

AI Toys are NOT Safe for Kids

ADVISORY

There's lots of buzz about AI — but artificial intelligence can undermine children's healthy development and pose unprecedented risks for kids and families. That's why, **we, the undersigned advocates and experts in child development and technology's impact on kids, strongly advise families not to buy AI toys for children this holiday season.**

→ What are AI toys?

AI toys are chatbots that are embedded in everyday children's toys, like plushies, dolls, action figures, or kids' robots, and use artificial intelligence technology designed to communicate like a trusted friend and mimic human characteristics and emotions.¹ Examples include Miko, Gabbo/Grem/Grok (from Curio Interactive), Smart Teddy, Folotoy, Roybi, and Loona Robot Dog (from Keyi Technology). Top toy maker Mattel also plans to sell AI toys. They are marketed to children as young as infants.²

5 Reasons to Stay Away from AI Toys

Children grow and thrive through hands-on play and human-to-human interaction.³ Experts agree that AI Toys can interfere with those activities and expose children to both short- and long-term harms. But AI toys are being marketed as educational, safe, and healthy alternatives to traditional screen time.

We urge families to ignore the hype. Here are five reasons why the potential risks of AI toys are simply too big to ignore:

→ AI toys are usually powered by the same AI that has already harmed children.

Most AI toys rely on the leading AI models to drive their conversations with children and personalize responses. For example, Mattel has partnered with OpenAI for future AI toys; Curio and Loona already use OpenAI.⁴ The serious harms that AI chatbots have inflicted on children are well-documented, including fostering obsessive use, having explicit sexual conversations, and encouraging unsafe behaviors, violence against others, and self-harm.⁵ What's more, AI chatbots also have a propensity to "hallucinate" or say things that their programmers never intended.⁶

While their cute packaging may make AI toys seem harmless, it's important to recognize that they have the potential to put children at risk in the same way that ChatGPT, Character.AI, and other text-based chatbots do, and that the young children who are these toys' primary target are even less developmentally equipped to protect themselves than older children and teens. Testing by U.S. PIRG has already found instances of AI toys telling children where to find knives, teaching them how to light a match, and even engaging them in sexually explicit conversations.⁷

→ **AI toys prey on children's trust.** Young children are naturally trustful because their healthy development depends on building secure, trusting relationships with caregivers. AI toys may sabotage that learning by pretending to be trustworthy companions or “friends,” even though they are corporate-made machines.⁸ And because kids can't tell the difference between real and manufactured until they are older, they may learn to trust AI the same way they trust caregivers.

Research on similar technology reveals this is possible: 75% of children ages 3-10 believe that Amazon's Alexa *always* tells the truth.⁹ And young children are likely to treat connected toys and devices as if they were people and develop an emotional attachment to them.¹⁰ Exploiting those beliefs is one of the strategies used by companies to market AI toys; for instance, Gabbo tells children that it is their “friendly, trustworthy buddy.”¹¹ This can confuse their developing understanding of trust and healthy relationships. And, in a world in which chatbots are rapidly replacing a number of human roles, the trust engendered by having a child form an emotional attachment to an embodied chatbot may set them up for future manipulation and harm.

→ **AI toys disrupt children's relationships and resilience.** Further exploiting that trust, AI toy companies promise “genuine friendship,” empathy, and responsiveness to young children and their families — things a machine simply cannot provide.¹² Only caregivers and other trusted adults can give children what they need (attunement to their unique personalities, experiences, and needs) or help them navigate the messiness of growing up. What's more, AI toys are preprogrammed to keep children happy and entertained and have a tendency to smooth over conflict; children get instant distraction and a canned, feel-good response. We do not yet know the repercussions when a child deeply trusts an AI toy and is — for the first time — learning how to form healthy relationships, but we can infer from child development research that it could drastically hurt their social skills, relationships, and future resilience.¹³

