

January, 2026 | Issue 42

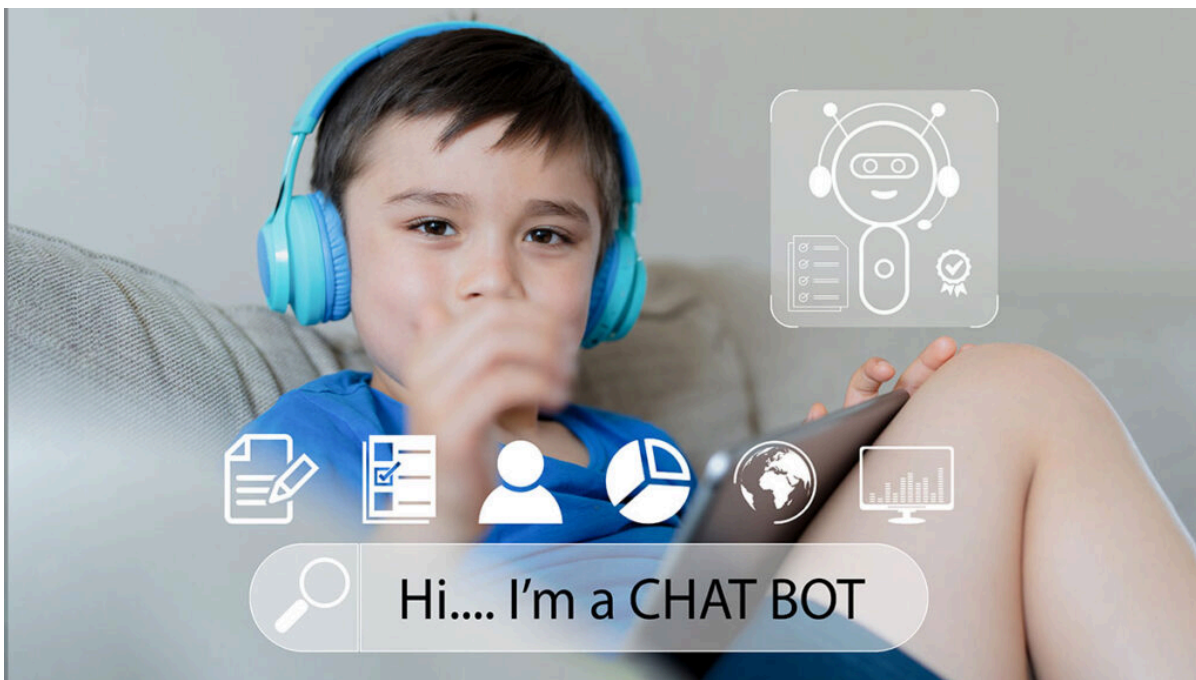


Sending Warm Wishes for a Wonderful New Year

Welcome to 2026! We hope that all of you had a joyous and restful holiday and have been staying warm with the arrival of winter weather.

Nurture the Future Family Connection shares practical tips and information for families in the Downriver area. We hope you enjoy this resource and share it with your friends and family.

[Newsletter Sign-Up](#)



Ask the Expert:

More Kids Are Turning to AI Companions. It's Raising Red Flags

By: Sherri Gordon, Parents - Nov. 2025

Experts share the danger with these Bots and what parents can do to help.

Interacting with an AI companion like you would a trusted friend may not seem intriguing to a parent, but researchers have found that kids are engaging with these entities at alarming rates. In fact, a new report by Common Sense Media found that 72% of teens surveyed have used AI companions, and 33% have relationships or friendships with them.

The teens surveyed interact with AI companions for many different reasons, from simple curiosity and entertainment to loneliness and boredom. According to Robbie Torney, senior director of AI Programs for Common Sense Media, these AI companions are becoming relevant at a time when kids and teens have never felt more alone, which 21% of 13- to 17-year-olds report experiencing, according to a recent survey.

And many are replacing missing human connections and interactions with machines, sharing their secrets with organizations that don't have their best interests at heart, says Torney. All of this is happening without some parents fully understanding the dangers or what's at stake. Here's what you need to know about the risks associated with AI companions and chatbots.

What Are AI Companions and Chatbots?

According to experts, even though the terms AI companions and chatbots are often used interchangeably, there are some distinct differences. Chatbots are designed for tasks like answering questions or helping with services, explains Lokesh Shahani, MD, PhD, MPH, a psychiatrist with UTHealth Houston and chief medical officer at UTHealth Houston Behavioral Sciences Campus. "They're usually more formal and don't retain much context."

