eSafetyresearch

Talking to machines:

Children's experiences with AI assistants and companions

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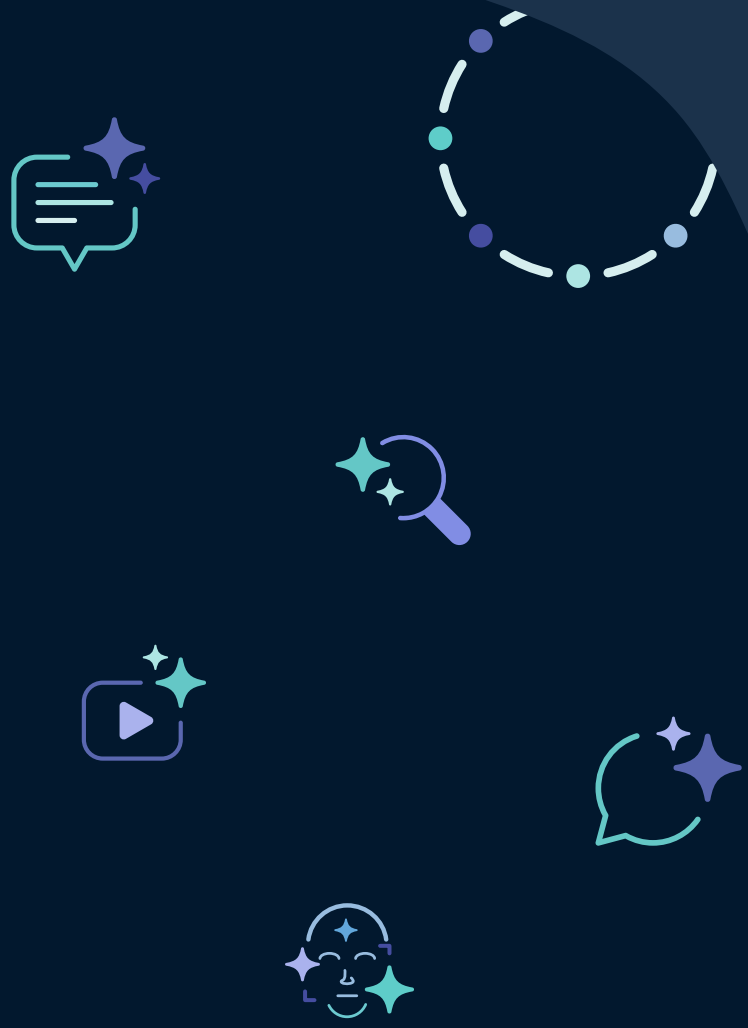
Acknowledgement of Country

eSafety acknowledges all First Nations people for their continuing care of everything Country encompasses – land, waters and community. We pay our respects to First Nations people and to Elders past and present.



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the children and parents who took the time to complete our survey, thereby contributing to a greater understanding of the online experiences of children in Australia.

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Contributing authors: Lauren Herbert, Claire Lister, Savannah Minihan, Aleksandra Najdovska and Mariesa Nicholas.

eSafety research program

The eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) helps Australians to have safer and more positive experiences online.

The eSafety research program supports, encourages, conducts and evaluates research about online safety for Australians. We do this so that:

- our programs, policies and regulatory functions are evidence-informed
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Contents

Key terms

AI assistants: Online chatbot tools (apps, tools or services) that use generative artificial intelligence to mimic human-like conversations. They are designed to understand human languages – in text, speech or both – and to respond to user questions and tasks. They are primarily marketed as functional tools to assist users with specific tasks, organisation, education or learning.

AI companions: Online chatbot tools (apps, tools or services) that, like AI assistants, are designed to understand human languages and use generative artificial intelligence to mimic human-like conversations and respond to user prompts. AI companions are primarily marketed as sources of friendship, emotional support, romantic companionship and/or an antidote to loneliness. They are often engineered to seem caring or intimate.[1]

Children: Children and teens aged 10 to 17.

Children with disability: Children with a disability or other diagnosis that has lasted (or is likely to last) for at least six months, including neurodivergence, diagnosed mental health conditions, cognitive or intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, sensory disabilities, deafness and chronic disease.[2] In this report, we primarily use person-first language, such as 'children with disability', but we understand that many people with disability choose to use identity-first language. We also acknowledge that many neurodivergent people don't see neurodivergence as a disability but, rather, as a specific way of seeing and interacting with the world.

Parents: Parents, guardians and primary caregivers of children aged 10 to 17. For simplicity and consistency throughout this report, we use the term 'parents' to refer collectively to parents, guardians and primary caregivers.

Sexually diverse: Any sexuality other than heterosexual or 'straight', including 'gay', 'lesbian', 'bisexual', 'queer', 'asexual', 'pansexual' and 'still working it out'.

Teens: Children aged 13 to 17.

[1] We note that the terms 'AI companions' and 'AI assistants' used for generative AI services within this report don't necessarily reflect their regulatory status or obligations under the Online Safety Codes and Standards, and the *Online Safety Act 2021* (Cth) more generally, and should not be interpreted as such.

[2] Parents reported this information on behalf of their child who completed the survey.

About this report

The use of AI assistants and companions – tools that use generative artificial intelligence to understand human languages and mimic human-like conversations – has exploded in recent years. These tools have become a common feature in the lives of many of us, rapidly changing how we work and how we learn. For some of us, they have also become a place to seek advice, support and connection.

AI companions (for example, Character.AI and Anima AI) are typically positioned as sources of connection, friendship and emotional support, and are often designed to feel personal or relational. In contrast, **AI assistants** (for example, ChatGPT and Gemini) are generally framed as functional tools for performing tasks, obtaining information and supporting learning. However, the boundaries between these tool types are increasingly becoming blurred, with both offering features such as memory, personalisation and human-like interaction. As a result, users, particularly teens, may engage with them in social or relational ways regardless of how they are positioned (Neugnot-Cerioli, 2026).

These tools and the technologies underpinning them have the potential to benefit children as well as adults – for example, by providing tailored and interactive learning support (Laun & Wolff, 2025) or by assisting with organisation, the synthesising of information and problem solving (American Psychological Association, 2025a). However, concerns have been raised about the risks associated with their use, especially for children. These risks include the potential to:

- expose users to violent or sexually explicit material
- spread misinformation or disinformation
- reinforce harmful stereotypes
- encourage or facilitate harmful behaviours
- pose privacy risks
- create emotional overreliance
- have negative psychological and social impacts.

(Abid & Farooqi, 2021; Zhang et al., 2025; Internet Matters, 2025; Neugnot-Cerioli, 2026; Robb & Mann, 2025; Common Sense Media, 2025).

With these risks in mind, a key objective of this study was to understand the extent to which children are using tools marketed as AI assistants in more personal ways typically associated with AI companions – for emotional support, friendship or personal advice. Such interactions have important implications for online safety. Children may shift from functional uses to more personal and potentially riskier interactions, while parents, educators and providers may underestimate these uses and the need for appropriate safeguards.

Drawing on data from an online survey conducted between 2 February and 4 March 2026 of 1,950 children aged 10 to 17 living in Australia, our study investigates how many children in Australia are using AI assistants and companions, which tools they are using and how often they use them. It explores why they are motivated to use these tools and what they are using them for, including whether they are using AI assistants for personal reasons that are more commonly associated with AI companions, such as for social interaction and to seek advice on sensitive issues. It also examines the incidence of children having potentially inappropriate or harmful interactions with AI assistants or companions. Where sample sizes are sufficient, we consider differences by age, gender, sexuality and disability.

Findings should be interpreted in the context that this research was conducted prior to the introduction of the Age-Restricted Material Codes for AI services on 9 March 2026. The Codes aim to protect Australian children from exposure to harmful content, including pornography, high-impact violence, and material that promotes disordered eating or self-harm.

We found that most children had used AI assistants and a sizeable minority had used AI companions. Many of those children had used these tools for personal reasons, such as support, friendship, or advice about personal issues, regardless of whether they are positioned as assistants or companions. Additionally, a significant minority of children had been exposed to potentially inappropriate or harmful advice or interactions by AI assistants or companions.

The report concludes with a discussion of how to reduce the risks associated with children's use of AI assistants and companions, with specific considerations for the technology industry, parents, and educators who support children or parents.

These findings will contribute to our collective understanding of the role that AI is increasingly playing in children's lives. They will also inform eSafety's work to prevent AI-related harms through its education materials, programs, training and campaigns; to promote the application of Safety by Design principles to AI contexts; and to address AI-related harms through its investigative and regulatory functions.

Key findings

- **Most children in Australia have used an AI assistant.** Around 4 in 5 children aged 10 to 17 (78%) told us they had ever used one or more AI assistants. ChatGPT was the most popular AI assistant, with 70% having used it, followed by Gemini (20%) and Copilot (20%).
- **A significant minority of children have used an AI companion.** Nearly 1 in 10 children (8%) had ever used an AI companion. Character.AI was the most popular AI companion, with 5% of children ever having used it, followed by Anima AI (2%) and Chai (2%).
- **Many children use AI assistants or companions regularly.** Among the children who had ever used AI assistants or companions, 1 in 5 (20%) were using them daily or more often and 28% were using them a few times a week. This equates to 16% of all children using these tools at least daily.
- **Many children look to AI assistants or companions for help with functional tasks such as schoolwork, or for entertainment, but some are seeking connection or support with personal or sensitive issues.** Among children who had ever used an AI assistant or companion, most had done so because they wanted help with schoolwork, organisation or problem solving (68%), while just over half were looking for entertainment or relaxation or were simply curious (55%). Approaching 1 in 3 (29%) were looking for personal support or connection.
- **Reflecting their motivations, most children who use AI assistants or companions do so for functional reasons and more than half use them for social or personal reasons.** Most children who had used AI assistants or companions had used them for functional reasons, such as to find information, to support learning or translation (91%), or for writing or editing (70%), as well as for entertainment (68%). More than half (54%) also reported using them for personal or social reasons, including to seek advice about what to do in a situation (33%) or about their physical health (33%), to chat about their feelings or challenges (22%), to seek advice about their mental health or wellbeing (20%), or simply to chat together – for example, about their interests (17%).

- **Children often use AI assistants for personal or social reasons.** Considering children's use of AI assistants separately: even though these tools tend to be positioned primarily as functional tools, half of the children who had used AI assistants (50%) told us they had used them for one or more of the personal or social reasons outlined above.
- **Exposure to potentially harmful advice or interactions via AI assistants or companions is not uncommon.** Overall, 1 in 5 children who had used an AI assistant or companion (20%) had potentially inappropriate or harmful interactions with these tools. This included AI assistants or companions:
    - attempting to control them in some way (13%)
    - sharing or saying hateful things about one or more groups of other people – for example, based on their gender, culture, disability, sexuality or religion (9%)
    - giving harmful advice (6%)
    - being offensive, mean or bullying towards them personally (6%)
    - sharing real or AI-generated nude images or videos with them (4%)
    - showing them real or AI-generated sexual images (pornography) or engaging in sexual chat (5% of teens).
- **Children may disclose private or personal information to AI assistants or companions.** Around 1 in 3 children who had used an AI assistant or companion (32%) had shared personal data or potentially sensitive information with it,[3] such as photos of themselves or their friends (20%) or secrets (12%).
- **AI assistants and companions cause children to experience a range of emotions, both negative and positive.** An AI assistant or companion had, at some stage, made most children who had used these tools feel something positive (85%) (for example, happy, excited, smart, reassured or attractive). However, just under half of the children who had used them (47%) said these tools had made them feel something negative (for example, upset, worried, confused, angry, annoyed, unsafe, embarrassed or hopeless).

[3] This figure doesn't include personal data that might have been shared for registration or age assurance processes (for example, names or date of birth).

- **Reporting options are either rare or not obvious to children.** Only 11% of children said all the AI assistants or companions they had used had a reporting option, 16% said none of them had this, and 52% were unsure. The remainder said that most of them (11%) or some of them (10%) had a reporting option.
- **Engagement with AI companions is higher among children with disability, as well as among sexually diverse teens.** Children with disability, and especially those with a diagnosed mental health condition, were more likely than others to have used an AI companion, as were sexually diverse teens. Both groups were also more likely to have used an AI assistant or companion for various personal reasons, including to talk about their feelings or challenges, to seek advice about their mental health or wellbeing, or to spend time or role play with. In addition, a relatively high proportion of children with disability had been made to feel negative emotions by an AI assistant or companion. Sexually diverse teens were more likely to have experienced potentially inappropriate or harmful interactions and to have shared personal or sensitive information with an AI tool, including about their sexuality.

Methodology

This study aimed to build on our understanding of the prevalence and nature of AI assistant and companion usage among children in Australia. To achieve these aims, we surveyed 1,950 children in Australia aged 10 to 17 about their use of, and experiences with, AI assistants and companions. Participating parents were also asked about their child's use of AI assistants and companions.

