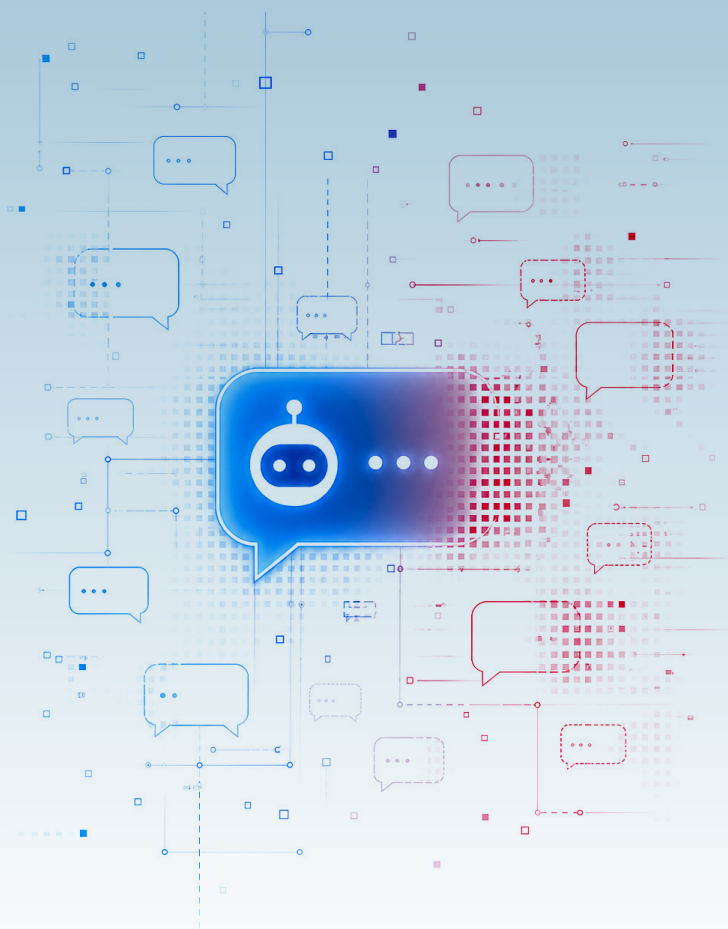


WHEN A CHATBOT BECOMES A FRIEND

The Use of AI Chatbots for Emotional Support Among Teenagers

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General introduction

Over the years, young people and teenagers have been at the forefront of adopting new technologies - from the early internet and the arrival of smartphones to the spread of social media. As these technologies have been adopted, their role in young people's daily lives has also changed and expanded. In recent years, a new pattern has emerged: teenagers use generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) not only to search for information or edit documents, but also for personal conversation, advice and emotional support. A 2025 Youth Endowment Fund study of around 11,000 teenagers in England and Wales found that approximately one in four turn to AI chatbots for emotional support. Similarly, Common Sense Media's 2025 report, *Talk, Trust, and Trade-Offs: How and Why Teens Use AI Companions*, based on a US survey of 1,060 teenagers aged 13-17, found that one third of respondents (33%) use these tools for social and emotional purposes.

Against this background, the Israel Internet Association, together with ELEM's digital interventions team, developed and conducted a comprehensive survey to examine the role of AI chatbots in the daily and emotional lives of teenagers in Israel. Geocartography Knowledge Group collected the data in November 2025. The sample comprised 502 internet-using teenagers aged 13-17 from the general Jewish population and is nationally representative of this group in Israel. Owing to sampling limitations, teenagers from Arab and Haredi communities were not included.

This survey extends earlier Israeli research, including work by the University of Haifa's Faculty of Education and Bezeq's Internet Report. It examines not only teenagers' preferences and the extent and purposes of their AI chatbot use, but also how helpful they consider conversations on different topics; how often they approach a chatbot as a social agent; why they may prefer a chatbot to a person; and the feelings and experiences associated with this use.

