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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Alexander Neville Foundation

All Girls Allowed, Inc.

American Youth Association (AYA)

Annalees Hope

Apple Blossom Village

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Better Screen Time

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The Carson J Bride Effect

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