

How to talk to your teens About AI

3 ways to get teenagers thinking about AI and faith

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Every day, we're using tools that felt like science fiction just a few years ago.

Do you have a textbook chapter or article you don't understand? AI will turn it into an entertaining podcast. Fancy a song? AI will write music from thin air. Say "make me a video," and sure enough, it will. Not always great, but frighteningly fast... and getting better by the day.

At the same time as we're impressed by what AI *can* do, we're worried about what AI *might* do - especially to young people. Young people are the most connected generation in history, and yet they can also be the loneliest.

Surveys in the UK illustrate that 16-29 years olds consistently top the loneliness charts. That shatters our stereotypical view, that it's the elderly who are most vulnerable to loneliness. But it's not just that they're lonelier. Early data shows that teens and young adults are also the most likely age group to engage with "AI companions", especially when dealing with loneliness and anxiety.

What can Christian youth leaders and parents do to educate teens to use AI well? And how do we tie worldly things that change so fast to gospel values that never change?

Firstly, AI isn't all bad for young people

There's a risk that we think of AI in the same way as extreme horror or porn – it's evil! But that's neither helpful nor true. AI is revolutionising areas like medical research, with huge benefits. And for young people, it can be a big help. Eg:

Personalised learning - struggling students get a second chance to learn with a patient personal tutor, at their own pace and in a way that builds confidence and is inclusive.

Career prep tools – these can suggest career options and even offer practice interviews for unsure teens.

Anonymised mental health tools - can give private access to early intervention for young people who wouldn't ask for counselling —a stepping stone to human help.

Digital citizenship and critical thinking – actively learning to use AI responsibly and ethically presents an opportunity to develop discernment and critical thinking that can align with Christian values of truth-seeking and wisdom.

But of course, we're right to be concerned

I recently heard the story of an American mother whose teenager built an AI friend based on the heroine Daenerys Targaryen from Game of Thrones. He spent day and night "in conversation with her". This is not just Q&A like you do with ChatGPT. These AI-friend sites are deeply immersive; they build a whole world in which you are the hero. Ultimately, he desperately wanted to be with his AI friend, which, in turn, encouraged him; so, he committed suicide. Her story is devastating - I recall pausing the podcast several times, it was hard even to listen.

And yet, ironically the company that created this AI software claims to be *solving* the problem of loneliness. As their CEO puts it: “We see a lot of people using it because they're lonely or troubled and need someone to talk to.”

Could that ever be true? ... Possibly. For example, a young gay teen, or indeed any teenager, may discover that AI helps them to find the right language, gives them confidence, to navigate the challenges of adolescence. But the consequences when this goes wrong are disastrous.

And picture a world where a young person gets invited to a youth group for the first time, but the anxiety of walking into a room full of strangers is overwhelming. Isn't it much easier to stay home and chat with someone who won't judge you. And that someone need not be a person. AI characters are always willing always available as one of these AI-sites says, “always on your side”.

And there are other risks that AI brings to young people including:

Temptation to cheat: “Authenticity” has become a buzzword, but let's be honest — if your friends are using AI to complete their assignment, the pressure to do the same is real.

Radicalisation: AI generated video and social media can be used to spread extremist ideas. Its super easy now to create realistic videos from just a text prompt. Used cleverly, these can appear agreeable, feed our confirmation bias, and make extreme ideas defensible.

Fear of the future: What kind of jobs will even exist in five years? There can be a creeping uncertainty which can make the future feel pointless.

Loss of cognitive ability: Growing dependence on AI is being correlated with a reduction in thinking skills.

So how do we respond?

Three simple steps to help teens use AI wisely

Suggesting that young people “stay away from AI” is unhelpful. AI will increasingly become ambient, embedded into everyday objects including phones, laptops and smart speakers. Our faith has to say more than that.

But here's the good news (well apart from THE Good News): you don't need to be an AI expert to equip young people to manage this new world well. *Young people value the conversation with you more than you having all the answers.* So, have a conversation. Here is an approach to discussing AI – without being an expert in AI.

1. Start the conversation, ask young people what they think:
 - *What do you think is good or dangerous about AI?*
 - *How do your friends use AI?*
 - *What's the best thing you've seen AI do – and the worst?*
 - *How do you work out if something you're seeing is real or fake?*
2. Go deeper and ask key questions about AI:

Could a “conscious AI” in the future ever be described as human?

Here our faith delivers a magnificent, clear answer that society needs to hear: *AI is not, and will never be, human*. Even if something “conscious” is simulated, AI will never have what we have:

- Values of its own – AI is just a sponge – it absorbs the values of whatever data it finds
- Subjective experience – AI can never know the smell of a flower, the taste of ice cream. These are inherently human experiences. (Take a look at this clip from Good Will Hunting <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRG2jIQWCsY>)
- Our fragility – AI strives to become perfect, but we, with all our wonderful flaws, know that to be human is to make mistakes. It’s why Jesus came
- The Imago Dei – the image of God, God only created *humans* in his image and will only ever be in relationship with humans

These are significant differences, some of which are found only in Christianity.

3. Start teaching principles on how to use AI well:

- *Talk about bias* – especially confirmation bias on the internet. The business model of the internet depends on keeping you glued to it. Learn to question sources, spot deepfakes
- Learn to question how a post makes you feel: *does this make me feel very angry or gossipy?* If so, it might not be true. Don’t just forward it on.
- And lastly, talk about how AI *should* be used, Keep it simple:
 - Use AI as a critic rather than a creator – use it to improve your work, not do your work
 - Keep the “human in the loop” principle – if AI becomes the sole expert, it becomes autonomous, even dangerous

Above all, if you are a youth leader, keep doing the sleepovers, days out, pizza parties. Not only can these never be replaced by an AI, they are precisely the places where these conversations can arise.

A better story

AI progress isn’t slowing. We are witnessing an AI arms race between the US and China, and even more so with the latest US administration policy on AI which is pretty much, “move fast and beat China”. AI safety has been sidelined by national governments amidst a fear of missing out.

As Christians, we have a window to get this right and not allow our churches and young people to sleepwalk into this new world. We *have* a better story here - a counter narrative that is rooted in principles that remain unchanged after 2,000 years. Where loneliness is met with real relationships, where cheating is countered with integrity. where fear is met with conversation, not paralysis, and radicalisation is replaced with discernment.

Our faith means we don’t need to be fearful for our young people and AI, but we do need to pastor, parent, and prepare them – and no algorithm will replace the power of presence, love, and wise conversation.

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