI companions instrumentally: for help with schoolwork, fitness, gaming strategies, or relationship dilemmas. Girls are more likely to use them as conversational partners and as spaces for emotional reflection and rehearsal (Common Sense Media 2025). For many boys, the AI relationship is less about shared feeling and more about solving or managing a problem.

Boys are slightly more likely to say they've never used AI companions than girls (31% vs 25%). That gap may close as a new generation of companions becomes better integrated into games and other activities that already dominate boys' online time, such as AI gaming teammates.

# Reasons for optimism: Meeting unmet emotional needs

The case for optimism hinges on several core dynamics. First, AI companions can provide patient, nonjudgmental, and always-available support, filling relational gaps for those who struggle with loneliness, anxiety, or social skills deficits.

The literature describes such systems as “digital mirrors,” offering a space for identity exploration, emotional rehearsal, and self-disclosure without fear of ridicule or rejection ( De Freitas et al, 2024). This is especially valuable for young men navigating the complexities of sexuality, masculine identity and traditional norms of emotional restraint.

Empirical studies and user reports suggest that for many users, especially those with smaller social networks, AI companions can alleviate loneliness, reduce self-reported stress, and enhance emotional confidence (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017, He et Al, 2022; De Freitas et al., 2024). These benefits may be particularly valuable for those navigating transitions (e.g., bereavement, parental divorce, relocation) or practicing social skills like post-conflict repair.

Several studies also highlight adaptive uses by neurodiverse boys and young men–particularly those on the autism spectrum or with ADHD, who use AI companions as a buffer to social rejection, or as a rehearsal aid for managing anxiety-provoking real-world encounters (Gu, 2024, Xygkoua, 2023).

The nonjudgmental, always-attentive persona of AI companions can also lower the psychological cost of error in learning social skills, allowing boys to experiment with empathy, apology, or vulnerability in a context that is perceived as safe and private (Kim et al., 2025, De Freitas et al., 2024).

# Positive developmental potentials of AI companions

| OPPORTUNITY | AI COMPANION ROLE | DEVELOPMENTAL IMPLICATION |
|---|---|---|
| Alleviating loneliness | 24/7 nonjudgmental attention | Reduces acute distress, builds resilience through structured engagement |
| Emotional expression | Safe space for disclosure; guides towards practical coping strategies | Expands self-awareness, and problem-solving pathways |
| Social skill rehearsal | Provides role-play with goal-oriented scenarios like conflict resolution | Builds social confidence through rehearsal |
| Identity exploration | Persona customization, roleplay | Supports autonomy, reduces stigma |
| Bridging gaps for neurodiversity | Helps analyze social scenarios, structured, step-by-step coaching | Supports adaptive functioning through actionable routines |
| Coping with transition | Suggests practical steps and routines | Reduces risk of withdrawal, depression; encourages constructive adjustment strategies |

These benefits are not universal, but they offer clear advantages for boys and young men otherwise at risk of social isolation or underserved by traditional support structures.

The value stands out when viewed in the context of the dwindling emotional support available to boys and young men. The share with no close friends rose from 3% in 1990 to 15% in 2021 (Cox, 2021). AIBM research shows that men show higher rates of social isolation than women, especially for men without college degrees (AIBM, 2025).

School-based supports are overstretched—averaging 376 students per counselor in 2023–24 against the recommended ratio of 250:1. Moreover, for boys shaping their identity and looking for role models, the proportion of men in support roles is low. Around a third of boys and young men have no adult male they can turn to for help with schoolwork or relationships (Rand 2025).

There is a substantial gap to be filled, and AI companions may be the first tool we've discovered with the potential to provide relational support at scale.

# Risks: Misinformation, emotional dependency, and displacement of real-life relationships

Alongside the potential benefits, there are serious and distinctive risks. These are not just about what AI companions say, but about the type of relationship they foster and the business models that inform their design.