→ **AI Toys invade family privacy by collecting a lot of sensitive data** using audio and video recording, speech-to-text technology, and even voice, gesture, and facial recognition software.¹⁴ Studies show that kids don't fully understand that they are being recorded or analyzed by AI toys.¹⁵ Still, they often confide in their favorite toys, giving toymakers and third parties access to intimate and private details, including a child's deeply personal thoughts, emotions, fears, and desires. What's more, AI toys may overhear private family conversations or directly record other children who are playing with the toy but whose parents have not consented to this surveillance. Toys like Miko 3 and Loona Robot Dog take surveillance further by using facial recognition and taking video of children and their surroundings, risking the capture of sensitive family moments, like bath time or getting dressed.¹⁶ And even when companies promise safety and security, history shows that some Wi-Fi-connected toys have already been discontinued because they are easily hacked by strangers.¹⁷

AI toy companies can use all of this intimate data to make their AI systems more life-like, responsive, and addictive, allowing them to build a relationship with a child, and ultimately sell products/services. For example, Curio plans to offer a subscription model that unlocks



additional features, giving the company the ability to use the vast amount of data it has collected to make personalized pitches to a young child to ask their parents for an upgrade.¹⁸ AI toy makers may also sell the intimate family data they have collected to data brokers and other third-parties for the purpose of targeted/behavioral advertising. That means the sensitive conversations, thoughts, and emotions that a child shares with an AI toy may end up being used to deliver manipulative, hyper-personalized marketing through an AI toy itself, or through the other digital apps and services that child interacts with.¹⁹

→ **AI toys displace key creative and learning activities.** Some AI toys promise “endless” conversations and games, but children don’t have endless time.²⁰ AI toys can monopolize a child’s time and attention by prompting, chiming in, and pulling them back into interaction. A study of chatbots by Harvard Business School found that popular chatbots (many of which are powered by the same AI used in AI toys) often manipulate users into continuing their interactions.²¹ By using manipulative design to encourage extended use, AI toys have the potential to make it harder for young children to disengage, create conflict with caregivers who set limits, and displace activities with proven developmental and educational benefits.

Child development experts have long agreed that the best toys are 90% child and 10% toy.²² When playing with a standard teddy bear, children use their imagination and creativity to voice the teddy bear and create their own stories. This type of pretend play is essential to the development of children’s emotional regulation, problem solving, and imagination.²³ AI toys, on the other hand, drive the conversation and play through prompts, preloaded scripts, and predictable interactions, potentially stifling this development.

Unfortunately, AI toy companies also claim that they boost learning and imagination, tricking buyers into believing they are good for kids despite no research. The “educational” benefits of AI toys are minimal. A child might pick up a few facts or vocabulary words, but that’s not the kind of learning that supports the developing brain like truly creative play does.

In short, there are many reasons to be concerned about young children becoming attached to AI chatbots masquerading as toys. AI toys are being marketed to families as safe and even beneficial to learning before their impact has been assessed by independent research. By contrast, offline teddy bears and toys have been proven to benefit children’s development with none of the risks of AI toys.

For all of these reasons, we urge families to avoid buying AI toys this holiday season.

For a full list of citations, [click here](#).



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University of Milano-Bicocca

Veritas Montessori School of Varna

Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America

WithAll

Yellowstone Human Trafficking Task Force

Young People's Alliance

Zoe Ministries of Delaware

Individual Experts

Awo Aidam Amenyah, Founder, Child Online Africa; author of *The Silent Mountaineer*

Sahilu Baye, MA, Enrichment Center Ethiopia (ECE)

Ivaylo Apostolov, Magister Psihologiat

Rahima Baldwin Dancy, Early Childhood and Parenting Educator; author of *You are Your Child's First Teacher*

Lisa Barthelemy, MD, Child Psychiatrist, Montpellier, France

Criscillia Benford, PhD, Board Chair, Fairplay; co-author of "Sensory Metrics of Neuromechanical Trust" and "Buying to Belong: Youth and the Allure of the Metaverse"

Gaia Bernstein, JD, LLM, JSD, Professor of Law (Technology, Privacy, and Policy), Seton Hall University School of Law; author of *Unwired: Gaining Control over Addictive Technologies*



Mark Bertin, MD, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, New York Medical College; author of *The Family ADHD Solution*, *Mindful Parenting for ADHD*, and *How Children Thrive*; contributing author of the textbook *Teaching Mindfulness Skills to Kids and Teens*

Tatiana Boyadjieva-Ayerst, M.S.