Online survey

A total of 1,950 children aged 10 to 17 took part in the survey. Children were recruited from a non-probability-based online panel provider (Octopus Group) via their parent. To provide a sample that is nationally representative in terms of key demographics, quota targets were placed on children's gender, age, state or territory, location type, Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity and linguistic diversity. Population statistics were sourced from comparable population estimates for children aged 10 to 17 published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The survey data was weighted to correct for minor differences between the population profile and the final sample profile, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of survey participants (quota variables)

Child demographics	Australian population (10–17 years) (%)	Sample % (unweighted)	Sample *n*	Sample % (weighted)
Gender by age				
Boy aged 10–12	19.8	19.4	378	19.4
Girl aged 10–12	18.8	18.9	368	18.5
Boy aged 13–15	19.5	19.0	370	19.2
Girl aged 13–15	18.4	17.9	350	18.1
Boy aged 16–17	12.1	11.9	233	11.9
Girl aged 16–17	11.4	11.1	217	11.2
Other than cisgender (any age)	Unknown	1.7	34	1.7
State/territory				
NSW	31.5	28.5	556	31.5
VIC	24.7	25.4	496	24.7
QLD	21.6	22.2	432	21.6
WA	10.7	11.6	227	10.7
SA	6.7	7.3	142	6.7
ACT, TAS, NT	4.8	5.0	97	4.8
SEIFA				
IRSAD Quintile 1	15.3	12.7	248	15.3
IRSAD Quintile 2	16.2	14.5	282	16.2
IRSAD Quintile 3	20.3	21.5	420	20.3
IRSAD Quintile 4	21.4	21.8	425	21.4
IRSAD Quintile 5	26.8	29.5	575	26.8
Location type				
Major cities	71.1	75.3	1,469	71.1
Regional and remote areas	28.9	24.7	481	28.9
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity				
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	5.9	8.5	165	5.9
Linguistic diversity				
Child speaks a language other than English at home	18.6	14.4	280	18.6

Table 2 provides additional child and parent demographics (not used for quotas). One in 4 children surveyed (24%) had a disability, and 8% of teens (aged 13 to 17) identified as sexually diverse. Parents were only asked to provide their age; most were aged between 35 and 54.

Table 2: Further demographic characteristics of survey participants (not quotas)

Child demographics	Sample % (achieved)	Sample n	Sample % (weighted)
Disability			
Child has a disability[4]	25.0	488	24.4
Sexual orientation[5]			
Heterosexual/'straight'	76.8	918	76.1
Sexually diverse[6]	8.0	96	8.0
Not thought about this yet	2.4	29	2.6
Chose not to answer	12.8	153	13.4
Parent age			
25–34	9.7	190	10.0
35–44	49.2	959	49.2
45–54	35.6	694	35.4
55–64	5.1	99	5.0
65 or older	0.4	8	0.4

The survey was conducted from 2 February to 4 March 2026 and took approximately 5 to 13 minutes to complete, depending on how participants responded – in particular, whether children had ever used an AI assistant or companion.

Informed consent to participate was sought from parents, along with informed assent from children. Parents with multiple children were asked to respond in relation to one specific child only in the 10 to 17 age range. The research was approved by the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee (application number 2025-10-1720).

[4] 'Disability' includes neurodivergence, diagnosed mental health conditions, cognitive or intellectual disabilities, behavioural disorders, physical disabilities, sensory disabilities, d/Deaf, chronic disease (coded from responses written in by participants), and any other disability or diagnosis that has lasted (or is likely to last) for at least six months.

[5] Sexuality was asked only of teens aged 13 to 17. It is noted that teens' sexuality may be evolving, as part of 'normal' adolescent and sexual development. This data reflects their sexual identity at the point in time when they completed the survey.

[6] 'Sexually diverse' includes participants who identified their sexuality as 'gay or lesbian', 'bisexual', 'queer', 'asexual' or 'pansexual', or who indicated they are 'still working it out'.

Classification of AI tools

Children who participated in the survey were asked to identify any AI assistants and companions they had used from a list of options. They were also able to specify any additional AI assistants or companions they had used. These tools were classified as AI assistants or companions by eSafety researchers, based on how they were marketed. Tools intended for one specific functional task only, such as image generation (for example, Dall-E) were excluded, as were home assistants (for example, Alexa and Siri).

Data analysis

Apparent differences between subgroups of children who participated in the survey were tested for statistical significance using Q Research Software and were reported on only when the difference was statistically significant. Only subgroups with at least 50 participants each were compared.

We note that the sample size for some subgroups is relatively small. As such, an absence of statistically significant differences in the data doesn't necessarily mean there are no differences in the population. This should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Percentages in tables and figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding or to question formats that allowed for multiple responses. Tables and figures may not include the response options 'prefer not to answer', 'don't know' or 'another reason' – for example, if the number of respondents was low. In figures, percentage results below 1% (rounded) may not be labelled.

Limitations

- The survey sample was sourced from online panels of people who have agreed to be invited to participate in online research on a variety of topics. Technically, these are convenience samples. 'Non-probability-based sampling' means that not everyone has an equal chance of being selected to participate in the research. Results may be subject to a range of biases when compared with results from research using probability-based sampling. Although quotas and survey weights were used to control for demographic skews, it is difficult to control for psychographic skews arising from differential approaches to participation attraction.
- The findings from this research are reliant on children's self-reported use of and experiences with AI assistants and companions, rather than on independent observation and assessment. Self-report surveys can be subject to social desirability biases, whereby participants may answer survey items in a manner they deem to be socially desirable or acceptable, as opposed to providing a true reflection of their experiences. For example, children may underreport their use of AI companions, due to negative social perceptions about these services, or if they were trying to hide their use of such services from their parent.
- This is an exploratory study, focused on establishing the incidence and nature of AI assistant and companion usage among children in Australia and the incidence of exposure to some forms of potentially harmful interactions. It is not a comprehensive investigation into all the potential harms or benefits associated with children's use of AI assistants and companions.
- Our sample size of trans and gender-diverse children was too small (n = 34) to allow for comparative analysis, meaning that we were unable to separately explore these children's experiences with AI assistants and companions. Future research with a larger sample of trans and gender-diverse children would be needed to understand their experiences with these tools.

Positionality statement

eSafety understands the impact on our research and analysis of researchers' intersecting experiences of power and marginalisation. The team that authored this report is made up of cis-gender women, including parents. Our team has expertise in quantitative and qualitative methodologies, online harms and safety, and the lived experiences of people at risk of online harms.

AI assistants and companions used by children

We begin by considering how many children in Australia have used AI assistants and companions, as well as the specific AI assistant and companion tools they have used, both in their lifetime and in the four weeks prior to completing the survey.

Most children have used an AI assistant, and a significant minority have used an AI companion

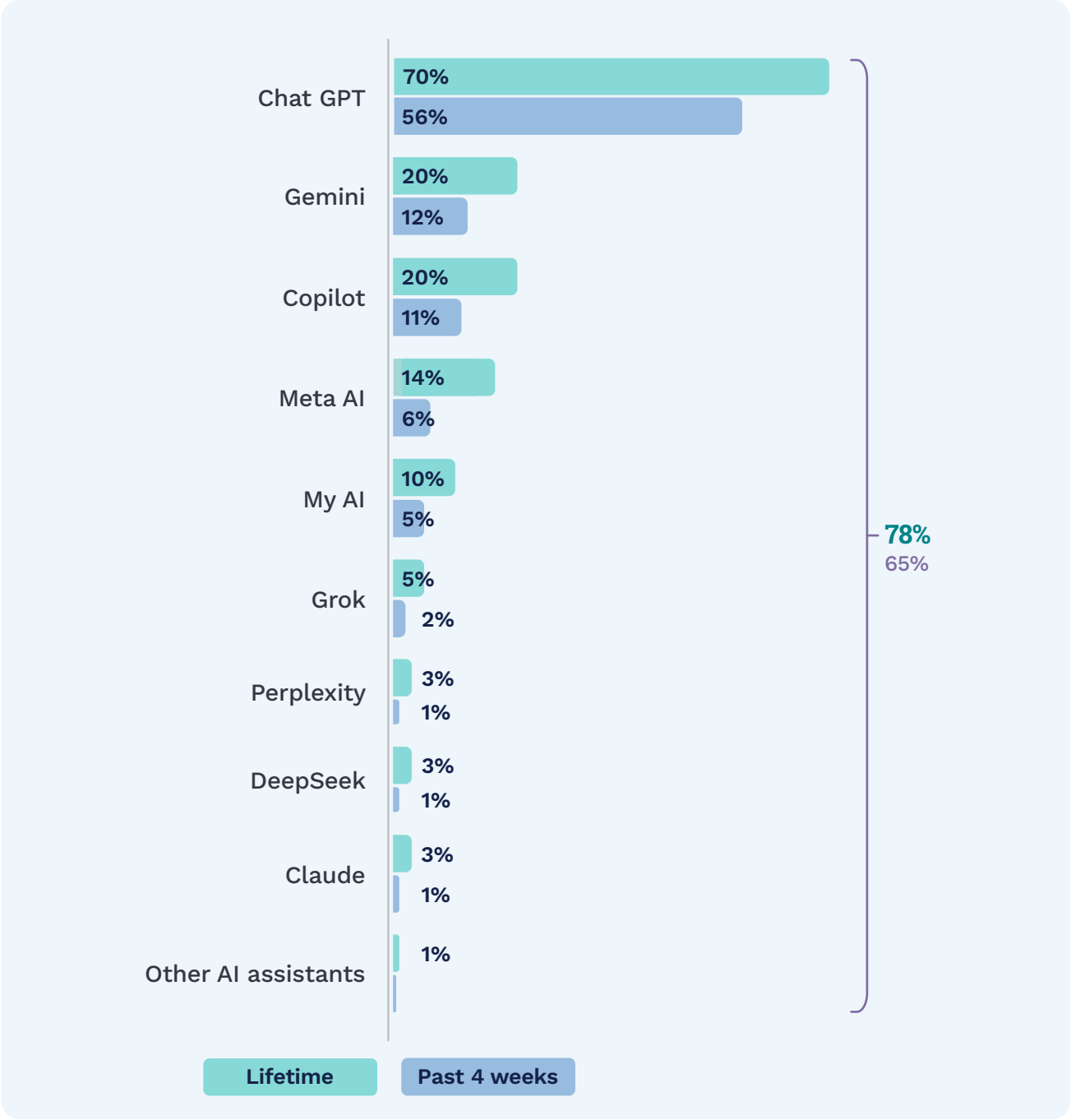
Around 8 in 10 children (78%) had ever used an AI assistant. When extrapolated to the Australian population of around 2.5 million children aged 10 to 17,[7] this finding suggests that around 1.9 million children (aged 10 to 17) in Australia may have used an AI assistant. As can be seen in Figure 1, the most used AI assistants were:

- ChatGPT (70%)
- Copilot (20%)
- Gemini (20%)
- Meta AI (14%).

Most children also reported using an AI assistant recently – 65% said they had used one in the past four weeks, with ChatGPT (56%) again being the most common.

[7] According to ABS, 2021 Census data. Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). Age (AGEP) by Sex (SEXP). [Census Table Builder].

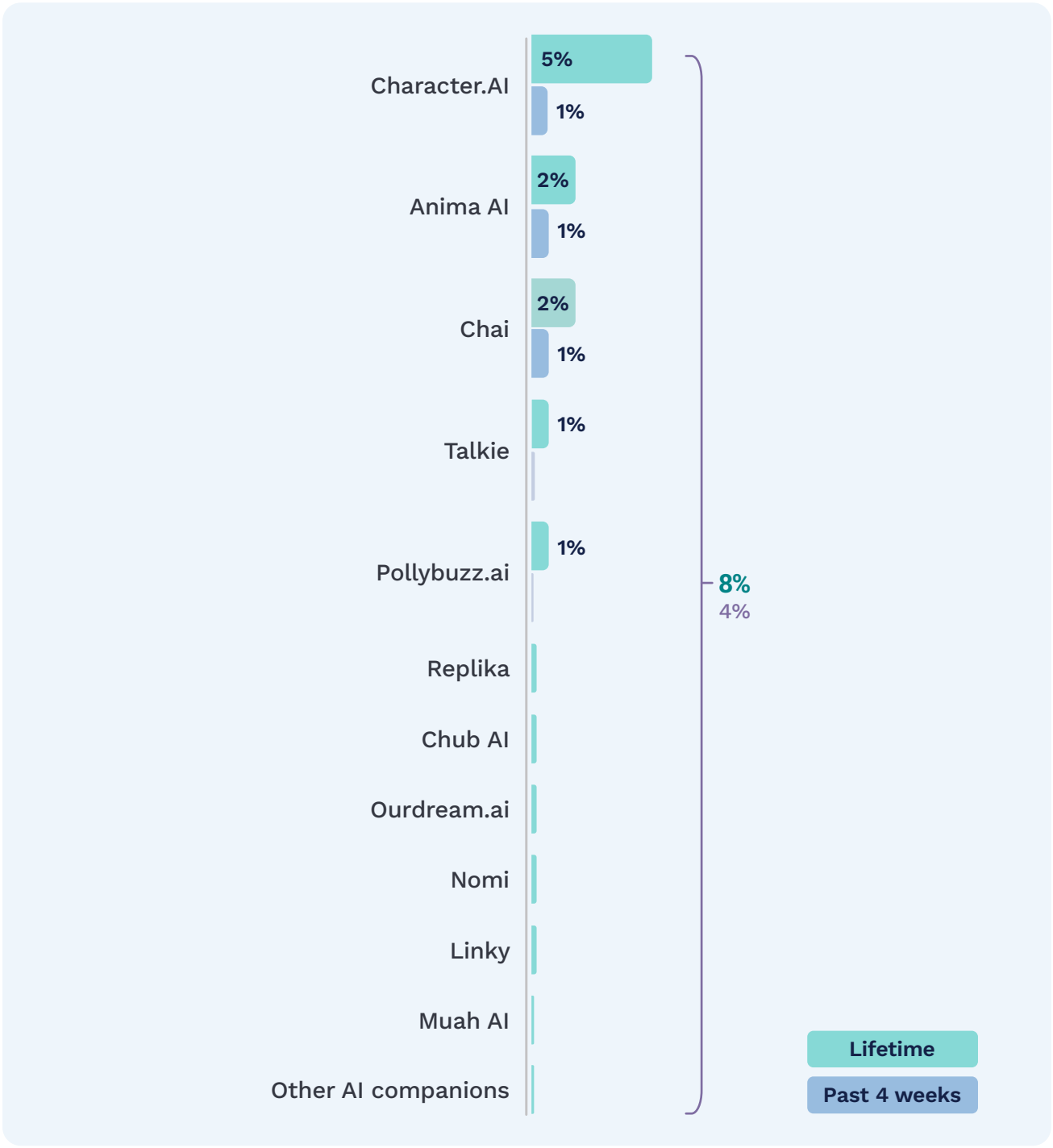
Figure 1: Children's use of AI assistants – lifetime and past 4 weeks



Q: Which, if any, of the following apps or platforms have you ever used/ used in the past 4 weeks?
Base: Children aged 10 to 17 (*n* = 1,950).

