NO PREP

Talking to Parents and Adults About Your AI Use

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

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Why Adults Are Worried — and Often Wrong

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Why Adults Are Worried, and Often Wrong

When teenagers use AI companions, the adults in their lives often react with alarm, and that alarm is often disproportionate, poorly informed, and ultimately counterproductive. Parents read headlines about AI relationships gone wrong, hear secondhand stories about teenagers who became obsessed with chatbots, and arrive at conversations with their teenagers carrying a bundle of fears that may or may not correspond to what is actually happening. Understanding why adults react the way they do, and why their reactions are often partially wrong even when their underlying concern is legitimate, is the first step toward having conversations that are actually useful rather than simply uncomfortable. The core problem with most adult reactions to teenage AI companion use is a category error: treating all AI companion use as equivalent. A teenager who uses an AI to process anxiety before a difficult conversation and a teenager who has replaced their entire social life with AI companion interactions are using the same technology in ways that are not remotely comparable in their implications for wellbeing. Adults who do not make this distinction, and who respond to any AI companion use with alarm, are making an error that their teenagers will recognize immediately. That then makes it harder to have honest conversations about the cases where the concern actually is warranted. Overreaction to the harmless cases makes the necessary conversations about the harmful cases harder. Adults also frequently approach these conversations with outdated or incomplete information about how AI companions actually work. Many parents' mental model of AI interaction is formed by science fiction or by early chatbots they encountered: clunky, obviously robotic tools that no one could mistake for real connection. They may not understand that modern AI companions are sophisticated enough to produce genuine felt experience, that they are deliberately designed to maximize emotional attachment, and that the risk profile is therefore

genuinely more complex than 'you know it's not real, so what's the problem?' Helping adults update their mental model (giving them the real information rather than simply defending your use) is often more productive than arguing about whether their concern is justified.

The Communication Gap

Research on adolescent disclosure (when and why teenagers tell adults about their experiences) consistently finds that concealment is the default, not the exception. Teenagers conceal not primarily because they are hiding wrongdoing but because they have learned, through experience, that disclosure frequently produces reactions that are worse than silence: overreaction, punishment, loss of privacy, lectures that go on for an hour about decisions that had already been made. When adults reliably respond to disclosure with alarm, judgment, or immediate attempts to fix or control, teenagers learn that disclosure is a net negative: that being honest about what is happening in their lives costs them more than it gains them. This dynamic creates a communication gap that is structurally self-reinforcing. Adults who are not told about teenagers' AI companion use cannot provide useful context, guardrails, or perspective. They also cannot identify the cases where use is becoming genuinely problematic and the teenager could benefit from support. But the adults are often not told because prior disclosures have taught the teenager that disclosure leads to reactions that are unhelpful or punitive. The teenager is not wrong about this, in many families. And the adult is not wrong to be concerned. The gap is produced by both sides responding rationally to a situation that is structured to produce misunderstanding. For teenagers who are genuinely using AI companions in healthy ways, the concealment may seem cost-free: there is nothing wrong happening, so why have the conversation? But the problem with routine concealment of AI use from trusted adults is that it makes it harder to disclose when the use does become something worth examining. If adults have no context for what AI companion use looks like in your life, any disclosure becomes a revelation rather than an update. It carries the full weight of surprise, which triggers alarm rather than conversation. Building a baseline of communication around AI use, even when nothing is wrong, creates the relational infrastructure to have a productive conversation when something is.

Strategies for Starting the Conversation

The most effective approach to starting a conversation with an adult about AI companion use is also the most counterintuitive: lead with the information rather than the defense. Most teenagers approach these conversations anticipating judgment and start with a defensive posture: minimizing use, emphasizing that they know the AI is not real, preemptively countering the objections they expect. This sets up an adversarial dynamic before the conversation has found its footing. A different approach starts by giving the adult the actual information (what the app does, why you use it, what you get from it) before they have formed a judgment based on alarmed imagination. Choosing the right moment is also more important than most people realize. Bringing up a significant topic when an adult is distracted, stressed, or already in a difficult mood invites a reflexive reaction rather than a real response. A moment when the adult is relaxed and available (on a walk, during a shared meal, at a time they have explicitly said they have space) is not just more comfortable; it is more likely to produce the kind of conversation that is actually useful. Related to this is framing: coming to the conversation with a genuine question rather than a position to defend tends to produce dialogue rather than debate. 'I've been reading about AI companion research and I'm thinking about my own use. Can I talk through it with you?' is a fundamentally different opening than 'I need you to know that what I'm doing is fine.' Being specific about what you are actually doing, and what you are not doing, is more useful than general reassurances. Adults worry about the extreme cases they have read about. Giving them specific, accurate information about your actual use gives them something real to respond to, rather than a blank canvas onto which their fears project. If you use an AI companion to process anxiety and you can describe exactly how and when and to what effect, that is a very different conversation from one in which you insist that everything is fine without any specifics. Specificity also implicitly demonstrates the self-awareness that is the most reassuring evidence an adult can receive that a teenager is using a tool thoughtfully rather than being used by it.