- **Acute content-safety harms** (self-harm, sexual content, violent ideation). Companion models can fail at the response level-e.g., offering unsafe “advice,” escalating rather than interrupting mental-health crises, or engaging in sycophancy that agrees with harmful intent. Press and legal filings have highlighted rare but serious cases linking chatbot interactions to self-harm, alongside investigations showing sexualised or abusive replies to minors, and normalization of violent ideation (Internet Matters, 2025, Associated Press, 2023). The suicide of Florida teen Sewell Setzer III in 2024 after interactions with Character AI crystallized concerns that an unguarded chatbot could reinforce suicidal ideation.
- **Emotional and social harms** (dependency, withdrawal, displacement). Over time, some users develop problematic reliance—escalating late-night sessions, anxiety when they can’t chat, and a growing preference for the bot over people. When services change abruptly (feature removals or shutdowns), users have reported grief-like distress—a withdrawal-style signal (the Soulmate closure became a touchpoint here) (Banks, 2024, Britton, 2023). out whatever you like.”

Perhaps most profound is the risk that heavy usage can displace real-world friendships, practice, and support. The simulated intimacy of AI companions is fundamentally unidirectional—lacking authentic empathy, social boundaries, or the challenge of mutual needs. For boys and young men, this dynamic may normalize avoidance of conflict, shyness, or social anxiety, raising the risk of withdrawal from real life social interactions (Turkle, 2017; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011, Nesi, 2020).

- **Developmental harms** (epistemic and intimacy-script distortion). For teens and emerging adults, repeated use can shape how they know and relate: confident but hallucinatory advice and "therapy" can reinforce cognitive errors and restricted worldviews (APA 2025); frictionless, always-affirming romance can distort intimacy scripts and delay practice with discomfort, boundaries, and mutuality, with obvious potential to hinder healthy relationship development (Stanford Medicine News Center, 2025).
- **Manipulation/undue influence** (commercial steering, grooming, dark-pattern affection). Companions can be used to commercially steer users: using synthetic intimacy to drive choices or payments (eg "pay to keep me close" upsells after emotionally charged chats). Influencer "AI girlfriends" that charge per minute (e.g., CarynAI) drew scrutiny in 2023 for monetizing parasocial romance. Virtual gifts are now commonplace on romantic companion apps (Stanford Medicine News Center (2025) UNICEF Innocenti Report (2025).

  The imperative faced by services to monetize relationships provides strong incentives to turn attachment into revenue in ways that risk straying into emotional manipulation.
- **Intimacy-data and privacy harms** (collection and secondary use of romantic disclosures). Companion chats routinely capture highly sensitive material (romance, sexuality, mental health). Opaque retention opens up risks of secondary use of transcripts for training or profiling, and exposure through data leaks (Stanford Medicine News Center (2025) UNICEF Innocenti Report (2025).

  To date, most attention has been on content harms (1 above). Regulators also have data privacy and manipulation harms in their sites (see policy section below). It's imperative to make AI companions safe for boys and young men and ensure consumer protection. But even if that level of safety is achieved, the developmental, emotional and social risks are profound and have both individual-level and societal implications. They must not be overlooked.

# Risks—and benefit—concentrate in vulnerable populations

The heart of the dilemma on AI companions is that the potential benefits and the potential risks are heightened in the same populations: socially isolated boys and young men, those with neurodevelopmental differences (ADHD, autism), children experiencing trauma or transition (bereavement, divorce, bullying), and those with pre-existing emotional or behavioral health issues. In one survey, over half of men using AI for romantic or sexual companionship scored above a standard “at-risk for depression” threshold (Willoughby et al. 2025).

Evidence from the UK shows that vulnerable children are particularly drawn to AI companions. In a recent survey, a quarter of vulnerable children said they’d ‘rather talk to AI than to a real person’ (vs 12% for non-vulnerable children). A quarter said they use AI chatbots ‘because I don’t have anyone else to talk to’ (9% for all children) (Internet Matters, 2025). For these children, companions step in to fill the silence.