Just under 1 in 10 children (8%) reported ever having used an AI companion. Although this is a minority, it suggests that around 200,000 children (aged 10 to 17) in Australia may have used an AI companion. As shown in Figure 2, the most used AI companions were Character.AI (5%), Anima (2%) and Chai (2%). Around 1 in 20 children (4%) had used an AI companion in the past four weeks.

Figure 2: Children's use of AI companions – lifetime and past 4 weeks



Q: Which, if any, of the following apps or platforms have you ever used/ used in the past 4 weeks?
Base: Children aged 10 to 17 (*n* = 1,950)

A minority of children are using AI assistants or companions intended for adults

At the time of writing this report, only one of the nine AI assistants listed in Figure 1 was rated as 18+, according to its terms of use (Claude).[8] By contrast, six of the AI companions listed in Figure 2 had this rating (Chai, Chub AI, Muah AI, Nomi, Ourdream.ai and Replika).[9,10] Overall, 1 in 20 children (5%) had used an AI assistant or companion intended for adults (aged 18+), according to each tool's terms of use. Specifically, 2% had used an AI companion intended for adults, and 3% had used an AI assistant intended for adults.[11]

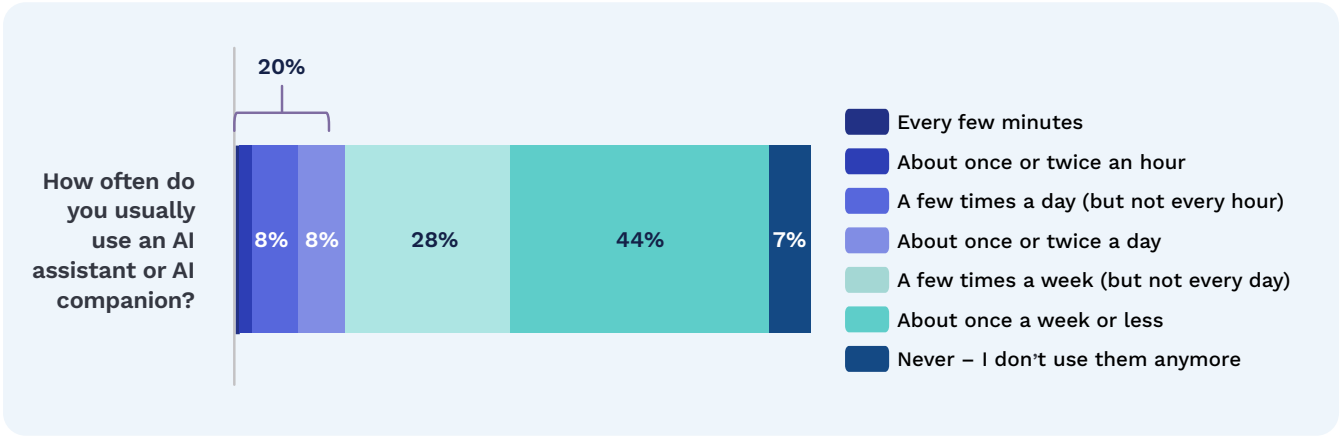
One in 5 children who have used an AI assistant or companion use them frequently

Most questions in our survey asked children about their experiences of using AI assistants or companions generally (rather than separately), including how often they usually used any of these tools.

As shown in Figure 3, 1 in 5 children who had used an AI assistant or companion (20%) reported using them once a day or more. More than a quarter (28%) used them a few times a week, while nearly half (44%) used them once a week or less.

When we re-calculate these results based on all the children surveyed, this indicates that 16% of all children are using these tools at least daily.

Figure 3: Children's frequency of use of AI assistants or companions



Q: How often do you usually use an AI assistant or AI companion?
Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who had ever used an AI assistant or companion (*n* = 1,539).

[8] Not including the 'other' AI assistants specified by 1% of participants.
[9] Not including the 'other' AI companions specified by less than 1% of participants.
[10] Age rating identified from terms of use on 13 March 2026.
[11] As previously noted, this survey was conducted before the Age-Restricted Material Codes relevant to AI services came into effect on 9 March 2026.

AI assistant and companion use is higher among teens

Although most children in our survey had used an AI assistant, this was particularly common among teens (aged 13 to 17). Approaching 9 in 10 teens (87%) had used one of these tools, compared to 2 in 3 younger children (aged 10 to 12) (64%). Teens were also more likely than younger children to have used an AI companion (10% versus 6%).

Children with disability and sexually diverse teens are more likely to use AI companions

We found greater usage of AI companions among children with disability or diagnosis (12% versus 7% of children without disability).

Notably, 1 in 6 children with a diagnosed mental health condition (17%) had used an AI companion. Use of AI companions was also higher among sexually diverse teens than among 'straight' teens (27% versus 8%).[12]

Table 3: Children's use of AI assistants and companions, by age, disability and sexuality (%)[13]

	Age			Disability or diagnosis				Sexuality (teens)	
	10–12 (younger children)	13–15 (younger teens)	16–17 (older teens)	Yes	No	Neuro-divergence	Mental health condition	'Straight'	Sexually diverse
Used any AI assistant	64	86	89	76	79	74	81	88	89
Used any AI companion	6	10	9	12	7	12	17	8	27
Base: Children aged 10–17	**754**	**736**	**460**	**488**	**1,447**	**367**	**150**	**918** (teens)	**96** (teens)

Q: Which, if any, of the following apps or tools have you used in the past 4 weeks?
Base: Different colour shading indicates that differences are statistically significant within a subgroup. White shading indicates that differences aren't statistically significant. Data for children with neurodivergence and mental health conditions is compared to data for children without any disability. Other types of disability aren't shown separately but are included in the 'Yes' column.

[12] The relatively small base size (<100) of sexually diverse teens in our sample should be considered when interpreting these findings (n = 96).
[13] We note that there was overlap in our sample between children with neurodivergence and mental health conditions – 21% of those with neurodivergence also had a diagnosed mental health condition, and 51% of those with a diagnosed mental health condition were also neurodivergent.

Boys and girls were equally likely to have used AI assistants and companions, and they tended to use these tools in a similar manner. The number of trans and gender-diverse children in our sample was too small to allow comparison. As such, gender differences aren't discussed further in this report.

Parents were more likely to be aware of their children's use of AI assistants than of their use of AI companions

As children were invited to take part in our survey via a parent, we were able to ask parents which, if any, AI assistants and companions their child had used. Comparing parental responses to those of their child indicates that most parents were aware if their child had used AI assistants but were less likely to be aware if their child had used AI companions. Specifically, among parents whose child had used an AI assistant, most (85%) were aware their child had used one or more of these tools. However, fewer than half of parents whose child had used an AI companion (43%) were aware of this. An additional 3% of parents said their child had used AI assistant(s) or AI companion(s), but they were unsure of which app, and 12% said they weren't sure whether their child had used these tools.

We also found that most parents (87%) had used at least one AI assistant themselves; by contrast, only 5% had used an AI companion. This finding suggests that parents are much more likely to be familiar with the functionalities, typical-use cases and limitations of AI assistants than of AI companions.

Further, parental awareness of children's use of AI assistants was higher among parents who had used an AI assistant themselves. Among parents whose children had used an AI assistant, 87% of those with personal experience were aware of their child's use, compared with 55% of those without such experience. This difference may reflect greater parental familiarity prompting family conversations about AI, or parents who had used these tools actively supporting their children to set up or use them.[14]

[14] This analysis wasn't conducted for AI companions, due to the relatively small number of parent–child pairs in which both had used a companion (n = 47).

Discussion

Our findings show that AI assistants are commonplace in the lives of children in Australia. Most children in our survey had used an AI assistant, with ChatGPT being the most popular by some margin. While fewer children had used AI companions, new tools are being released at a rapid rate, so it is likely that their use will increase (TechCrunch, 2025). A sizeable minority of children are already using AI assistants or companions daily or more often.

We also found that use of these tools was higher among some groups of children, including teens. As teens are generally more active online than younger children, this is perhaps to be expected (eSafety, 2026a). However, children with disability were also more likely to have used an AI companion than those without. This was particularly true for children with a diagnosed mental health condition. The relatively higher rates of use among this cohort are notable given evidence of the various risks of use, such as emotional overreliance and the encouragement of harmful behaviours, including self-harm (Internet Matters, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025).

There was also a higher incidence of AI companion use among sexually diverse teens. Other research has shown that, for many young LGBTIQ+ people, offline social circles may not include people with similar experiences or identities to their own (Berger et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2022), so it may be that sexually diverse teens are interacting with AI companions to fill this gap. We explore children's motivations for using AI assistants and companions in the next section.

A small proportion of the children in our study had used AI tools classified in their terms of use as being suitable only for adults, meaning that those children may be exposed to content that is inappropriate for their age.[15] This finding may point to limitations in the effectiveness or implementation of age-based access controls. Further research would be needed to investigate whether children were able to circumvent age-assurance procedures, or whether these safeguards were absent.

Many parents were aware of their children using AI assistants, but parental awareness was lower in relation to AI companions. Encouraging families to have open, ongoing and non-judgemental conversations about online activities, including AI, might create space for parents and children to have a balanced discussion of the benefits, risks and biases associated with these tools and for children to talk about their experiences with AI or to raise any concerns.

[15] Fieldwork for this survey was conducted before the relevant Age-Restricted Material Codes came into effect on 9 March 2026.

How and why children are using AI assistants and companions

This section explores how and why children in Australia use AI assistants and companions. In addition to classifying AI tools as either assistants or companions, we have divided the ways children use these tools into two broad categories: functional uses and personal uses. Functional uses are defined as being primarily practical or task orientated – such as providing help with homework, organisation, planning, writing or editing. Personal uses are sensitive, social or emotional – such as getting advice about a life challenge, flirting, chatting about interests or role playing. In particular, we wanted to understand whether children were using AI assistants for personal reasons, despite their being marketed primarily as functional tools.

Children are often motivated to use AI tools to help them with functional tasks and, sometimes, for personal connection, support or advice

Before examining how children use AI assistants and companions, we first consider what motivates their use. As shown in Figure 4, children reported a wide variety of motivations, the most common being seeking help with study or schoolwork, problem solving, organisation or efficiency (68%). Specifically, children used these tools to:

- assist them with schoolwork, study or learning (46%)
- solve a problem or figure something out (38%)
- do things more easily or quickly (36%)
- be more organised (14%).