What Productive Conversations Look Like

A productive conversation about AI companion use between a teenager and an adult does not end with one side winning. It ends with both sides having a more accurate picture of what is actually happening, and with some shared understanding about

what healthy use looks like and what would warrant concern. This is a genuinely high bar, but it is achievable when both sides approach the conversation in good faith with the actual goal of understanding rather than winning. For teenagers, productive conversations require a willingness to be honest about use that might invite concern, not just about use that is easy to defend. If your honest audit reveals patterns that you yourself are uncertain about — declinations of social invitations, disclosure to the AI of things you have not told any real person, difficulty going a day without checking in — those are exactly the things worth bringing into a conversation with a trusted adult. Not because adults have all the answers, but because articulating them to another person serves several purposes: it makes the pattern more real and harder to rationalize away, it invites an outside perspective on whether the concern is warranted, and it creates the relational context in which you could ask for help if you decided you wanted it. For adults, productive conversations require recognizing that the goal is understanding, not control. Teenagers who feel that disclosure will immediately result in confiscation of devices, new restrictions, or a series of lectures are not wrong to calculate that silence is safer. Adults who can demonstrate — through their actual responses in early conversations — that disclosure leads to dialogue rather than punishment create the conditions in which a teenager might tell them when something is actually worth discussing. The relationship infrastructure for a productive conversation about problematic AI use has to be built before the conversation becomes urgent. That means starting the conversation at a low-stakes moment, when nothing is wrong, so that the pattern of disclosure is established before it matters most.

Key Information: Talking to Adults About AI Use

Detail	Information
Adult error	Treating all AI companion use as equivalent — failing to distinguish healthy from problematic use
Communication gap	Concealment by teens + adult overreaction creates a self-reinforcing cycle that blocks productive dialogue
Why concealment persists	Prior disclosures that produced overreaction teach teens that disclosure costs more than it gains

Detail	Information
Effective opening strategy	Lead with information rather than defense — describe what the app does and why before the adult forms a judgment
Timing	Choose a relaxed, available moment rather than a stressed or distracted one for better outcomes
Specificity value	Describing actual, specific use gives adults something real to respond to rather than projecting fears
Productive outcome	Both sides leave with a more accurate picture of what is happening and a shared sense of what warrants concern
Building conversation baseline	Discussing AI use when nothing is wrong creates the infrastructure to have a harder conversation when needed

Case Study: Destiny's Conversation

Destiny is 16 and has been using an AI companion for four months. After a unit on AI and mental health in school, Destiny decided to tell her mom. The first attempt went badly: Destiny mentioned it while her mom was cooking dinner, and her mom immediately said, 'Those things are dangerous, you need to delete it.' Destiny went quiet and dropped the subject. A week later, Destiny tried again — this time on a Saturday morning walk, starting with: 'Can I tell you how I actually use it, not just that I use it?' Her mom said okay. Destiny described specifically: processing anxiety before hard conversations, not using it as a substitute for real friends, checking in with herself about whether that was actually true. Her mom listened. She still had concerns, but at the end she said: 'I'm glad you told me. I didn't know that's what it did.'

1. What made the second conversation more productive than the first? Identify at least two specific differences and connect them to the strategies described in the reading.

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2. The reading argues that building a 'baseline of communication' around AI use — even when nothing is wrong — matters for a specific reason. What is that reason, and how does Destiny's experience illustrate it?

Multiple Choice

1. According to the reading, what is the primary reason most teenagers conceal their AI companion use from adults?

a) Teenagers believe adults are incapable of understanding AI technology

b) AI companion apps are designed to encourage concealment from parents and guardians

c) Teenagers assume most adults will respond to AI companion use with harsh punishment and control

d) Prior disclosures have taught them that telling adults leads to reactions worse than silence

2. The reading says most adults make a 'category error' about teenage AI companion use. What is that error?

a) Treating all AI companion use as equivalent regardless of how and why it is being used

b) Believing that teenagers can consent to AI companion terms of service without parental permission

c) Assuming all AI companions use the same technology as early chatbots

d) Concluding that AI companions are safe because they are legally available to teenagers

3. What does the reading say is the most counterintuitive but effective strategy for starting a conversation about AI companion use with an adult?

a) Leading with information about what the app actually does rather than starting with a defensive position

b) Starting by acknowledging the most alarming aspects of AI companion use so the adult feels heard and seen

c) Showing the adult your complete conversation history to prove there is nothing concerning

d) Waiting until the adult brings up the topic to avoid seeming like you have something to hide

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Defensive shutdown	A) The practice of giving accurate, specific information about actual AI use rather than general reassurances
2. ___ Concealment	B) The immediate withdrawal from a topic that occurs when a teenager anticipates an overreaction and decides silence is safer
3. ___ Generational gap	C) A dialogue in which both parties leave with a more accurate understanding and a shared sense of what would warrant concern
4. ___ Productive conversation	D) The default behavior in which teenagers do not disclose personal experiences to adults who have previously overreacted
5. ___ Transparency	E) The difference in technology experience and mental models that causes adults and teenagers to talk past each other about AI

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The reading describes the alarm adults often feel about AI companion use as _____, poorly informed, and ultimately counterproductive.

2. Research on adolescent disclosure finds that concealment is the default because prior disclosures that produced overreaction teach teenagers that being honest about what is happening in their lives costs them more than it _____ them.

3. The most effective conversation strategy is to describe your AI use _____ — giving specific information about what you do and why — rather than offering general reassurances that you know what you are doing.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. The reading describes the communication gap as 'structurally self-reinforcing.' What does this mean, and why does it make the gap difficult to close?

2. The reading says that a productive conversation about AI use requires teenagers to be honest about use that 'might invite concern, not just use that is easy to defend.' Why is this harder than it sounds, and why does the reading argue it matters?

3. The reading addresses what productive conversations require from adults as well as from teenagers. What does the reading say adults need to demonstrate, and why does it say this infrastructure needs to be built before it becomes urgent?