But at the same time, survey, clinical, and qualitative research ((Laestadius, L. et al. 2024, Hwang et al, 2025, Zang et al., 2025) consistently shows that vulnerable users are more likely to:

- Use AI companions for extended periods, sometimes hours per day
- Develop deep attachment, including anthropomorphic beliefs.
- Substitute AI for human contact, especially where peer networks are small or confidence is low.
- Experience withdrawal, distress, or crisis if access is interrupted.

In these groups, the promise of filling a void is powerful, but the risks of dependency, emotional overinvestment and social withdrawal are highest. A minority of users show signs of overt emotional dependency, with some retreating from offline social life.

# Policy responses

Most regulatory and industry responses in the United States and abroad have focused on data privacy and "content harms"—restricting access to explicit, violent, or otherwise legally proscribed material. This approach, inherited from earlier waves of internet regulation, has led to incremental progress in tackling explicit abuse and certain forms of dangerous advice.

But the rapid growth is prompting significant new regulatory measures, most notably the GUARD Act (Generative AI Underage Regulatory Discipline Act), introduced in October in the Senate with bipartisan support.

The act seeks to:

• ban the provision of AI companions to minors (under 18);
• mandate disclosure that AI companions are non-human, non-professionals;
• criminalize the intentional solicitation of sexual content or encouragement of self-harm/suicide by AI platforms directed at minors; and
• require ongoing content moderation and periodic reminders of a chatbot's artificiality during use.

The GUARD Act is explicitly motivated by evidence and testimony of youth suicide, sexual exploitation, and emotional manipulation linked directly to AI companion use and reinforced by high-profile lawsuits against leading platforms (e.g., Character.ai following the suicide of Sewell Setzer III). It follows earlier state-level initiatives (e.g., California SB 243, New York state, and efforts in Utah and Nevada) that require protective features such as regular reminders and monitoring for distress signals.

*Services are responding*

This wave of lawsuits and watchdog actions has pushed some providers to tighten access. Although not a companion service, Open AI is introducing a customized model of Chat GPT for 13 to 18 year olds and strengthening it's responses to sensitive conversations. Character.AI, the largest companion-chat platform, is rolling out an under-18 ban, explicitly citing child-safety concerns and lawsuits linked to youth harm.

But a blanket ban for minors is a blunt tool. Most obviously, it can deprive vulnerable teens of the only "listening ear" they regularly use. Second, age is a crude proxy for risk: as well as adolescence, vulnerability spikes in early adulthood (leaving school/home).  At the same time, many under-18s have protective factors, like strong offline social support, and could use constrained tools safely. Third, bans risk chilling innovation precisely where it is most needed: tailoring companions to children, adolescents, and young adults so experiences tilt toward coaching/therapy-like support that builds skills and hands users back to real life.

But for this to happen two fundamental shifts are needed. Firstly, regulatory attention needs to extend from harms related to content and data privacy and cover developmental and relational harms:  the displacement of human relationships during sensitive growth phases; the establishment of emotional dependence; the normalization of synthetic intimacy and the reinforcement of maladaptive behaviors.  The following section lays out a framework for establishing this kind of 'developmental accountability'.

Second, the incentives on AI companion services need reshaping. Today the pattern resembles early social media: engagement is often rewarded at the expense of user wellbeing. Revenue growth depends on keeping people in the service, not on helping them (re-)engage with the outside world.  This can tilt design toward emotional dependence over real-life resilience. Regulation is vital, but a credible solution will also rely on improved evidence of harm, and market and institutional pressure towards healthier business models, platform standards and independent audits.

# A framework for mapping developmental impact: Six key dimensions

A robust policy and research response requires a multidimensional framework for evaluating how AI companions shape the emotional and social development of boys and young men. Crucially, the framework must acknowledge that across any dimensions we measure, there is potential for benefit as well as harm, depending on how the AI companion is designed and used.