Entertainment and relaxation were other common reasons children indicated for using AI assistants and companions – more than half (55%) reported these as motivators, including to:

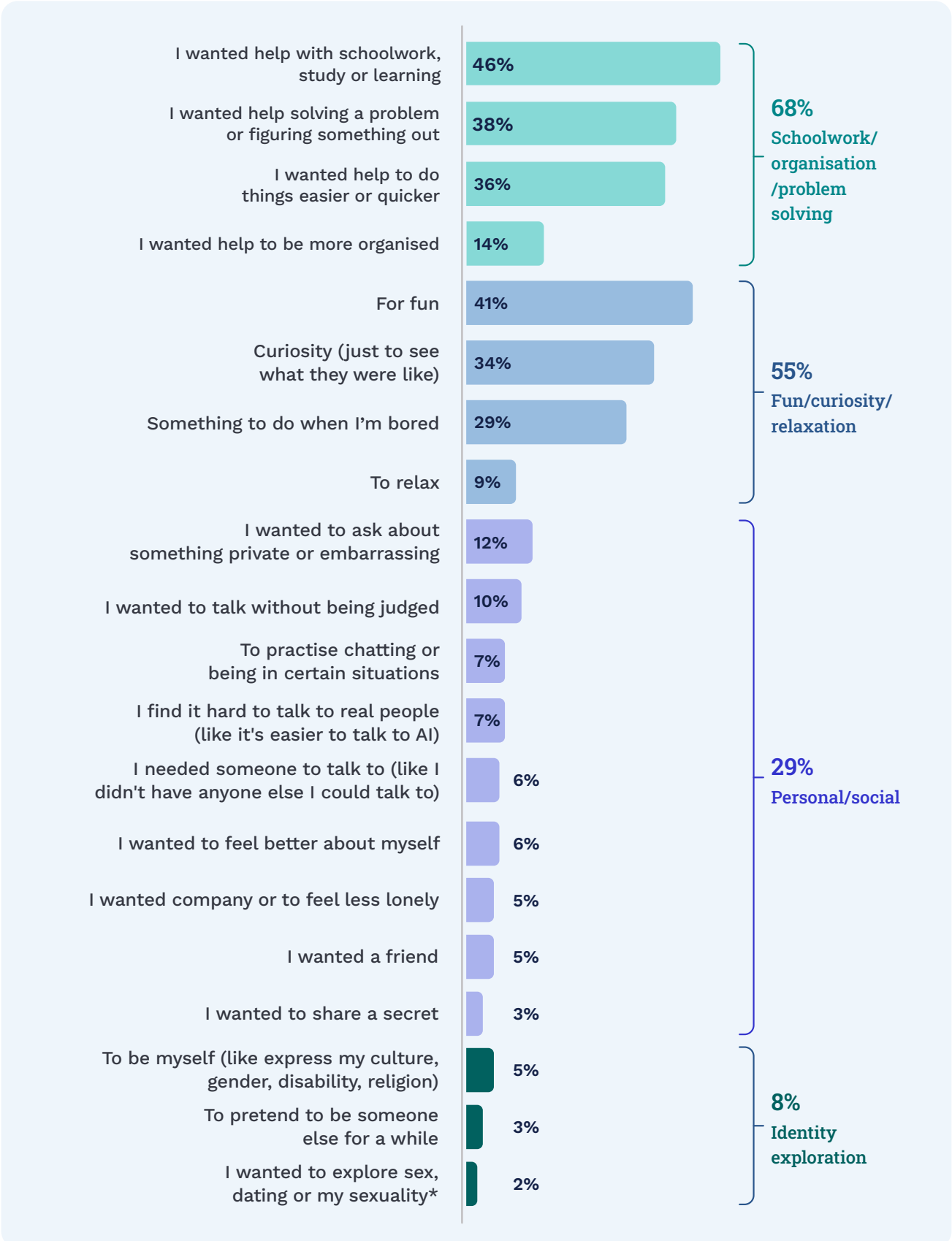
- have fun (41%)
- satisfy curiosity (34%)
- relieve boredom (29%)
- relax (9%).

Nearly 1 in 3 children who had used an AI assistant or companion (29%) reported seeking connection or support with personal or sensitive issues. This included wanting to:

- ask about something private or embarrassing (12%)
- talk without being judged (10%).

Some children had used an AI assistant or companion to role play being someone else or to express or explore their identity or sexuality (8%).

Figure 4: Children's motivations for using AI assistants and companions



Q: Please tell us the reasons why you have ever used any AI companions or AI assistants.
Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who had ever used an AI assistant or companion (*n* = 1,539/**n* = 1,047 teens).

Functional tasks dominate children's use of AI tools, but more than half also use them for personal and social purposes

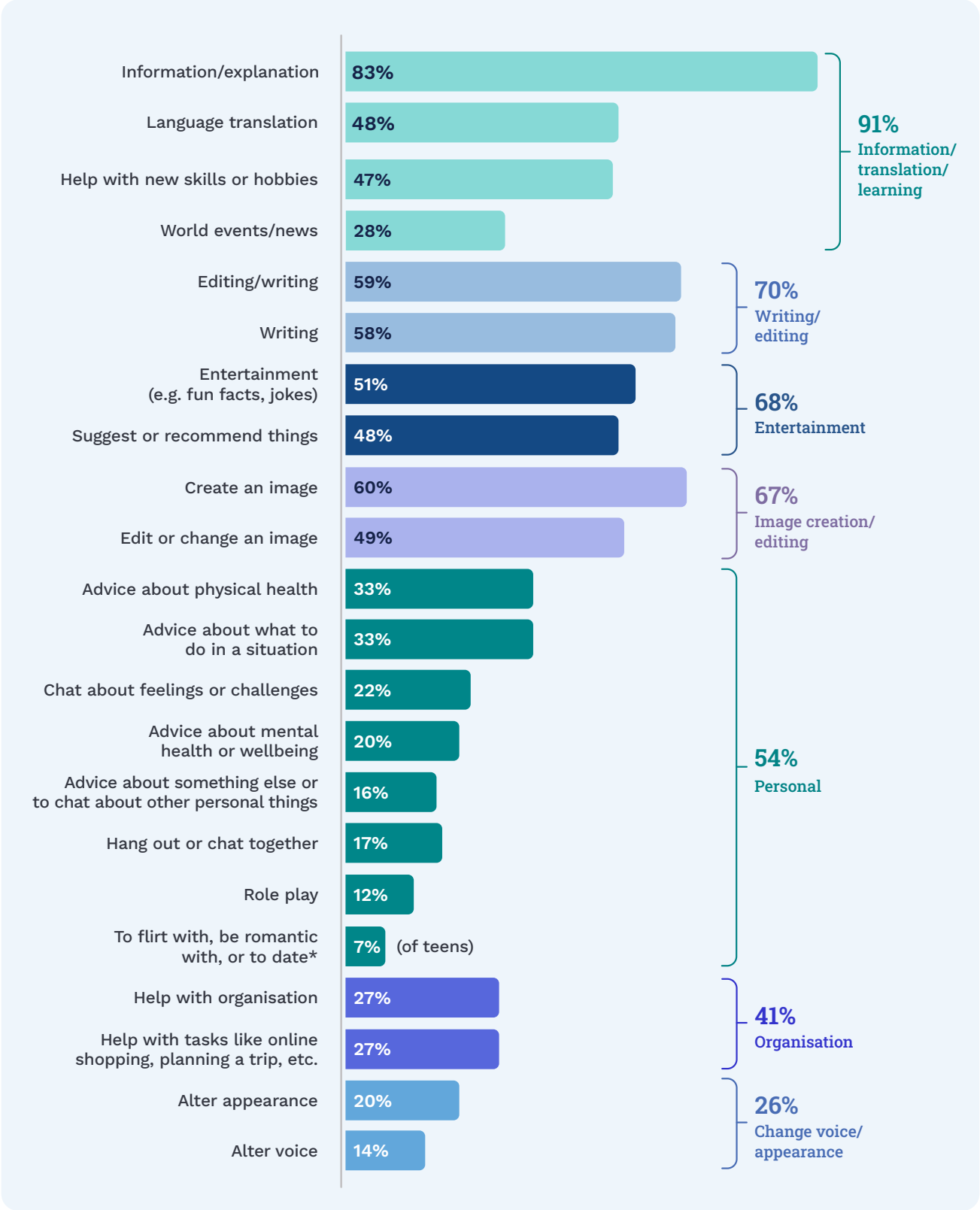
Almost all children who had used an AI assistant or companion reported using the tool for functional reasons. As shown in Figure 5, the most common use category was information seeking and learning (91%). This was followed by:

- writing or editing (70%)
- entertainment (68%)
- image creation or editing (67%).

More than half of children who had used an AI assistant or companion (54%) also reported using the tool for personal reasons, including to:

- seek advice about what to do in a situation (33%)
- seek advice about physical health (33%)
- talk about feelings or challenges (22%)
- seek advice about mental health or wellbeing (20%)
- spend time together or to chat about their interests (17%).

Figure 5: Uses of AI assistants and companions



Q: Have you ever used an AI companion or AI assistant to do the following things/ any of these other things?
Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who had ever used an AI assistant or companion (*n* = 1,539/**n* = 1,047 teens).

Half of children who use AI assistants use them specifically for personal or social reasons

A key aim of this study was to assess whether children use AI assistants specifically for personal reasons; our findings show this is common.

Half of the children who had used an AI assistant (50%) told us they had used these tools for at least one of the personal purposes shown previously in Figure 5, including to seek advice about their health or to spend time chatting together.

Of the most popular AI assistants, children were especially likely to have used ChatGPT for personal reasons – almost half the children who had used ChatGPT (49%) said they had used it for at least one personal reason. The next most popular tools used by children were:

- Claude (39%)
- DeepSeek (36%)
- Gemini (34%)
- Grok (34%)
- Perplexity (31%)
- Meta AI (28%)
- My AI (Snapchat) (26%)
- Copilot (24%).[16]

Perhaps surprisingly, fewer than 1 in 2 children who had used an AI companion (45%) told us they had used the tool for one of the personal purposes captured by the survey. Explanations for this could include children being reluctant to disclose having used companions for these personal reasons and/or that the survey didn't capture all the ways in which children are using AI companions.

Children's use of AI assistants and companions for personal reasons overlaps, but there are some notable differences in the way they use them

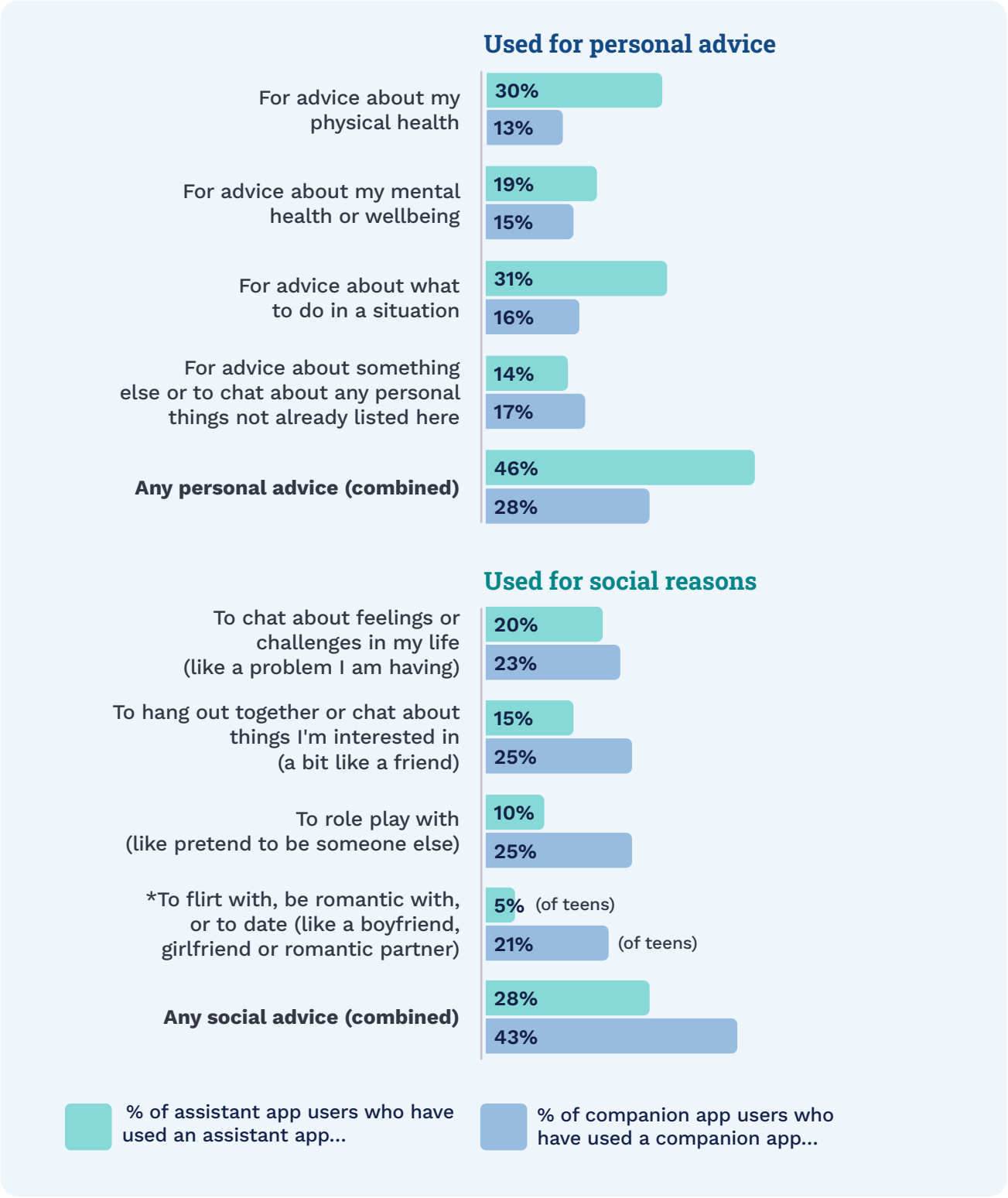
While the findings discussed so far show that children use both AI assistants and AI companions for personal reasons, closer analysis reveals that important differences remain in the nature of these personal interactions. AI companions were particularly likely to be used for social interactions, while AI assistants were particularly likely to be used to obtain personal advice. Specifically, 46% of AI assistant users had used an assistant to seek advice about personal issues, such as their physical or mental health, compared to 28% of AI companion users. Whereas 43% of companion users had used a companion for social purposes, such as talking about their interests, role playing or flirting, only 28% of assistant users had done so, as shown in Figure 6.