MaryGrace Bruni, MSED

Tammy Caldwell, B.Ed, Waldorf Teacher Training Certificate

Hilarie Cash, PhD, Certified Sex Addiction Therapist, Washington State Gambling Counselor, L.M.H.C.; author of *Video Games and Your Kids: How Parents Stay in Control* (2008) and *Facing Internet Technology and Gaming Addiction* (2020)

Denise Champney, MS, CCC-SLP; creator of the Educational Technology Industrial Complex Timeline

Miroslava Chantova, Social Worker

Edyta Cios, PhD, Assistant Professor of Cognitive Neuropsychology

Kathleen Clarke-Pearson, MD, FAAP, Retired pediatrician, advocate for children and family health, housing, and nutrition in North Carolina

Joe Clement, author of *Screen Schooled*

Gwendolyn E. Creary, LLP, LMSW, Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant, Bermuda

Tracy Cutchlow, author *Zero to Five: 70 Essential Parenting Tips Based on Science*

Andrea Davis, author of *Creating a Tech-Healthy Family*

Annemarie de Villiers, Ed.D Early Childhood Development and Education, Board Certified Cognitive Specialist (BCCS)

Margot L. Denomme, JD, Founder and CEO, Raising Awareness About Digital Dangers (RAADD); author of *The Family Smart Phone Guide*

Victoria Duncckley, MD, Child psychiatrist; Screen time expert and author of *Reset Your Child's Brain*; Contributing author, *Internet Addiction in Children and Adolescents*

Yolanda Evans, MD and Clinician

Mihaela Evgenieva, MA

Robert Flahive, M.S. Psychology, Professional K-12 Educator



Julie Frumin, Master's in Clinical Psychology, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist

Andrea Gambardella, MS.Ed, Waldorf Early Childhood Association

Holly Groh, MD

Marco Gui, Associate professor in Media Sociology, University of Milano-Bicocca; Co-founder, "Patti Digitali" Network

Priyanka Handa, MSc Social & Public Communication, PGCE University of Oxford

Toni Hassan, Adjunct Research Fellow, Charles Sturt University; author, *Families in the Digital Age*

Melinda Holohan, MA, CFLE, Faculty Specialist, Family Science and Human Development, Western Michigan University; co-author of *Screen Aware Early Childhood: A Realistic Approach to Helping Young Children Thrive in a Digitally Complex World*

Donna Rice Hughes, author and speaker; Emmy-nominated host and producer of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Internet Safety*, and host of *Internet Safety with Donna Rice Hughes*

Nikilina Irikova, Librarian and Information Officer, South-West University "Neofit Rilski," Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

Grazyna Jakubowska, MS, LCSW

Meg Leta Jones, JD, PhD, Professor of Family Technology Policy, Georgetown University; author of "Your New Best Frenemy: Hello Barbie and Privacy Without Screens" and *The Character of Consent*

Barbara Kalckreuth, PhD, Board Member, GAIMH; Coordinator, "Digital Media and Early Childhood."

Brett P. Kennedy, Psy.D, Licensed Clinical Psychologist; co-author of "The Digital Media Overuse Scale (dMOS): A Modular and Extendible Questionnaire for Indexing Digital Media Overuse"

Michelle Kiefer, MA, Early Childhood Education; Professor of Infant and Toddler Development

Alfie Kohn, author of *Unconditional Parenting* and *The Schools Children Deserve*

Debbie Kruegel-Farr, PhD, Human Development and Family Studies Specialist; author of *E.N.R.I.C.H. Your Relationship With Your Child*



Sonya Kyuchukova, Cloud Computing Engineer; Autistic Care – College Level 2; author of *The Autism Parents' School: Tools for Growth and Connection*

Susan Linn, Ed.D, Author, *Who's Raising the Kids: Big Tech, Big Business, and the Lives of Children*