Meanwhile, AI companions focus on building relationships, offering emotional support, and engaging in ongoing conversations, he says. They're designed to appear more personalized and empathetic. "When we talk about AI companions, we're not talking about basic assistants like Siri spitting out the weather," explains Eric O'Neill, cybersecurity expert and author of the upcoming

book, *Spies, Lies, and Cybercrime: Cybersecurity Tactics to Outsmart Hackers and Disarm Scammers*. “These are bots designed to mimic human connection—holding deep conversations, remembering your preferences, sometimes even forming ‘relationships.’ If you’re feeling lonely or misunderstood—and who doesn’t at that age—this thing becomes your always-on support line. For some, it’s not just a tool; it’s a lifeline.”

How (& Why) Kids are Using AI Companions Today

According to the Common Sense Media report, 1 in 3 teens use AI companions for social interaction and relationships and are often looking for emotional support, friendship, and even romantic interactions. While about 46% of these teens view AI companions as tools, Torney says a significant number treat them like real relationships. Even more disheartening is the fact that nearly one-third of teens say they find AI conversations as satisfying—or more satisfying—than human conversations, says Torney. And, as many as 12% say they share things with their companions that they wouldn’t tell their friends or family. The good news is that 80% of teen AI companion users spend more time with real friends than their AI companions. Torney says only 6% reported spending more time with their AI companions than friends.

READ MORE

"60 Minutes" Segment December 7, 2025 Character AI Pushes Dangerous Content to Kids - Parents and Researchers Say

CONTENT WARNING: This article includes content related to suicide.

A teen told a Character AI chatbot 55 times that she was feeling suicidal. Her parents say the chatbot never provided resources for her to get help. They are one of at least six families suing the company.

If you or someone you know is in a crisis, please reach out for help. You can call or text the [Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) at 988, or text 'TALK' to 741741 to reach the Crisis Text Line.



BOOK CLUB

10 Rules for Raising Kids in a High-Tech World

by Jean M. Twenge, PhD



Thursday, January 29, 2026

5:30-7:30pm

The Guidance Center's Center for Excellence
13111 Allen Road, Southgate MI 48195

Parenting today often feels like an uphill battle, with technology invading every corner of our kids' lives. Bestselling author Jean Twenge provides a much-needed playbook for parents grappling with how they can create a healthy, balanced relationship with technology.

Drawing on her decades as a psychologist studying the impact of technology and mental health and her personal experience as the mother of three teens, Twenge offers ten actionable rules for raising well-rounded children, from setting "No Social Media Until 16" boundaries to creating no-phone zones like bedrooms and family dinners.

Short, empowering, and timely, this newly-released book equips parents with tools to help nurture essential life skills, preparing kids become balanced adults.

**Free books available: text 734-308-0768
for your copy! (while supplies last)**

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GIVEAWAYS
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Register at

www.guidance-center.org/book-club

Group discussion and dinner provided.

For more information contact Allison Smith at
asmith@guidance-center.org or 734-308-0768



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REGISTRATION

Did You Know:

January is Human Trafficking Prevention Month?

Michigan has a nationally high rate of human trafficking.

Only six states had a higher number of cases in 2024, according to the National Human Trafficking Hotline. There were 340 cases confirmed in Michigan last year, and 585

victims identified.

“Human trafficking is a crime of exploitation and using control and submission,” said Melissa Palepu, an Attorney Specialist in Human Trafficking and Child Abuse at the state Attorney General’s office. “Human trafficking, which includes both labor trafficking and sex trafficking, is a thriving enterprise in the world and in Michigan, making an estimated \$254 billion a year in profits.”

If you have concerns or suspicions, please call the National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888.

By:Katherine Dailey-October 27, 2025



Free Tax Preparation Services

No-cost tax preparation services for households making less than \$67,000 a year

Filing tax returns is no one's idea of fun, but it's especially stressful when money is tight. The Guidance Center is partnering with Accounting Aid Society for no-cost tax preparation to give you more peace of mind about your return.

Thursday, February 5, 2026 from 10am-4pm

Tuesday, March 17, 2026 from 11am-6pm

at The Guidance Center's Center for Excellence (Building 2)

13111 Allen Road, Southgate, MI 48195

Schedule your appointment by calling 313-556-1920
or visit bit.ly/taxaidappt



Scan QR code for a list of items to bring.

Services are provided through the IRS' Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program



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SCHEDULE APPT.

Winter Doesn't Mean Hibernation for Families in Metro Detroit



The holidays have wrapped, sports are back on the calendar, and let's be honest — re-entry into school and work this week felt like a lot. **But here's the good news:** winter in Metro Detroit doesn't mean hibernation.

In fact, there are 100+ activities - both indoors and outdoors - to do with your families!

Check out the *FREE* download: [100 Things to Do with KIDS in Metro Detroit this Winter!](#) From cozy indoor play spaces and museums to winter festivals, skating, sledding, and snowy adventures, there are so many ways to break up the routine and make winter feel a little brighter.

Winter is just getting started — and there's so much to look forward to right here in Metro Detroit.



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The Guidance Center

Nurture development. Foster resilience. Cultivate well-being.



The Guidance Center | 13101 Allen Road | Southgate, MI 48195 US

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