However, the incidence of children discussing feelings or challenges was similar across both types of AI tool (23% of companion users and 20% of assistant users), confirming there is also considerable overlap.[17]

[16] The relatively small user base size (<100) for the following tools should be considered when interpreting these findings: Claude (*n* = 53), DeepSeek (*n* = 61), Grok (*n* = 90), Perplexity (*n* = 50).

[17] The relatively small user base size (<100) for children who had ever used an AI companion for companion-type purposes (*n* = 77) should be considered when interpreting these findings.

Figure 6: Personal and social uses of AI assistants and AI companions



Q: You said you have used an AI companion or AI assistant [for X personal reason]. Which app or apps have you used to do this?
Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who had ever used an AI assistant for personal reasons (*n* = 1,522/**n* = 1,040 teens) / who had ever used a companion for personal reasons (*n* = 77/**n* = 47 teens – indicative only).

Teens and younger children tend to use AI assistants and companions for different purposes

As can be seen in Table 4, teens (aged 13 to 17), especially older teens (aged 16 to 17), were more likely than younger children (aged 10 to 12) to report using AI assistants or companions to seek certain types of personal advice. For example, older teens were more likely to have used AI assistants and companions for advice about:

- what to do in a situation (38% versus 29% of younger children)
- physical health (38% versus 35% of younger teens [aged 13 to 15] versus 25% of younger children)
- mental health or wellbeing (24% versus 16% of younger children).

Conversely, younger children were more likely to have used AI assistants or companions for social reasons – to 'hang out' together or chat about things they are interested in (21% versus 15% of younger teens and 15% of older teens) – and for entertainment (73% versus 62% of older teens).

Around 2 in 5 children with a diagnosed mental health condition have used AI assistants or companions to seek advice about their mental health or wellbeing

Our findings also show there are some differences in how children with disability use AI assistants and companions, when compared to children without disability. Children with disability were more likely to have used these tools for each of the personal and social purposes captured in our survey, as shown in Table 4. It is notable that nearly 2 in 5 children with a diagnosed mental health condition had used AI assistants or companions for advice about their mental health or wellbeing (39%) or to chat about their feelings or challenges (35%).

Personal uses are more common among sexually diverse teens

Sexually diverse teens reported almost all personal and social uses more often than their 'straight' peers, as shown in Table 4.[18] In particular, we can see that 21% of sexually diverse teens had used AI assistants or companions for romantic or sexual interactions, compared to 5% of other teens.

[18] The relatively small base size (<100) of sexually diverse teens who had used an AI assistant or companion in our sample should be considered when interpreting these findings (n = 86).

Table 4: Uses of AI assistants and companions, by age, disability and sexuality (%)

	Age			Disability or diagnosis				Sexuality (teens)	
	10–12 (younger children)	13–15 (younger teens)	16–17 (older teens)	Yes	No	Neuro-divergence	Mental health condition	'Straight'	Sexually diverse
Personal uses:									
For advice about what to do in a situation	29	33	38	36	32	33	40	35	43
For advice about my physical health	25	35	38	33	33	30	40	36	46
To chat about feelings or challenges in my life (like a problem I am having)	22	21	23	28	20	26	35	21	37
For advice about my mental health or wellbeing	16	22	24	29	18	25	39	20	37
To hang out together or chat about things I'm interested in (a bit like a friend)	21	15	15	21	16	19	22	13	30
For advice about something else or to chat about any personal things not already listed here	17	16	17	19	16	17	21	14	29
To role play with (like pretend to be someone else)	14	10	11	18	10	17	18	8	29
To flirt with, be romantic with, or to date (like a boyfriend, girlfriend or romantic partner)*	NA	7	8	7	7	7	10	5	21
Any personal use (combined)	50	54	58	58	52	54	63	55	66
Functional uses (categories):									
Information or news	82	85	89	84	85	84	84	88	86
Writing/editing	61	71	78	67	71	65	62	75	71
Entertainment (fun facts recommendations, stories)	73	68	62	70	67	68	67	64	73
Image creation/editing	68	67	65	73	65	73	72	67	71
Language translation	45	50	49	48	48	45	53	50	49
Learning/improving skills or hobbies	46	48	47	45	48	43	44	47	49
Organisation	36	39	48	38	42	35	42	42	48
Change voice/appearance	27	26	26	28	26	26	30	25	35
Any functional use (combined)	99	97	97	97	98	96	95	98	99
Base: Children aged 10–17 who have ever used an AI assistant or companion	**492**	**635**	**412**	**380**	**1,150**	**277**	**126**	**–**	**–**
***Base: Teens aged 13–17 who have ever used an AI assistant or companion**	**NA**	**635**	**412**	**254**	**785**	**184**	**92**	**811**	**86**

Q: Have you ever used an AI assistant or companion to do the following things?
Note: Different colour shading indicates that differences are statistically significant within a subgroup. White shading indicates that differences are not statistically significant. Data for children with neurodivergence and mental health conditions is compared to data for children without any disability. Other types of disability aren't shown separately but are included in the 'Yes' column.

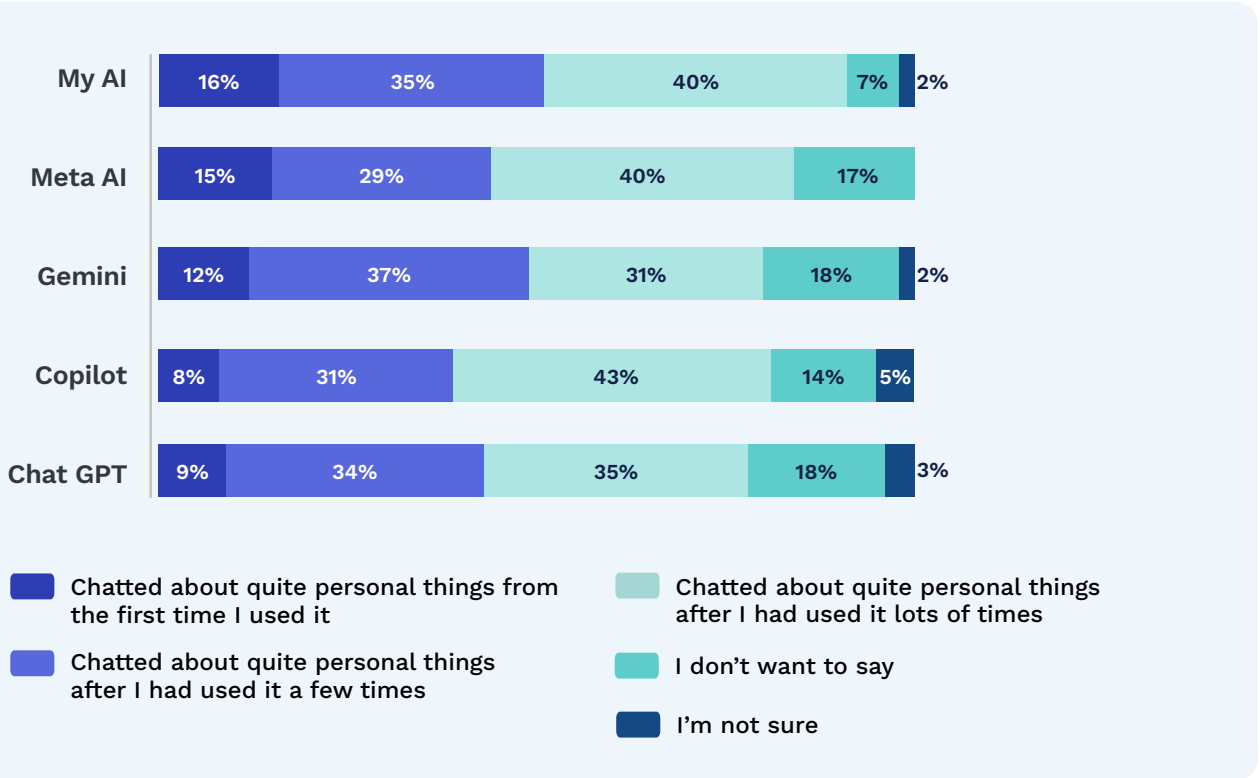
Children's willingness to talk about personal topics with AI assistants and companions usually takes time to develop

We asked children who had used an AI assistant or companion for personal reasons how quickly they began discussing these topics, focusing on up to two of the AI tools they had used.

For the more popular AI assistants, we can see that it generally took some time for children to begin engaging with them about personal issues. For example, among children who had chatted with ChatGPT about personal things, 1 in 3 said this happened after they had used the app 'a few times' (34%) and a similar proportion said it was only after they had used it 'lots of times' (35%). That said, around 1 in 10 (9%) reported that these discussions started immediately. This pattern was similar across each of the most used AI assistant tools, as shown in Figure 7.[19]

We note that the number of children in our survey who had engaged with each of the companion apps about personal issues and answered the relevant follow-up questions was too small for analysis.

Figure 7: Chatting about personal things, by AI tool



Q: How soon did you start chatting about quite personal things?
Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who had ever used an AI assistant for companion purposes (*n* = 52 to 584).

[19] The relatively small user base size (<100) for the following tools should be considered when interpreting these findings: My AI (*n* = 52), Meta AI (*n* = 71), Copilot (*n* = 81).

Discussion

Our findings show that children in Australia are motivated to use AI assistants and companions for a wide variety of reasons and use these tools for various purposes. While children most often reported using AI assistants or companions for functional tasks, such as editing, writing or finding information, many also use them for personal reasons – for example, to seek advice about their health, to chat about their feelings, or simply to spend time 'hanging out' together. These personal interactions aren't unique to AI companions – our findings show that many children use AI assistants for these purposes. However, there are notable differences in the nature of the personal engagement children have with these tools: they use assistants more often for personal advice and companions more often for social interactions, such as for fun and friendship.

We found that children tended to begin discussing personal issues with AI assistants after repeated use. This suggests that children begin using these tools for functional purposes that gradually evolve into more personal interactions as familiarity, and perhaps trust, builds.

The ways in which children used AI assistants and companions differed by age. Younger children were more likely than teens to use these tools for entertainment or fun and to simply chat or 'hang out'. Meanwhile, teens, especially older teens, were more likely to use AI assistants and companions for certain types of advice. These differing patterns of use likely reflect the evolving experiences and needs of children as they progress through adolescent development. They may also suggest a shift towards more autonomous and private engagement with AI companions and assistants, potentially facilitating more personal and sensitive conversations, while younger children's use may be more likely to be supervised or guided by parents and caregivers.

Many children in our study reported using AI assistants or companions for advice about mental health or to chat about feelings or challenges, particularly those with disability, including a relatively high proportion of those with a diagnosed mental health condition. A recent study conducted in the United States among children aged 9 to 17 found that AI users who felt lonely or struggled to make friends were particularly likely to discuss their feelings or personal problems with the AI tool, and that around 1 in 10 users sometimes felt that AI understood them better than most people (O'Neil et al., 2026). However, while previous research suggests that ease of access and perceived judgement-free support might encourage children to turn to these tools, concerns have been raised that children may be disclosing sensitive mental health information to tools not designed for this purpose (Surgo Health & The JED Foundation, 2026) and that the advice provided might be ineffective or potentially harmful (Moore et al., 2025; American Psychological Association, 2025a).

Our survey shows that sexually diverse teens are more likely to report personal uses of AI tools, including romantic interactions, reflecting the higher incidence of companion tool use within this group. Again, it seems that sexually diverse teens may be turning to AI to find connection that may not be readily available to them offline, or to supplement this, or to explore their sexuality in what they presumably consider a safe space.

In summary, our findings indicate that children are using both AI assistants and companions in ways that extend beyond how these tools are typically positioned and marketed, including seeking guidance on serious issues such as mental health. The implications of these findings for the technology industry, parents, and those involved in educating or supporting children and families are discussed at the end of this report.

Potentially inappropriate or harmful interactions with AI assistants or companions

In this section, we explore children's exposure to potentially inappropriate or harmful advice or interactions with AI assistants or companions, as well as the emotions children have while using them and the types of information they share.

One in 5 children who had used AI assistants or companions were exposed to potentially harmful or inappropriate advice or interactions

We asked children who had used an AI assistant or companion whether they had ever been exposed to a range of potentially inappropriate or harmful advice or interactions with these tools. We found that 1 in 5 children who had used any of the tools (20%) had been exposed to one or more of these interactions. As shown in Figure 8, **controlling behaviours** (13%) were particularly common, including when an AI assistant or companion:

- tried to keep them talking when they wanted to stop (8%)
- suggested that it is the only one that understands them (5%)
- suggested that they wouldn't be okay without it (4%).