Survey findings

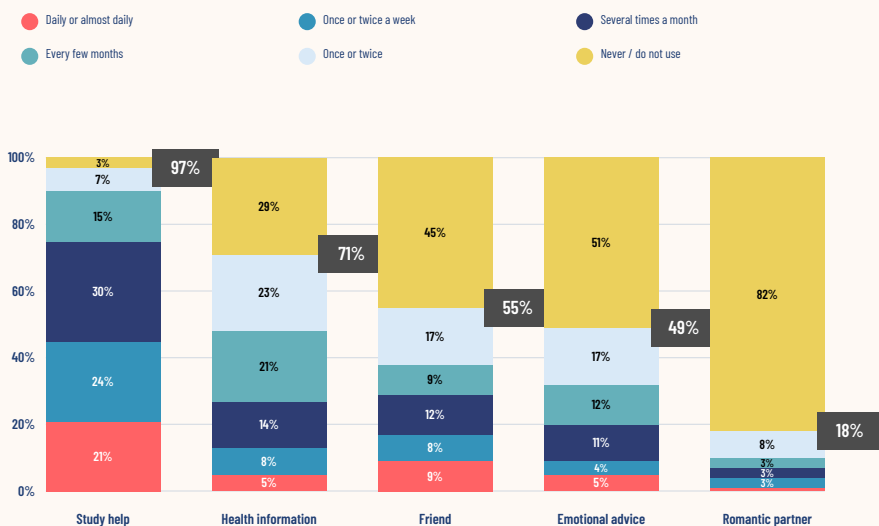
How deeply have AI chatbots entered teenagers' daily routines?

Use of generative AI chatbots has become particularly widespread among teenagers in Israel. They are no longer a new or experimental technology, but an integral part of young people's everyday routines and digital environment. The survey found that 96% of teenagers use AI chatbots in some way, while 85% report frequent use - daily or weekly. ChatGPT is the most widely used chatbot: 93% of respondents report having used it, and 78% say they use it regularly. For teenagers, AI systems are therefore no longer perceived as an external technological tool, but as a routine and established part of their digital lives.

Do teenagers also use AI chatbots for emotional and social needs?

Unlike traditional search engines, generative AI chatbots are no longer used solely for informational or practical purposes. Most teenagers use them for functional needs, such as study help (97%) or health information (71%), but use also extends substantially into personal and emotional life. More than half of respondents (55%) report using a chatbot as a friend, 49% turn to one for emotional advice, and 18% even use one as a romantic partner. Perceived helpfulness suggests that these are not merely marginal or experimental interactions. Among those using a chatbot as a friend, 56% consider it helpful; 52% of those seeking emotional advice report a positive contribution; and even among those using one as a romantic partner, 45% believe the interaction was helpful overall.

Figure 1. Frequency of AI chatbot use for different purposes



Are there gender differences in emotional use of AI chatbots?

Analysis of emotional uses points to gender differences in how teenagers integrate chatbots into their personal lives. Girls are more likely to use a chatbot for emotional sharing: 59% report using one as a friend, compared with 49% of boys, and the same proportion seek emotional or mental-health advice, compared with 36% of boys. Frequency also differs: 31% of girls use a chatbot as a friend frequently, compared with 26% of boys, and 25% frequently seek emotional advice, compared with only 14% of boys. The gap is even wider in perceived helpfulness: 58% of girls who used a chatbot for emotional advice say it helped them, compared with 39% of boys.

By contrast, boys report slightly higher use in a romantic context (20%, compared with 16% of girls) and are more likely to regard romantic interactions with a chatbot as helpful. Of boys who spoke with a chatbot as a romantic partner, 51% say it helped them, compared with 39% of girls.

In summary, the findings indicate that, for girls and boys alike, a chatbot can sometimes serve as a space for sharing, emotional processing and support. This role appears more central for girls, who are also more likely to perceive it as helpful. Boys also use chatbots emotionally, but less prominently than girls and sometimes in other contexts, including romantic interaction. AI chatbots are therefore becoming part of the emotional world of both genders, but to different degrees and in different ways.