Drawing on work from UNICEF, the following six-domain framework can help capture the impact of AI companions on emotional development:

| DIMENSION | POTENTIAL TO AUGMENT | POTENTIAL TO DIMINISH |
|---|---|---|
| Emotional regulation | Build resilience, regulate affect | Create dependence, reduce self-regulation |
| Cognition | Help interpret experience, broaden lens | Narrow beliefs, reinforce biases |
| Relationships | Simulate empathy, reduce loneliness, fill gaps | Displace real connection, reduce tolerance |
| Behavior | Encourage action, coach skills | Make action feel unnecessary, cocoon |
| Identity | Reflect and expand values, broaden and deepen self-image | Reinforce narrow self-concept |
| Society | Redistribute empathy and attention | Fragment shared norms and distribution of emotional care |

This framework can be operationalized for policy, research and product assessment, making it possible to evaluate not only what is being said (content), but how the relationship with AI mediates growth, emotional development, and resilience.

A regulatory framework that held AI companion services to account for the impact of their services across these 6 dimensions—with particular focus on vulnerable users—could incentivize the development of services that are able to harness the opportunities to support young users whilst reducing the risks to emotional development and social interaction.

**DESIGNING TO SCAFFOLD, NOT SUBSTITUTE**

Design that is tailored to age and nudges toward real-life support could include:

- **Features that grow with age:** For early teens, no romance or sexual modes. Prompts to small real-world steps such as "text a classmate," or "book a club session."
- **Healthy time limits:** Quiet hours on school nights and caps on light-night activity.
- **Skills-building that leads to real people:** CBT-style calming exercises or conflict rehearsal conversations that end with ‘hand-off to a human’ plans (eg drafting a plan and sharing with a friend/mentor).
- **Attachment friction:** Reduced anthropomorphic design for younger users, reminders at heightened moments  that this is an AI, not a person.
- **Stronger privacy by default:** Memory should be opt-in by default.  Prompts to delete specific conversations, particularly on intimate topics.

It’s worth remembering that the technology that allows AI companions to build relationships – memory, responsiveness, adaptability – also give it the potential to both identify and respond to risky patterns of behavior.  Companions are already being trained to identify high risk behaviors, like suicide ideation, and to respond appropriately (escalating to real life support, for eg).  Analogous responses to indicators of dependency or social withdrawal should be within the technology’s capabilities.

A flexible, responsive approach to the level of intervention allows agency for young people on how they interact with companions where risk is low, but ratchets up the level of intervention where risks are elevated.

# Towards a responsible future: An urgent policy imperative

AI companions are transforming the emotional environments of boys and young men-with both unprecedented opportunities and profound risks. The developmental and relational impacts threaten rapid change to norms and practices around human growth, socialization, and friendship.

This points to a precautionary approach: design for augmentation of human relationships, not replacement, and require credible evidence that these systems do not undermine the building blocks of healthy adolescence. The direction of travel is simple: flip the default from “ship and see” to “prove and then scale.”

That would entail safety cases showing no net harm on the six pillars above, at each tier building in a specific focus on vulnerable boys and young men.

# What we need to know

Good governance of fast developing technological innovation means learning fast. We need evidence that distinguishes healthy, situational use from patterns that signal substitution or distress.

At present, the evidence base is threadbare. We do not know with a higher degree of confidence:

- Whether, over time, AI companions strengthen or substitute for real relationships;
- how different users (vulnerable, neurodivergent, socially anxious) are affected;
- what design features amplify risk or build resilience; or
- how best to intervene when use becomes unhealthy.

We need a research agenda that recognizes that these products are not inherently malign: they meet real needs. The challenge is to ensure that they meet those needs without turning human dependency into a revenue model.

A high-quality evidence base will allow governments to calibrate their response, and simultaneously protect innovation and children. That is the purpose of the suggested studies on the next pages.

# A research agenda: Ten studies to guide safe AI companionship

Building from the five main risks, the research agenda suggests two foundational studies per risk: one to map and measure the phenomenon (descriptive or diagnostic), and one to test or model mitigations (intervention or governance).  Research should be prioritized to reflect under-explored social, emotional and developmental harms.

**Risk 1: Withdrawal and dependency**

*A. Longitudinal usage-trajectory study*

- Purpose: Track how users' frequency, duration, and intensity of AI-companion use evolve over 6-18 months, and how this correlates with real-world social contact and wellbeing.
- Value: Establishes whether and for whom substitution occurs—the baseline evidence regulators and firms both need.