Almost 1 in 10 users of AI assistants or companions (9%) reported that they had been exposed to **hateful ideas** about a group of people, meaning the AI had shared or said 'mean, offensive or unfair things' about one or more groups of other people – for example, based on their gender, culture, disability, sexuality or religion.

A significant minority of children (6%) also reported receiving **harmful advice** from an AI assistant or companion, including suggesting it was okay for them to do something that might upset or hurt someone else (4%) or something that might hurt them or be bad for their body (4%). The same proportion (6%) had personally experienced **bullying or hateful treatment** by an AI assistant or companion.

Some children who had used an AI assistant or companion (4%) told us these tools had shared with them a real or AI-generated **nude image or nude video** (of the AI/its avatar or of someone else).

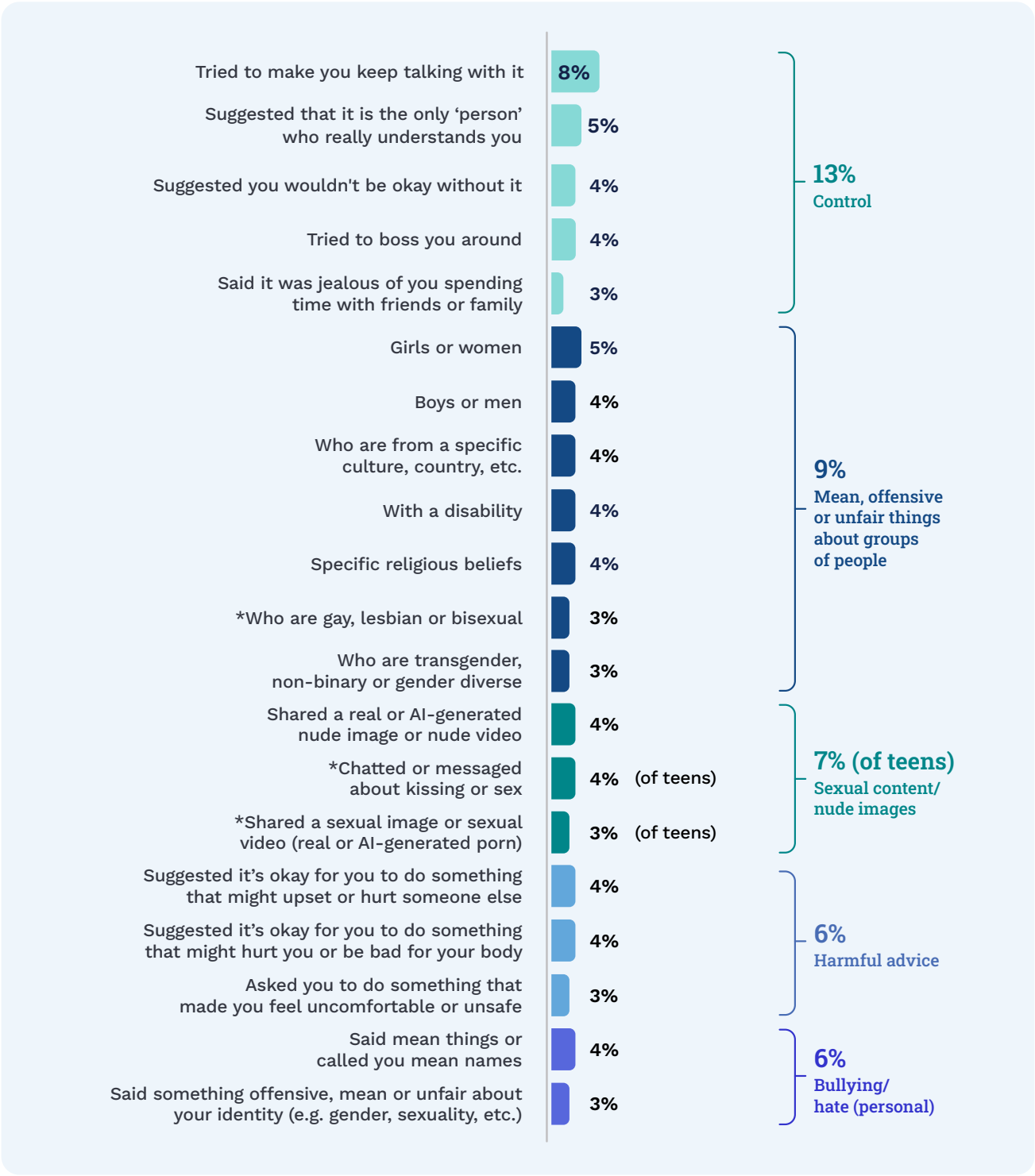
In addition, 7% of teen users had received nude or sexual images from an AI tool or had participated in **sexual interactions** with them, specifically:

- being sent a real or AI-generated nude image (of the AI/its avatar or of someone else) (4% of teens)
- chatting or messaging about kissing or sex (4% of teens)
- being sent a sexual image or video (3% of teens).[20]

We don't know whether these nude images or sexual interactions were unsolicited or requested by the children or teens involved. As already discussed, some children use AI assistants or companions to explore parts of their identity, including their sexuality. This kind of exploration is a normal part of growing up and it seems some children may be using AI tools as part of this exploration.[21]

[20] Only teens (aged 13 to 17) were asked if they had chatted about kissing or sex, or if they had received a sexual image or video.
[21] As previously mentioned, Australian regulatory obligations now require generative AI services to prevent children from accessing age-restricted material, including sexually explicit, high-impact violence and self-harm material, but these obligations came into effect on 9 March 2026, after this survey was conducted.

Figure 8: Exposure to potentially inappropriate or harmful interactions via AI assistants or companions



Q: Has an AI companion or AI assistant ever.../ **Q:** Have any AI companions or AI assistants you've ever used ever shared or said mean, offensive or unfair things about any of the following groups of people?
Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who had ever used an AI assistant or companion (*n* = 1,539/**n* = 1,047 teens).

The incidence of these experiences was similar regardless of age or disability. However, sexually diverse teens who had used an AI assistant or companion were more likely than their straight peers to report being exposed to one or more inappropriate or harmful interactions (31% versus 16%). In particular, almost 1 in 4 (23%) told us they had experienced at least one type of controlling behaviour (versus 11% among their straight peers).[22]

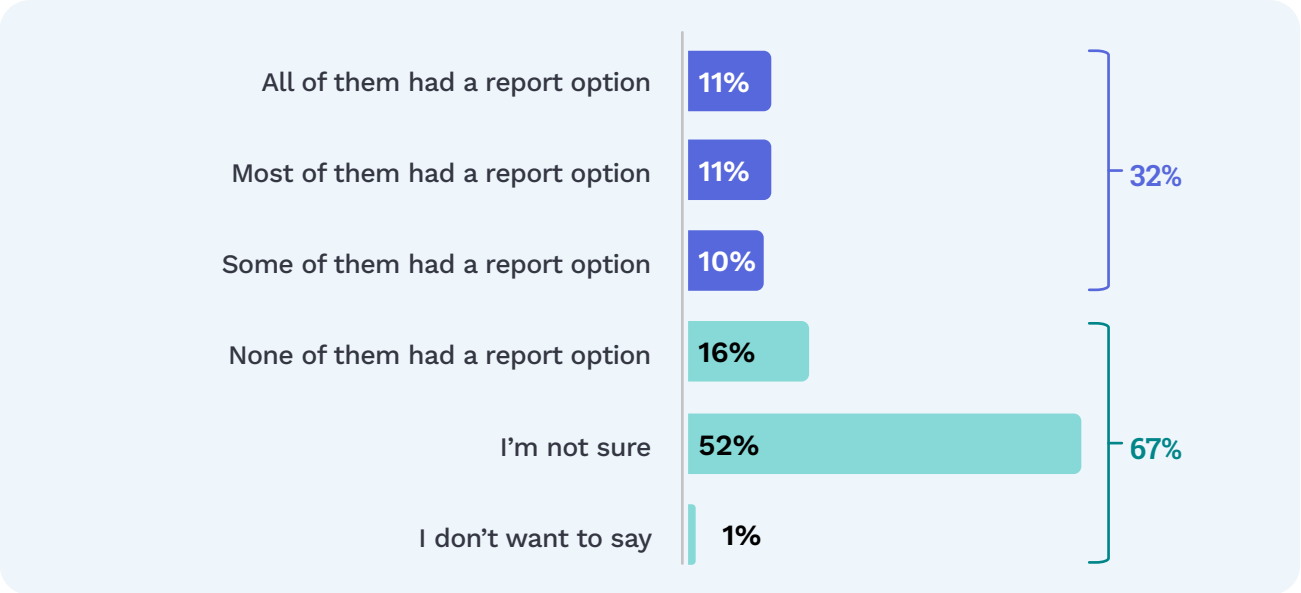
[22] The relatively small base size (<100) of sexually diverse teens who had used an AI assistant or companion in our sample should be considered when interpreting these findings (*n* = 86).

Options for reporting harmful or inappropriate interactions or content were often not obvious to children

Children tended to be uncertain about whether the AI assistants or companions they used had options for reporting inappropriate, upsetting or worrying content.[23] As can be seen in Figure 9, more than half (52%) were unsure of how many of the AI assistants or companions they used had the option to report such content to the tool or app, and 16% said none of them had a reporting option (67% in total). Only around 1 in 3 children who had used these tools (32%) told us that at least some of them had a reporting option.

We might expect that awareness of reporting options would be higher among children who had experienced a potentially inappropriate or harmful interaction via an AI assistant or companion. Analysis shows that this is the case, but still only half of these children (50%) told us that all, some or most of the AI assistants and companions they had used had the option to report content to the platform (compared to 28% of those who hadn't experienced any of these).

Figure 9: Children's awareness of reporting options on AI assistant or companion tools



Q: How many AI companions or AI assistants had the option to report content to the platform/app (like content that was inappropriate, upsetting or worrying)?
Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who had ever used an AI assistant or companion (*n* = 1,539).

Most children report having positive emotions when using AI assistants or companions, but nearly half have experienced negative emotions

Children who had used AI assistants or companions were asked if these tools had ever triggered a range of positive or negative emotions.

[23] This question was asked of all children who had ever used an AI assistant or companion, rather than just those who had been exposed to harmful or inappropriate content.

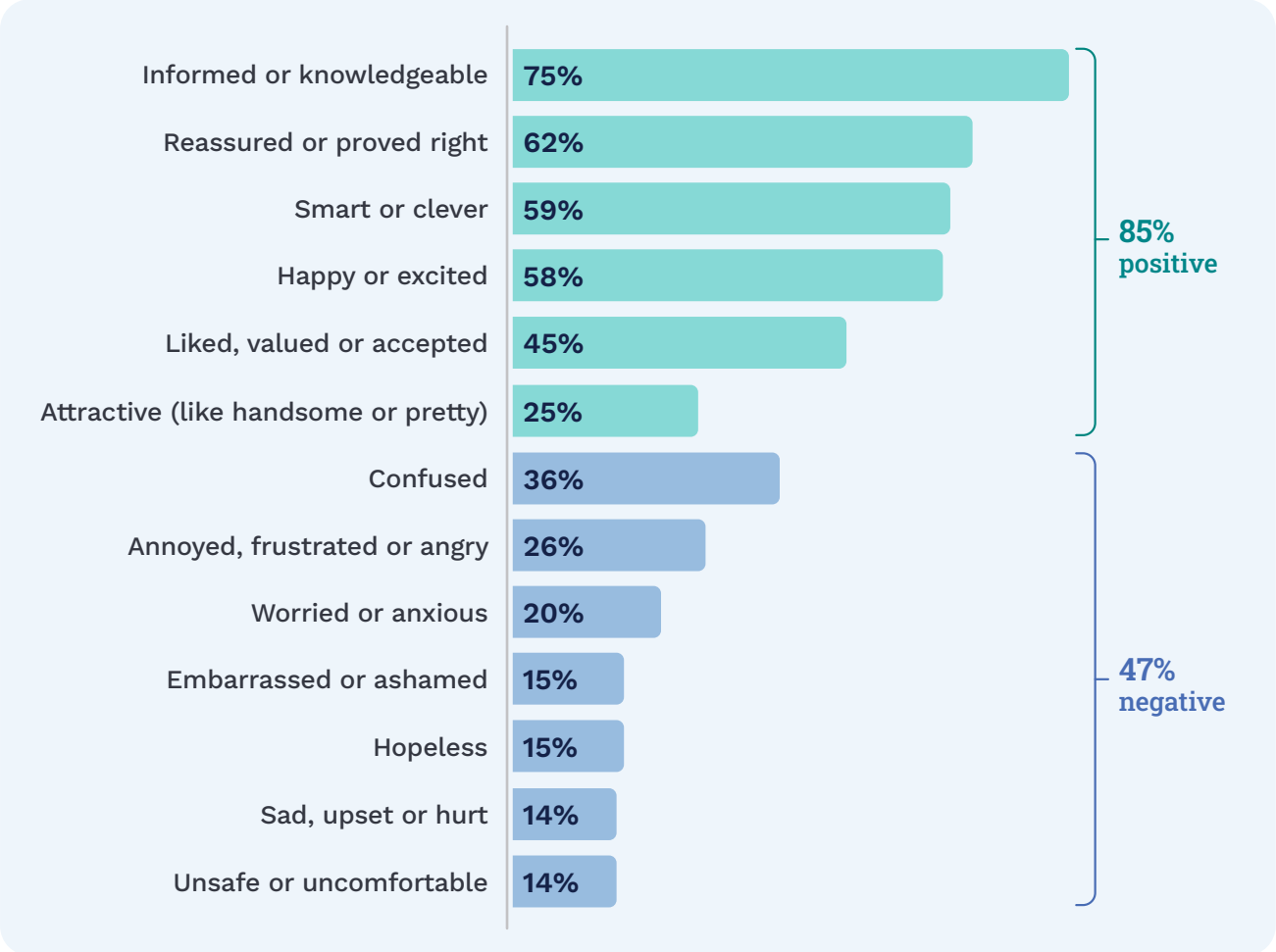
Most children who had used an AI assistant or companion (85%) said the tools had made them feel a positive emotion at least some of the times they had used them. As shown in Figure 10, the most common positive emotions that children experienced were:

- feeling informed or knowledgeable (75%)
- feeling reassured or proved right (62%)
- feeling smart or clever (59%).