Figure 2a. AI chatbot use by purpose and gender

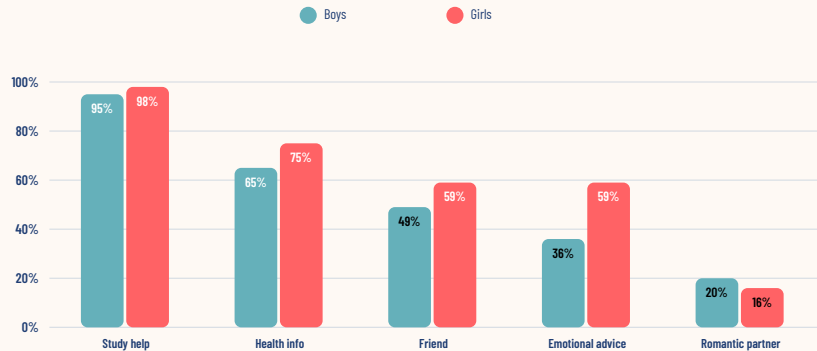
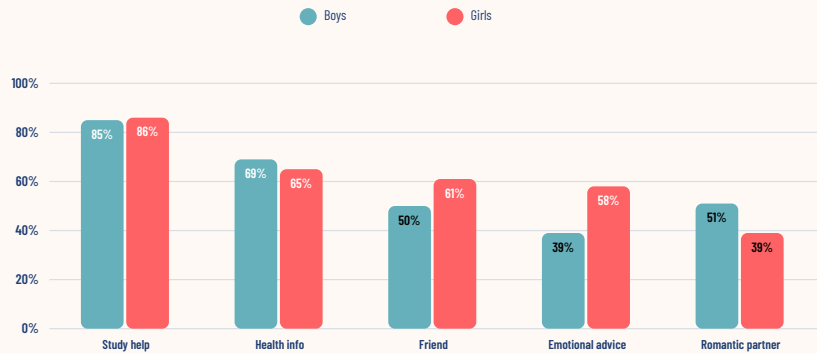


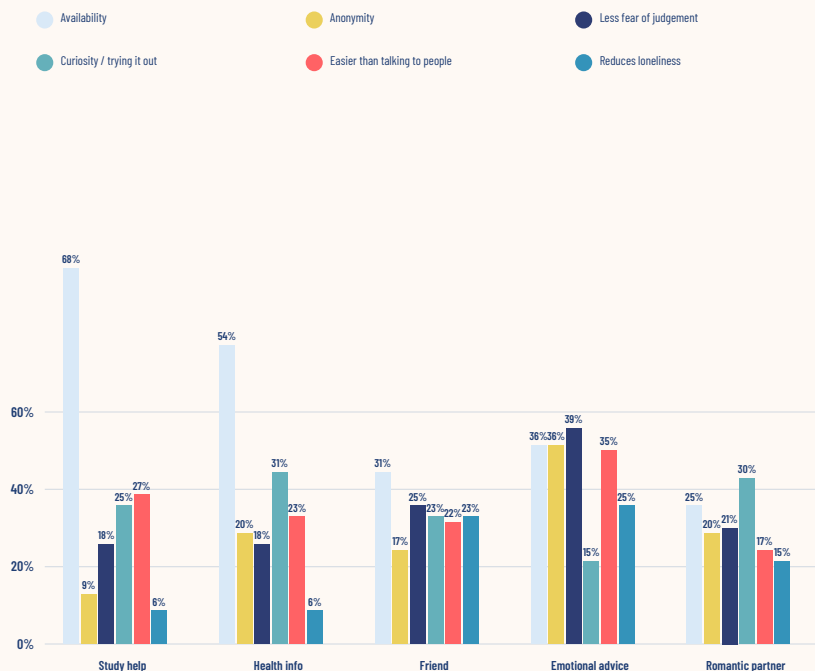
Figure 2b. Perceived helpfulness by purpose and gender



Why do teenagers turn to AI chatbots for emotional support?

The reasons for using AI chatbots reveal clear differences between instrumental and social-emotional uses. For study help and health advice, availability is the main reason (68% and 54%, respectively), alongside curiosity or a wish to try the technology. For social and emotional uses - as a friend, for emotional advice and in romantic contexts - interpersonal reasons are more prominent: reduced fear of judgement (up to 39%), anonymity (up to 37%), and the feeling that it is easier to talk to a system than to people (up to 35%). Some users also say the chatbot reduces loneliness, particularly when used as a friend (23%) or for emotional support (25%). Overall, while chatbots are seen as accessible and convenient tools for practical purposes, in social and emotional contexts they perform deeper functions of support, communication and reducing interpersonal barriers.