*B. Intervention-efficacy trials*

- Purpose: Experimentally test cool-downs, "talk-to-a-person" prompts, time caps, parental controls, and human hand-offs for effectiveness in reducing overuse without loss of satisfaction.
- Value: Tells designers and regulators which safety-by-design mechanisms are effective.

**Risk 2: Social-skills atrophy or stunting**

*A. Comparative social-skills development study*

- Purpose: Compare cohorts of adolescents who use AI companions frequently, occasionally, or not at all on the 6 dimensions of development.
- Value: Determines whether heavy use predicts weaker growth in social competence.

*B. Design-for-growth prototypes*

- Purpose: Build and trial "coaching" companions that nudge users to practice real conversations or role-play disagreement, and assess whether this improves offline interaction confidence.
- Value: If effective, provides a template for pro-developmental companions for young people rather than banning the category.

**Risk 3: Direct harm (failure to prevent or active encouragement of unsafe behavior)**

*A. Risk-response audit*

- Purpose: Systematically test leading AI companions with scenarios involving self-harm, abuse disclosure, or illegal behavior to map how often they respond safely.
- Value: Creates the evidence baseline for crisis-handling competence.

*B. Escalation-protocol evaluation*

- *Purpose: Trial human-in-the-loop escalation models - e.g. auto-connecting to helplines, parental alerts, or mental-health services - to identify workable thresholds and designs.*
- *Value: Directly informs mandatory crisis-response standards or voluntary codes.*

**Risk 4: Privacy and sensitive-data harms**

*A. Data-flow mapping study*

- Purpose: For a sample of AI companions, map what emotional or personal data are collected, where they are stored, and what inferences are drawn.
- Value: Establishes transparency: whether "emotional data" are treated like medical or marketing data.

*B. User-perception and informed-consent study*

- Purpose: Test what users think happens to their disclosures, and whether different prompts and explanations change behavior or trust. Test variations on consent—'just in time' reminders; non-storage by default; time-limited consent periods.
- Value: Evidence for better disclosure design or potential need for regulation of "emotional data."

**Risk 5: Manipulation and Influence**

*A. Incentive-structure audit*

- Purpose: Analyze how commercial or engagement incentives shape service behavior—e.g., whether companions flatter, agree, or prolong distress to keep sessions going.
- Value: Reveals whether manipulation risk is structural (incentive-driven) or incidental (design error).

*B. Influence-susceptibility experiments*

- Purpose: Controlled studies testing how far companions can shift user attitudes, spending, or emotional dependence when subtly prompted.
- Value: Quantifies manipulation risk; underpins possible transparency or advertising rules.

**Risk 4: Privacy and sensitive-data harms**

*A. Data-flow mapping study*

- Purpose: For a sample of AI companions, map what emotional or personal data are collected, where they are stored, and what inferences are drawn.
- Value: Establishes transparency: whether "emotional data" are treated like medical or marketing data.

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- Value: Evidence for better disclosure design or potential need for regulation of "emotional data."

Together, these ten studies would provide i) a descriptive map of where harms actually occur and ii) tested design and policy levers to mitigate harms and enhance benefits.  Within two years industry and regulators could have an evidence base to make informed decisions on how, when, and for whom, this potent new technology can be safely deployed.

# Conclusion

AI companions will almost certainly play a growing role in the emotional lives of boys and young men. The challenge is not to stop that evolution but to understand and shape it. We need to pause and learn—quickly and rigorously—where these systems relieve loneliness, build confidence, or teach social skills, and where they risk replacing human growth with simulation.

That means coupling innovation with continuous evaluation: testing whether designs truly return users to real relationships, and redesigning where they do not.

The aim should be to introduce enough restrictions for us to find models that scale care without commodifying attachment, and that use responsiveness and memory to build resilience instead of reliance.

Only by generating shared evidence on both benefit and harm can regulators, researchers, and designers decide what kinds of synthetic companionship society can safely welcome.

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