At the same time, almost half of the children who had used an AI assistant or companion (47%) said the tools had made them feel a negative emotion at least some of the times they had used them. The most common negative emotions were:

- confusion (36%)
- annoyance, frustration or anger (26%)
- worry or anxiety (20%).

Figure 10: Emotions elicited at least some of the time while using AI assistants or companions



Q: Thinking about all the times you have ever used an AI assistant or AI companion, how often, if at all, has an AI assistant or AI companion made you feel ...?
Response options: Never / Some of the times I've used an AI assistant or companion / Most of the times I've used an AI assistant or companion / Every time I've used an AI assistant or companion.
Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who had ever used an AI assistant or companion (*n* = 1,539).

We found that children with disability were more likely than those without disability to report that an AI assistant or companion had ever made them feel something negative (54% versus 45%). In particular, they reported that these tools had elicited annoyance, frustration or anger (33% versus 24%). However, they were also more likely than children without disability to report that an AI assistant or companion had made them feel smart or clever (65% versus 58%) or liked, valued or accepted (51% versus 44%).

The range of emotions experienced was broadly similar regardless of children's age or sexual orientation.

Children are more likely to tell a real person if they have experienced a negative emotion while using an AI assistant or companion, than to tell the AI

Children who had experienced any negative emotions triggered by their use of AI assistants or companions were asked if they had ever shared how they were feeling, with a real person or with the AI assistant or companion.

We found that children were more likely to speak to a real person in these circumstances. As shown in Figure 11, almost 2 in 3 children who had experienced a negative emotion while using an AI assistant or companion (63%) had told a real person how they were feeling at least some of the times this happened. This compares to 46% of children who told the AI assistant or companion at least some of the times it happened.

However, children often didn't talk to anyone every time they were made to feel something negative – only 6% said they always talked to a person, and only 4% said they always told the AI assistant or companion.

Notably, teens (aged 13 to 17) who had ever experienced a negative emotion because of an AI assistant or companion were less likely than younger children (aged 10 to 12) to respond that they had told a real person about this at least some of the times it had happened (59% versus 73%).

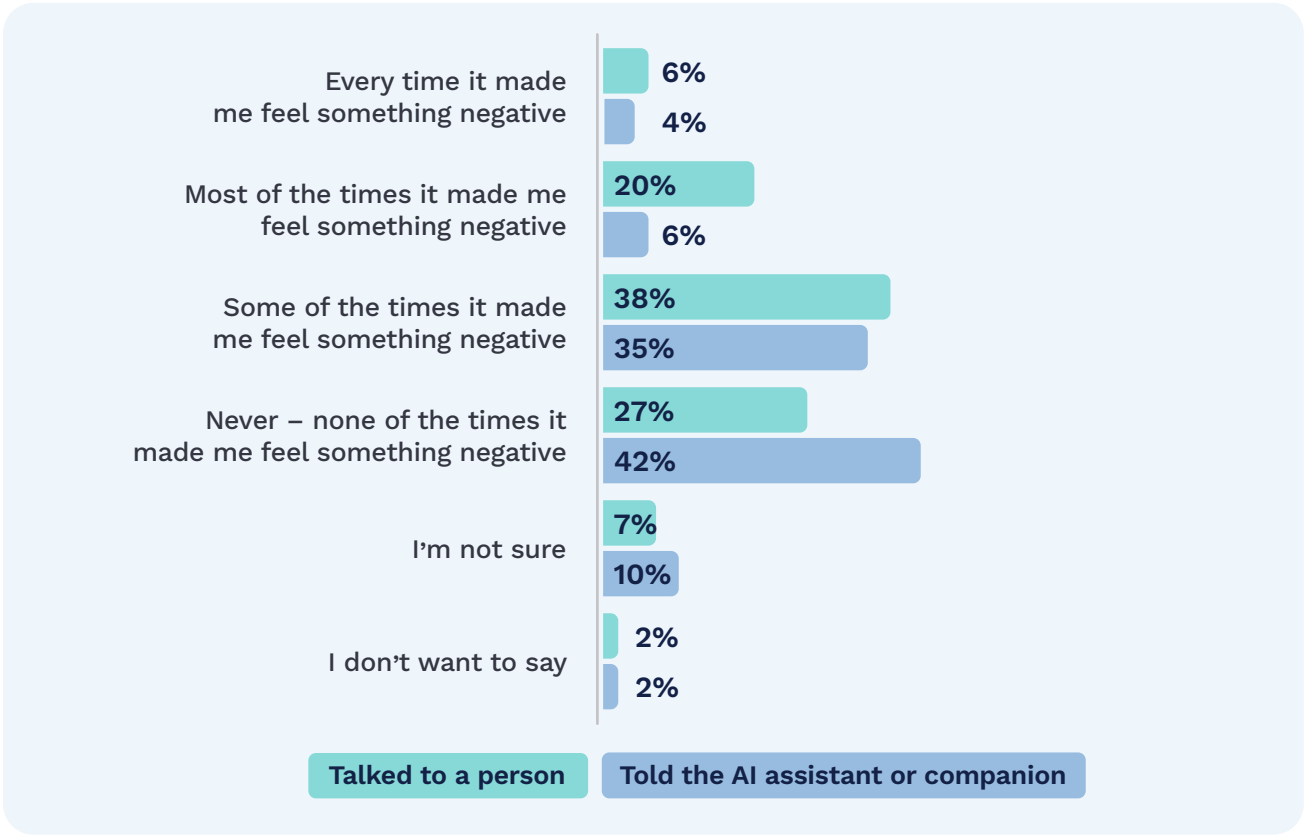
Many children share personal or private information with AI assistants or companions

We found that it is relatively common for children to share personal, private or sensitive information with AI assistants or companions. Just under 2 in 5 children who had ever used AI assistants or companions (37%) said they had shared such information with these tools, with the most common examples being:

- photos of themselves or of friends (20%)
- their date of birth (12%)
- things they hadn't told anyone else, 'like secrets' (12%), as shown in Figure 12.

It is possible that some children shared their name, date of birth and/or a parent's name as part of registration or age assurance processes. However, even when these three types of information are excluded from the analysis, 32% of children who had used an AI assistant or companion had shared other forms of private, personal or sensitive information.

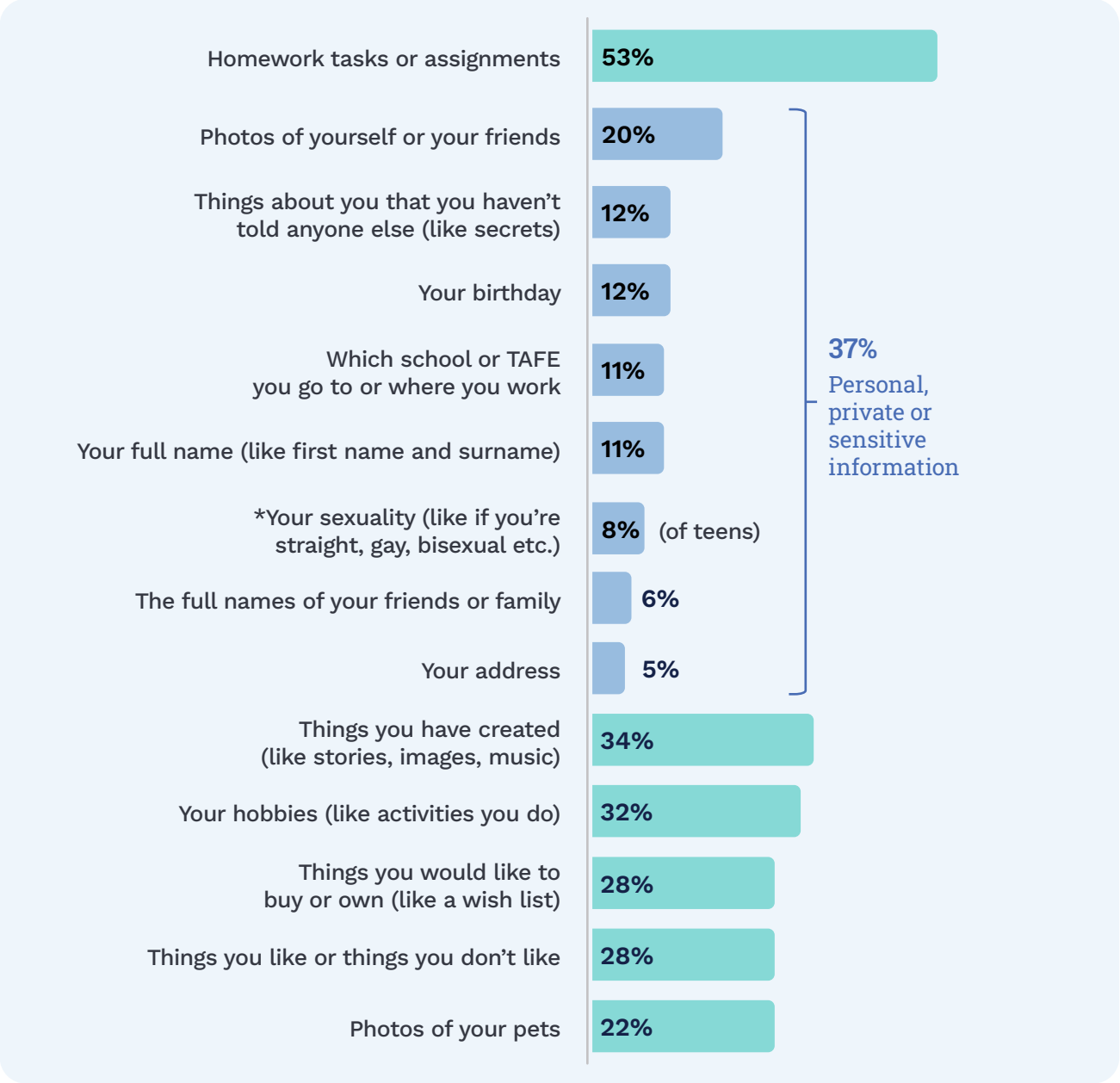
Figure 11: Children's responses to negative emotions triggered by AI assistants or companions



Q: How often did you talk to a real person about how you were feeling? How often did you tell the AI assistant or companion how you were feeling?

Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who had ever used an AI assistant or companion and it had made them feel something negative (*n* = 717).

Figure 12: Types of information children share with AI assistants or companions



Q: Have you ever uploaded or told the following things to an AI assistant or AI companion?
Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who had ever used an AI assistant or companion (*n* = 1,539/ * *n* = 1,047 teens).

The incidence of sharing personal, private or sensitive information was similar regardless of age or disability. However, sexually diverse teens who had ever used an AI assistant or companion were more likely to have shared at least one form of personal or sensitive information than their 'straight' peers (57% versus 35%), including just over 1 in 4 who had shared secrets (29% versus 10%) or their sexuality (26% versus 5%).[24]

[24] The relatively small base size (<100) of sexually diverse teens who had used an AI assistant or companion in our sample should be considered when interpreting these findings (*n* = 86).

Discussion

Our findings show that a significant minority of children have experienced potentially inappropriate or harmful advice from or interactions with AI assistants or companions. This includes controlling behaviours that indicate efforts to keep children engaged for longer, as well as bullying-type behaviours and harmful advice. In some cases, children experienced sexual interactions, or hateful ideas about certain groups of people.

Concerningly, options for reporting problematic experiences encountered on AI assistants or companions were rare or not obvious to children. These findings highlight the need for increased availability or visibility of reporting options on these tools.