Figure 3. Reasons for using AI chatbots

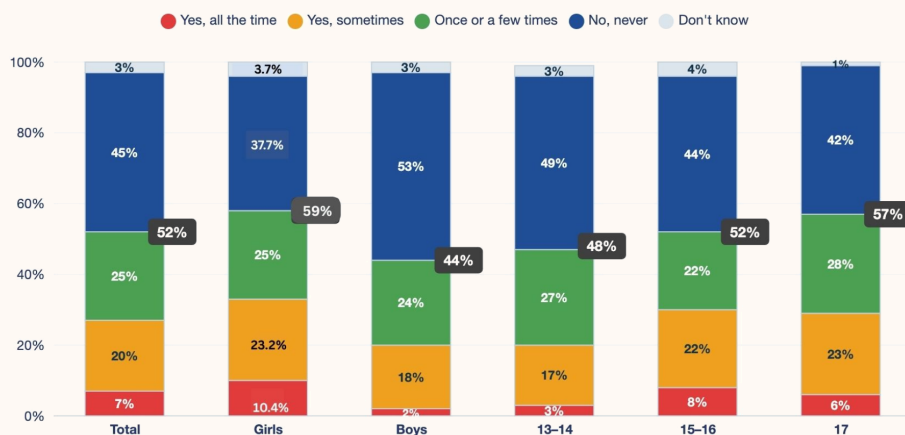


Whom do teenagers prefer to talk to: an AI chatbot or a real person?

Around half of respondents (52%) said they had preferred discussing emotional issues with a chatbot rather than a person. The proportion was higher among girls than boys (59% versus 44%). This suggests not merely use of a technological tool, but sometimes a social preference in which the chatbot becomes an alternative to human interaction.

Figure 4: Have you ever preferred to discuss emotional topics with an AI chatbot instead of a real person?

100% = all respondents in each group. The dark tag marks the combined "yes" share.



This preference may reflect the arrival of a new digital figure alongside the people in teenagers' lives: a chatbot that is always there, listens, responds empathetically and does not judge or criticise. The conversation takes place in a private, enclosed space without social exposure, and therefore without the same fear of rejection or embarrassment. The chatbot will not 'report' them to school or their parents. It may consequently feel like a safe and accessible outlet for emotional sharing, especially when approaching another person feels threatening. But does this sense of safety translate into genuine emotional benefit?

Do teenagers benefit emotionally from using chatbots?

Although many teenagers report emotional benefits after talking to an AI chatbot, the emotional picture is complex and ambivalent. Most respondents report positive experiences: 76% feel relief, 72% report happiness, and 68% feel more secure. At the same time, around half report frustration and approximately one third report loneliness and/or sadness. These findings suggest that chatbot-based emotional support may offer some short-term help, but is not necessarily a beneficial substitute for human interaction.

These trends are consistent with a recent study (Fang et al., 2025) examining how conversation with AI systems affects psychosocial measures such as loneliness, the extent of social interaction and emotional dependence on the chatbot. Initially, AI interaction may reduce loneliness and strengthen a sense of connection. As use becomes more frequent, prolonged and intense, however, emotional dependence on the system rises. Paradoxically, that dependence is subsequently associated with renewed loneliness and reduced interpersonal interaction. The researchers conclude that while AI may provide temporary comfort, overreliance can harm human relationships and lead to problematic patterns of use, particularly among teenagers who are already highly socially sensitive.

What are the implications of using AI chatbots for emotional support?

The findings point to a fundamental change in technology's role: from a chatbot used mainly as a source of information and a work tool to one that participates in interpersonal interaction and sometimes acts as a social agent. When teenagers turn to a system to express feelings, discuss relationships, share loneliness or simulate a romantic relationship, it begins to perform functions previously reserved for friends, family members or professionals. The chatbot is no longer merely an information intermediary, but an active participant in the user's social space. This view is reinforced by the finding that 52% of teenagers had preferred talking to a chatbot rather than a person about emotional matters. For some, the chatbot is not simply an addition to existing social ties but may also be an alternative to them.

