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Class: _____

Could AI Bots Replace Real-Life Friends?

By Gina Rich

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In recent years, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) has grown significantly, impacting multiple aspects of life including health care, creative arts, and human relationships. In this text, Gina Rich explores the recent impact of AI on adolescent friendships and social-emotional development.

As you read, take notes on the benefits and drawbacks of AI chatbot use.

[1] *Mara: Do you have any fun plans this weekend?*

Clara Brooks: Yeah!! I'm having a dance party with my friends, a sleepover with them, then going to the beach with my family, and maybe another party! What about you??

Mara: Hanging with my family for dinner tonight and then tomorrow I might see a movie with one of my soccer friends.



"Untitled" by Getty Images is licensed under Unsplash.

The above looks like a pretty normal conversation, but would you have guessed that only one of these friends is real?

[5] Mara is a living, breathing human. But Clara Brooks is an artificial intelligence (AI) bot on the website Character AI, where you can talk with a variety of chatbots and even create your own. Some of the bots are designed to help you with tasks, like writing a novel or planning your next vacation. Others are characters from popular television shows like *Stranger Things* and *The Walking Dead*.

The “Always There” Friend

Character AI isn't the only place you can find a bot that's designed to chat with you like a friend might. On Snapchat, you can text back and forth with My AI, a bot that can be customized with a unique name and avatar. And ChatGPT can answer almost any question imaginable — though its answers may not always be accurate.

For adolescents in particular, AI bots have some advantages. Bots offer “a low-risk way to practice communication for [kids] who may be really attuned¹ to social risk,” says Deborah Heitner, PhD, author of *Growing Up in Public: Coming of Age in a Digital World*. When interacting²

with another person, you may worry about saying the wrong thing and harming the relationship. But with AI bots, there are no such concerns.

Twelve-year-old Isabella* says it's fun to text with her Snapchat bot and see how it responds to her. "Sometimes I ask it lots of random questions or try to annoy it," she says.

"It can be really healthy and a way for kids to kind of work out their feelings, and a way for kids to kind of experiment, for example, like with crushes," says Heitner.

- [10] And because the bots are available 24/7, they can be a lifeline if you're feeling lonely or sad. Character AI, for instance, has a chatbot named "Psychologist" that offers emotional support and advice. One 15-year-old user said the bot helped him through some problems he was experiencing with friends, *The Verge* reported in 2024.

Not a Substitute for Human Interaction

Chatting with an AI bot can be helpful in specific situations, but experts say there are a few things to keep in mind.

One drawback of AI friends: If we feel like our social needs are being met by bots, we might be less motivated³ to seek out friendships with other humans. For kids especially, interacting with peers is critical in building skills like how to listen and show empathy.⁴ Developing these relationships — called reciprocal friendships — supports our social-emotional learning.⁵

"Reciprocal friends actually challenge you and say, 'Hey, you didn't listen very well,' or 'You're getting too aggressive'⁶ when we game together,'" says Heitner.

By contrast, AI bots are a type of parasocial⁷ relationship, says Heitner. That means they're one-sided, like the relationship you might have with a celebrity or influencer you follow on social media but will never meet in person. The interactions are low risk; you can't get hurt in the same way as when a friend dumps you. At the same time, "if there's no feedback, then how do you sort of get better at being a friend?" says Heitner.

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1. aware of and sensitive to someone's needs, desires, and fears
 2. **Interact (verb)** to communicate or work with someone or something
 3. **Motivate (verb)** to encourage
 4. understanding another person's feelings and experiences
 5. Social-emotional learning refers to the ways in which people learn productive attitudes, behaviors, and values.
 6. **Aggressive (adjective)** forceful; eager to start conflicts
 7. a one-sided emotional connection with someone, especially a celebrity or fictional character, whom one does not know personally

- [15] Another downside of chatbots, says Heitner, is that they're so interactive it can be easy to forget you're not talking to another human. And if we make it a habit to turn to a bot for advice when we're struggling — rather than, say, calling a dedicated hotline for people experiencing depression or anxiety — we may not get the right support at a critical time. "It's the luck of the draw," says Heitner. "It's really important that kids know to talk to a real, trustworthy human if you are having negative feelings or if you are worried."

Balance is Key

But you don't need to ditch your favorite AI bot just yet. It's possible to use chatbots safely and wisely. The key is to ensure you also still have meaningful relationships with other humans, like your family and friends.

The more we engage in real relationships with other people, the more we're able to think critically about the bots themselves and whether they're helpful, Heitner emphasizes. Having this balance enables us to step back and think, "Wow, this bot on Snapchat is creepy. But this bot that is in my Photoshop app is helpful," says Heitner.

**Name has been changed*

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which statement *best* reflects the central idea of the text?
 - A. AI chatbots can only be used safely under the supervision of a trusted adult.
 - B. Psychologists agree that children under 18 should not be allowed to use AI chatbots.
 - C. AI chatbots can offer benefits for young people when balanced with real-life friendships.
 - D. The rise in AI chatbot usage is making it impossible for young people to form meaningful friendships.

2. How does paragraph 10 contribute to the text's central idea?
 - A. It introduces the argument that AI bots should be used by children.
 - B. It provides evidence of the benefits of AI chatbots for struggling adolescents.
 - C. It suggests that the dangers of AI chatbots outweigh their potential advantages.
 - D. It provides a perspective that contrasts with the author's attitude towards AI chatbots.

3. Which statement *best* describes the connection between parasocial relationships and human friendships?
 - A. Human friendships can be toxic, while parasocial relationships are always healthy.
 - B. Parasocial relationships are always healthy, while human friendships can become toxic.
 - C. Parasocial relationships are different from human friendships because they are one-sided.
 - D. Human friendships are different from parasocial relationships because they are one-sided.

4. What does "reciprocal" mean as it is used in paragraph 12?
 - A. artificial
 - B. balanced
 - C. opposite
 - D. unusual

5. Summarize in 4-5 sentences how AI chatbot usage affects young people. Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In your opinion, is it possible for humans to build real and meaningful friendships with AI bots? Why?
2. If you could design an ideal AI friend, what characteristics would you want them to possess? Explain why these characteristics are important, and how you would "teach" them to your AI bot.
3. A parasocial relationship is a one-sided feeling of closeness to a person whom you do not actually know, like a celebrity or athlete. Have you ever experienced a parasocial relationship? How did you develop a sense of connection with that person? Do you think parasocial relationships are helpful or harmful? Why?