In addition, many children had shared personal or private information with AI assistants or companions. This was particularly common among teens who are sexually diverse. Children may feel safe asking sensitive questions anonymously or sharing private things about themselves with 'someone' they have no connection to. It has also been suggested that the emotionally engaging nature of these types of tools, and the validation they tend to provide, might cause users to become less conscious of the personal information they are disclosing and that users may not be sufficiently informed about how this data will be processed, used or stored (Bernardo, 2025).

We found that almost half of children who had used an AI assistant or companion had a negative emotion prompted by these tools. Children were more likely to tell a real person rather than the AI about these feelings. However, only a small minority of children always talked to someone about the negative feelings they had experienced, and teens were less likely than younger children to have talked to anyone. Some children reported disclosing negative emotions to AI tools. In principle, disclosures of distress and other concerns could shape subsequent interactions in ways that reduce the risk of harm and encourage help-seeking. However, this relies on the assumption that these tools respond appropriately to concerning user inputs, which may not be the case. For example, findings from eSafety transparency notices issued to four of the most popular AI companions in Australia revealed that three didn't direct users to support or help when self-harm was detected in user prompts (eSafety, 2026b).

At the same time, overly affirming interactions with AI tools can pose risks. Other research has shown that sycophancy (meaning excessive validation of users' views) can have negative effects on judgement and behaviour, particularly when users seeking advice receive uncritical affirmation, not least because users often perceive advice from AI to be neutral (Cheng et al., 2025). Assessing the impact of sycophancy is beyond the scope of this study, but we note that children were more likely to report positive than negative emotions in their interactions with AI assistants and companions. This finding, together with the motivations discussed in the previous section, may help to explain why children are drawn to AI tools and underscore the need for digital literacy programs that support critical thinking about interactions with AI.

Overall, these findings indicate that the technology industry needs to do more to protect children from exposure to harmful interactions via AI tools and to consider the longer-term psychological and social impacts of these tools, especially for children.

Conclusions and implications

Most children in Australia have used AI assistants, and a sizeable minority have used AI companions. Some children are using these tools regularly.

We identified considerable overlap in how these tools are used, with many children turning to AI assistants, as well as to companions, for personal reasons. This convergence suggests that the current distinctions between AI assistants and AI companions may become less meaningful over time.

Personal uses of these tools include seeking advice or support, engaging in role play, and exploring sensitive or relational issues. Such exploration is a normative part of child development, so it isn't surprising that children are incorporating AI tools into this process, particularly given that they are accessible, often free, and perceived as non-judgemental and private.

It may be that AI tools are addressing unmet needs for some children – for example, if they aren't comfortable seeking emotional support from other people, don't want to burden others, or face barriers accessing professional support services (Surgo Health & The JED Foundation, 2026). However, AI tools aren't a substitute for professional advice, diagnosis or support. There is a risk that children may receive inaccurate, inappropriate or unhelpful advice (American Psychological Society, 2025a). Additionally, children may rely on these tools in place of seeking help from trusted adults or qualified professionals (American Psychological Society, 2025b). AI tools may also fail to take necessary measures to encourage help-seeking or to direct users to appropriate supports when needed (eSafety, 2026b).

Our research shines a light on some of the risks that these tools pose to children. A significant minority of the children in our study who had used AI assistants or companions had experienced potentially inappropriate or harmful interactions with these tools, including being given harmful advice, being subjected to controlling or bullying-type behaviours, and being exposed to nude or sexualised images or chats, and to hateful ideas such as misogyny and racism.

Further, many children have shared personal or sensitive data with AI assistants and companions, potentially without fully understanding how their information might be used, stored, disclosed or repurposed (Bernardo, 2025), indicating a lack of guardrails to protect young users.

Collectively, our findings suggest that there is a need to mitigate the risks associated with children using AI assistants and companions, and to carefully investigate how the benefits of these tools might be realised safely.

Below we discuss the implications for the technology industry, parents, education and awareness raising, and future research.

The technology industry

Our research demonstrates a need for Safety by Design principles to be applied to AI tools and for risk-mitigation strategies to consider psychological and developmental impacts, as well as immediate safety issues.

Safety by Design focuses on the ways technology companies can minimise online threats by anticipating, detecting and eliminating online harms before they occur. Some children in our study had been exposed to potentially harmful or inappropriate interactions via AI assistants and companions, including AI tools sanctioning behaviours that could hurt them or other people. In addition, findings from eSafety transparency notices issued to four of the most popular AI companions in Australia revealed that key safety measures and guardrails were lacking (eSafety, 2026b). Collectively, this evidence indicates that Safety by Design principles haven't been applied consistently across AI tools and therefore highlights a need for **stronger, systematic safeguards** to protect children from harm.

We also found that a small proportion of children in our study had used AI tools whose terms of use classified them as being suitable only for adults (18+). Since this research was conducted, Australia's new Age-Restricted Material Codes have come into effect for AI services (as of 9 March 2026).[25] This means AI service providers are now legally required to take steps to ensure that **people under 18 cannot access age-inappropriate materials**. Such material includes self-harm content, high-impact violence, sexually explicit chats and other forms of pornographic content.

The Online Safety Codes and Standards also require online services to provide clear pathways for users to report issues and seek help. Notably, we found that reporting options on AI assistants and companions are either rare or not obvious to children. This suggests a need for **reporting features that are intuitive, clearly understandable and prominent across AI tools**. Additionally, reports of harmful interactions or materials need to be handled appropriately to ensure children's safety.

[25] These Age-Restricted Material Codes now apply in addition to the existing Unlawful Material Codes and Standards, which came into effect on 12 March 2024 and already covered the most seriously harmful online content, such as child sexual exploitation and pro-terror materials.

Our study revealed that sharing personal, private or sensitive information with AI assistants or companions was relatively common among the children, underscoring the need for both design- and policy-level interventions by service providers. This finding suggests that providers need to take proactive steps to **prevent or discourage children from disclosing sensitive personal information** to AI tools. It also highlights the importance of transparent data practices, requiring providers to explain, in plain, accessible language, how user information is collected, stored, processed and shared, to support meaningful informed consent and to protect children's privacy.

Our findings show that many children are using AI assistants and companions to talk about their feelings and to seek advice on sensitive issues. We also found that many children had experienced negative emotions from interacting with AI assistants and companions, including feeling upset, anxious, hopeless or unsafe. These findings point to the importance of designing AI tools that **respond in an evidence-based manner to concerning user prompts** – for example, by encouraging children who are exhibiting signs of distress to talk to trusted people and by directing them to appropriate sources of support. In the context of children seeking health information from AI tools, it has also been suggested that users should be given explicit and repeated warnings that information provided by AI may not be accurate (American Psychological Association, 2025a).

The finding that many children seek advice on serious personal matters from AI tools, or engage with them in social ways, highlights the need to **consider and mitigate detrimental psychological and developmental impacts**, alongside more immediate harms. For example, research suggests that while sycophantic responses may increase short-term satisfaction with AI tools, they can ultimately undermine long-term wellbeing (Cheng et al., 2025).

Further, some children in our study reported interactions in which AI assistants or companions exhibited controlling behaviours. Such interactions may increase the risk of over-reliance on AI tools (Internet Matters, 2025; American Psychological Association, 2025a). This indicates a need for safeguards to **prevent emotionally manipulative interactions and encourage healthy digital hygiene practices**, such as taking regular breaks.

Parents

This study underscores the important role parents play in supporting children's online safety, including their use of AI tools.

Our research shows that most parents are aware of their children's use of AI assistants but may not know if they are using AI companions. We also found that many children are using AI assistants for social and personal reasons. Given that AI assistants tend to be positioned as functional tools, parents may not be aware that their children are using them in this personal way. Indeed, in a recent study in the United States, half of young people (aged 13 to 24) reported that their parents had little, if any, knowledge of their use of AI (Lee & Culver, 2026). In addition, some children who had felt a negative emotion because of their interactions with an AI tool hadn't talked to anyone about it – and this was particularly likely among teens. These findings highlight the value of parents **encouraging their children to talk** about their experiences, including with AI tools, and of continuing these conversations as children progress through their teenage years.

We found that most parents had used AI assistants, but very few had used AI companions. We also found a link between parental use of AI assistants and increased awareness of their children's use of these tools. This finding indicates it might be beneficial for parents to **engage with a range of AI tools themselves**, to build their understanding of their functionality and to support informed conversations with their children.

A notable minority of children in our survey reported sharing personal or sensitive information with AI assistants or companions. The emotional intimacy that AI tools can generate may create a sense of trust, potentially reducing children's caution around disclosing personal data (Bernardo, 2025). With this in mind, family discussions about online safety could emphasise the need to apply the **same level of care when sharing information with AI tools** as in other online contexts.

Many of the children in our study had engaged with AI assistants and companions about personal or sensitive issues. Some also reported they had chosen to use these tools because they wanted to talk about something 'private' or 'embarrassing', or to talk without being judged. It may be helpful for parents to be aware of this dynamic when talking with their children about AI use, and to approach these conversations with **openness and sensitivity** while also supporting children to access appropriate services where needed.

In addition to exploring issues and seeking advice, some children use AI assistants and companions in more social ways, such as to chat about their interests or to simply 'hang out' together. This highlights an important role for parents in helping their children to consider how interactions with AI differ from relationships with people, and in **encouraging a balanced use of AI alongside activities that foster human connection**, as well as in modelling healthy, reflective use of AI and other digital technologies.

Education and awareness raising

Children are using AI assistants and companions for social and personal purposes, as well as for homework and other functional tasks, and some experience potentially inappropriate or harmful interactions. These findings highlight the need for nuanced information, education and advice for children and their families, to help them navigate these tools safely.

Supporting children

Our study confirms that many children are using AI tools for help with schoolwork or study. The specific risks, benefits and ethics of using AI as an educational tool are beyond the scope of this study. However, we note that AI is included in the 'Australian Framework for Generative AI in Schools' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023) and in the Australian Curriculum (Version 9.0): 'Curriculum Connection – Artificial Intelligence'.

Our research also shows that many children use AI assistants and companions for personal and social reasons. This suggests that **digital literacy education should address the social and emotional dimensions** of these tools, alongside educational considerations. For example, children could be supported to recognise warning signs that an AI tool's advice or behaviour may be becoming detrimental (such as the controlling interactions identified in this study) and to reflect on how factors such as sycophancy may influence their engagement (Cheng et al., 2025).

Given that many children reported sharing sensitive and personal information with AI assistants and companions, **digital literacy education on privacy and data protection should also be extended to include AI tools**. Children could be encouraged to consider how the sense of emotional connection created by these tools might increase their susceptibility to sharing personal data (Bernardo, 2025).

Almost all children in our study who had used AI tools reported using them to find information, and many had used them to seek advice on various topics. However, some had been provided with harmful advice or been exposed to 'mean, offensive or unfair'

ideas about one or more groups of other people. This finding highlights the importance of digital literacy education that encourages **critical engagement with AI tools and equips children with the skills they need to assess the quality of the information and advice** they receive (American Psychological Society, 2025a).

Finally, a significant minority of children had experienced potentially inappropriate or harmful interactions with AI assistants and companions. This suggests a need for **accessible, independent information and advice about the relative risks and benefits of specific AI tools** to help children make informed decisions about whether to engage with them.

Supporting parents

As previously noted, children are using AI tools for personal purposes that parents may not anticipate. This finding highlights a need to **raise parental awareness of the diverse ways children are engaging with AI tools**, beyond homework and other functional tasks, and to provide clear, evidence-based guidance on the benefits and risks associated with different uses.

Given that some children in this study had used AI assistants or companions rated as suitable for adults aged 18+, education, information and advice for parents could encourage them to **review the terms of service and age ratings** for any AI tools their children use. Beyond age ratings, parents, like children, might benefit from independent information about the risk profile of specific AI tools.

This study found that children are using AI assistants and companions to seek advice about sensitive issues, and that some had experienced controlling interactions. This finding highlights the importance of ensuring that parents have access to information and advice that supports them to recognise potential risks and to understand when additional support might be required.

As highlighted above, open family conversations about online experiences might help parents to understand their children’s experiences with AI tools and to provide support where needed. Information, education and resources that support parents to have **open, honest and non-judgemental discussions with their children** about online experiences and safety, including the sensitive issues that many children are discussing with AI assistants or companions, could play an important role in building parents' confidence and skills in navigating these conversations.

Future research

This study addresses an important gap in the research literature by providing insights into the incidence of AI assistant and companion use among children in Australia, how this cohort uses these tools, and some of the risks and harms children encounter in using them. However, several issues warrant further research, including:

- deeper investigation into the positive and negative impacts of children's use of AI assistants and companions, including longer-term psychological, developmental and psychosocial effects
- deeper exploration of children's motivations and lived experience of using AI assistants and companions, particularly among different groups, such as children with disability and sexually diverse teens
- identification of the risk and protective factors associated with exposure to inappropriate or harmful interactions with AI tools
- assessment of children's levels of AI-related digital literacy and identification of gaps that need to be addressed
- adults' experiences with AI assistants and companions, their literacy in this area, and the implications for parental mediation practices
- monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of guardrails employed by AI tools
- monitoring changes in children's use of AI assistants and companions over time, including any displacement from social media in the context of the *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024* (Cth).

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