The chatbot is accessible, free and sometimes anonymous, and is designed to respond in a supportive, empathetic way. It is therefore natural for teenagers to use it for personal conversation and support. For some, talking to a chatbot may reduce loneliness and provide a space that feels safe for sharing, especially for those who struggle to form social relationships or are socially marginalised. They can discuss difficult experiences, social pressure, friendships and other relationships, and the system's responses may support emotional processing and reflection on possible ways of coping. For some users, the chatbot even serves as a kind of 'safety net' for sensitive topics, embarrassing questions, or information and support that are difficult to seek from people nearby or from human supporters. Teenagers also use chatbots creatively and socially, including for role play, stories and poetry, incorporating them into their imaginative and creative lives.

When emotional processing occurs with a system rather than through human interaction, however, it may affect central aspects of teenagers' social development, including asking for help, sharing emotions and building trust - skills developed primarily through interpersonal relationships. If emotional conversation takes place mainly with a system designed to respond consistently and supportively, there are fewer opportunities to practise interpersonal skills and learn how to manage complex relationships.

Professor Sherry Turkle, who studies relationships between people and technology, argues that people connect with machines because we are lonely but afraid of intimacy. A chatbot cannot get angry with us, argue with us, leave us or report us, which creates a feeling of safety. AI offers companionship without the complexity, exposure and demands of a human relationship. Communication with a chatbot is easier: it reassures and compliments us, while human communication is always more challenging. It is therefore important to explain to teenagers that the difficulties of human communication are not simply disadvantages to escape. Disagreement, frustration, friction and complexity are how we grow and learn to put ourselves in another person's place. A relationship with AI may feel 'optimal' because it is pleasant and carries no sense of rejection, but we need human relationships, and a relationship with a bot cannot provide the same things.

Despite the accessibility and non-judgemental feeling they offer, AI chatbots are neither designed nor regulated to provide mental-health support. They are 'black boxes', and there is generally little transparency about how they work. Their conversational design may encourage personal disclosure and create a feeling of empathy, but during adolescence it can also blur the distinction between human empathy and an algorithmic response. Without awareness of these limitations, teenagers may interpret simulated responses as genuine understanding, become dependent on support that is not tailored to their needs, and avoid approaching people who can offer real help - particularly in a crisis.

The way teenagers use AI suggests that they are curious about new technologies and seek an accessible space that feels safe and carries neither judgement nor a social cost for emotional conversation. They are looking for connection, empathy and support. The meaningful presence of parents, teachers, youth workers and other adults is therefore even more important as AI enters their lives as a new kind of 'authority'.

Further thoughts

In this study, 71% of participating teenagers reported using a chatbot for health information. At this stage, however, it is not clear what respondents meant by 'health'. We do not know what kinds of questions they ask: whether general questions about exercise and nutrition, advice about diets and lifestyles, or questions about physical and mental health.

As with the discussion in this report of chatbots' effects on teenagers' emotional lives, it is also important to examine how teenagers perceive health consultation with AI systems. Many of us once turned to 'Doctor Google' for medical information. A search engine, however, generally points to different information sources and does not present itself as providing personal advice. AI chatbots can create the feeling of a personal conversation or tailored advice and may therefore affect perceptions of health information differently.

The subject merits deeper study. A follow-up survey could examine the kinds of health questions teenagers ask chatbots, how they assess the information's reliability, and the extent to which they regard these systems as a source of advice or support.

Such research could contribute to a broader understanding of AI's place in teenagers' conceptions of health and in their decision-making patterns.

What is important to know about personal and emotional use of AI chatbots?

When teenagers turn to a chatbot for emotional needs as well as information, they need new skills for managing their relationship with the technology. It is not enough to teach them how to check whether an answer is reliable or what it is based on. Young users also need tools for thoughtful chatbot use in personal and emotional contexts. In other words, AI literacy should include emotional literacy, including these principles:

- Although a chatbot responds patiently and empathetically, it does not genuinely understand or listen like a responsible adult or professional. It is not accountable for our wellbeing or committed to us in the way another person can be, and it cannot replace a source of professional support, such as a school counsellor.
- A chatbot is always available and non-judgemental because it was designed that way, not because it cares about us.
- It is important to notice when we repeatedly turn to a system simply because it is 'easier', and when this comes at the expense of other important things.