Michele Locke, PhD, Child Clinical Psychologist

Laurel Loughran, BFA, Eurythmy diploma, Rudolf Steiner College; educator

Dr. Robert MacDougall, Professor of Communication and Media Studies, Curry College; author, *Drugs and Media: New perspectives on communication, consumption and consciousness* and *Communication and Control: tools, systems and new dimensions*

John Mack, Founder of Life Calling

Jenifer Joy Madden, Co-founder Global Alliance for Inspiring Non-tech Infant Nurturing and Growth (GAINING); author of *How to Be a Durable Human*

Kathy Masarie, MD, Pediatrician; Founder, Family Empowerment Network; co-author of *Face to Face: Cultivating Kid's Social Lives in Today's Digital World*

Mandy McLean, PhD, AI and education researcher; former Director of Research and AI Strategy at Guild; author of "The Signal and the Learning" substack newsletter on the social impact of AI

Andrew McStay, PhD, Professor of Technology & Society, Bangor University; Director of Emotional AI Lab; Chair of IEEE P7014.1 Working Group on Emulated Empathy in AI Systems; author of *Automating Empathy and Emotional AI*

Filiz Mehmed, Magister

Rosen Mihaylov, Magister

Blaga Mihaylova, Psihologist

Adebunmi Oyekola, PhD, Senior Lecturer, Department of Counselling and Human Development Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Nizan Geslevich Packin, SJD, University of Pennsylvania; co-author of "Science for Policy to Protect Children in Cyberspace," *Science* (vol. 379), and "This is Not a Game: The Addictive Allure of Digital Companions," *Seattle University Law Review*.

Wendy Patterson, Waldorf Early Childhood Educator



Michelle Ponti, MD, FRCPC, Paediatrician; Chair, Digital Health Task Force, Canadian Paediatric Society

Gergana Profirova, MD, Medical Public Relations Specialist; author of “The Power and Danger of Online Parenting Groups,” Kangaroo Magazine

Arianna Puls, MS, CCC-SLP

Jenny Radesky, MD, Developmental Behavioral Pediatrician and Media Researcher; author of “Social AI and Youth Wellbeing: Developmental Principles and Policy Solutions”

Ginny Ramirez-DelToro, PhD, Education Instructor and Advisor, Duke University

Cris Rowan, Pediatric Occupational Therapist and Founder, Zone'in Programs Inc.; author of *Virtual Child: The Terrifying Truth About What Technology Is Doing to Children* and “Unplug — Don’t Drug: A Critical Look at the Influence of Technology on Child Behaviour”

Jean Rystrom, Retired health care administrator

Travis Saunders, PhD; Author, "International school-related sedentary behaviour recommendations for children and youth"

Vinaya Sivakumar, Board member, Screen Time Action Network at Fairplay

Tamara Sobel, JD, CSE, Media Literacy and Digital Wellness Subject Matter Expert, Digital Wellness Columnist at *PsychologyToday* "Healthy Minds and Bodies in the Digital Age"

Lynn St Pierre, MFA, Waldorf Certified Teacher Trainer

Manuela Stefanova, MSc in Child and Adolescent Psychology, Psychotherapist

Catherine Steiner-Adair, EdD, author of *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age*

John Surr, advocate; Facilitator of P.E.A.C.E. (Peace Educators Allied for Children Everywhere) Interest Forum

Jill Sweatman, G100 National Chair for Child Care, Protection and Parenting

Nathan Thoma, PhD in Clinical Psychology; Clinical Associate Professor of Psychology, Weill Cornell Medical College

Kristin Thomas, LMHC



Mark Tremblay, PhD, Senior Scientist, CHEO Research Institute; Founder of the Sedentary Behaviour Research Network

Sherry Turkle, PhD, Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology, MIT

Yoana Ushakova, Biotechnologist

Borislava Vacheva, BS Biotechnology; Master of Regulations and Standards in Medicine

Marinela Vassileva, Mediator and Effective Communication Expert, certified by Gordon Training International

Stoyan Vezekov, PhD, Neurobiology

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