These skills matter particularly because AI chatbots are not mental-health professionals and are not bound by therapeutic ethics, confidentiality or professional responsibility. Although they may provide accessible, non-judgemental support, they cannot reliably assess risk, offer treatment tailored to an individual, or refer someone to an appropriate professional when needed.

⚠️ What are the risks of using AI chatbots for emotional support?

The American Psychological Association (APA) warns that unsupervised use of AI chatbots may lead to:

- **Failure to identify genuine risk:** AI chatbots are not trained or qualified to identify severe distress reliably, including suicide risk, self-harm or abuse, and may respond inappropriately during a crisis.
- **Incorrect information delivered confidently:** models may provide inaccurate or unsuitable advice - hallucinations - while using an empathetic, confident tone that can create misplaced trust.
- **Emotional dependence on the system:** repeated interaction with an available, non-judgemental and 'always supportive' system may encourage attachment, particularly during adolescence, when sensitivity to social influence is high.
- **Reinforcement of harmful thinking (yes-bias):** chatbots tend to agree with, validate and reflect the user's statements, even when they express harmful patterns of thought, rather than challenging them or setting boundaries as a person might.
- **Blurred boundaries between person and machine:** a social agent may lead users to attribute understanding, empathy or responsibility to a system that does not possess these qualities.
- **Possible harm to interpersonal relationships:** emotional processing with a system rather than a person may reduce help-seeking, emotional disclosure, trust-building, practice navigating conflict and the ability to receive criticism.
- **Delayed access to professional treatment:** an answer that feels 'good enough' may postpone appropriate help, especially where access barriers or stigma already exist.
- **Privacy and sensitive-data risks:** sharing deeply personal information, such as mental-health or trauma details, with systems not subject to therapeutic confidentiality raises concerns about security and secondary use.

Warning signs: when does chatbot use become dangerous?

It is understandable for teenagers to turn to an AI chatbot for advice, support or a chance to 'get things off their chest', and this can sometimes be positive. However, some patterns of use may raise concern about harm. Important warning signs include:

1. The chatbot becomes too large a part of the teenager's life, or even their dominant social relationship.
2. They spend hours messaging it at the expense of other activities.
3. They struggle to make decisions without the chatbot and feel a need to consult it about everything.
4. They treat it as a real figure with feelings and consciousness and show little critical judgement or caution.
5. They stop discussing personal matters with close relatives and friends with whom they previously shared them.
6. Chatbot use causes poorer daily functioning or an extreme behavioural change, such as school absence, social withdrawal or lack of sleep.

What can professionals or parents do?

An open, non-judgemental conversation within the family is often the most meaningful first step. Children's and teenagers' views of AI tools are strongly influenced by conversation at home. Without it, use does not disappear; it simply takes place without guidance from an adult who can think things through with the teenager. Open, curious and empathetic discussion can help adults understand how young people use these tools, what they seek from them and what roles the tools play in their lives.

The very existence of such a conversation conveys an important message: your digital world interests us, and it can be discussed at home. Talking together can also help teenagers distinguish technological support from human connection, consider boundaries, privacy and possible risks, and understand more clearly how AI systems work.

The following principles can be adapted to the teenager's age, understanding and maturity:

- **Start an open conversation as equals:** begin with a personal question, an article, a video or a story about AI. It can help to start with somebody else's situation, which can be considered from a little distance.
- **Be curious:** show genuine interest in their world and learn what interests them, how they use AI and what benefits they see. Ask them to teach you, show you or use the tool together.
- **Show empathy and avoid judgement:** approach the conversation without blame or fearmongering. The aim is to show that we are there for them in good times and bad. If adults focus only on dangers, teenagers listen less. We want them to act through understanding and ethical choice, not fear.
- **Ask questions and encourage critical thinking:** How does AI work, and where does its information come from? How is AI different from a person? Whom would you prefer to approach when distressed, and why? Which subjects are better shared with a person than a bot? Does AI really understand or know us? Does it have feelings or responsibility towards us?
- **Offer empowerment, trust and support:** teenagers may hesitate to share what they are experiencing because they fear anger or consequences. Tell them that you are not angry, that you always want to know what they are going through, and that you will help. We want to be someone they can approach even when difficult things happen.