Is AI coming for your kids?

By Glenn Harlan Reynolds

I saw this the other day, shared by a friend on Facebook. I think it's cool.

Just watched my 5-year-old son chat with ChatGPT advanced voice mode for over 45 minutes.

It started with a question about how cars were made.

It explained it in a way that he could understand.

He started peppering it with questions.

Then he told it about his teacher, and that he was learning to count.

ChatGPT started quizzing him on counting, and egging him on, making it into a game.

He was laughing and having a blast, and it (obviously) never lost patience with him.

I think this is going to be revolutionary. The essentially free, infinitely patient, super genius teacher that calibrates itself perfectly to your kid's learning style and pace.

Excited about the future.

9:36 AM · Nov 15, 2024 · **11.9M** Views

But it also made me think about something I wrote here last year: *Meet Your New, Lovable AI Buddy.* I expected this prediction to come true soon, but it's happening very fast.

I wrote:

What if the real threat isn't that AI is super smart and kind of demonic? What if it's just kind of smart but super cute?

Maybe instead of worrying about [existential AI risk,](#) we should be worrying about something very different.

I'm imagining a world where everyone has a personal AI assistant. Perhaps you've had it for years; perhaps eventually people will have them from childhood. It knows all about you, and it just wants to make you happy and help you enjoy your life. It takes care of chores and schedules and keeping track of things, it orders ahead for you at restaurants, it smooths your way through traffic or airports, maybe it even communicates with other AI assistants to hook you up with suitable romantic partners. (Who knows what you like better?) Perhaps it's on your phone, or in a wristband, talking to you via airpods or something like that.

This is what I was thinking about when [I wrote:](#) "I kind of think the global ruling class wants all of us to have friendly, helpful, even lovable AI buddies who'll help us, and tell us things, but who will also operate within carefully controlled, non-transparent boundaries." . . .

Would people become attached? Probably. When my daughter was in elementary/middle school she was very into [Neopets](#), a site that let you create your own synthetic online virtual pets. If you didn't tend to them, they got sick and sad.   Before that, millions of kids doted on [Tamagotchis,](#) the little gadgets displaying creatures that had to be fed and played with or they wilted and eventually died. By modern standards these were highly primitive, but not too primitive to inspire affection and even devotion. (And of course, humans have long gotten attached even to inanimate objects, like boats or cars.) And recent research at Duke found that kids [anthromorphize](#) robots like Alexa and Roomba: "A new study from Duke developmental psychologists asked kids just that, as well as how smart and sensitive they thought the smart speaker

Alexa was compared to its floor-dwelling cousin Roomba, an autonomous vacuum. Four- to eleven-year-olds judged Alexa to have more human-like thoughts and emotions than Roomba. But despite the perceived difference in intelligence, kids felt neither the Roomba nor the Alexa deserve to be yelled at or harmed. . . .

But. Underneath the cuteness there would be guardrails, and nudges, built in. Ask it sensitive questions and you'll get carefully filtered answers with just enough of the truth to be plausible, but still misleading. Express the wrong political views and it might act sad, or disappointed. Try to attend a disapproved political event and it might cry, sulk, or even — Tamagotchi-like — "die." Maybe it would really die, with no reset, after plaintively telling you you were killing it. Maybe eventually you wouldn't be able to get another if that happened.

It wouldn't just be trained to emotionally connect with humans, it would be trained to emotionally manipulate humans. And it would have a big database of experience to work from in short order.

Well, ChatGPT isn't quite what I describe above, but reading the post, it's looking pretty close.

ChatGPT isn't specifically designed to manipulate kids (its terms of use say it's only for 13 years and older), but it *is* designed to manipulate people. It returns politically [biased](#) answers to queries from adults, and while it will presumably be reasonably straightforward in teaching counting, the likelihood that it won't be turned into an indoctrination system for children once such applications become common seems low. Certainly every other educational system in our society seems to have been turned into indoctrination, and our tech lords' enthusiasm for playing things straight down the middle appears insufficient.

The thing is, though, this sort of human/machine interaction is very appealing, and often even addictive. If these platforms exist, kids are going to use them. So what to do?

People on the right — that is, people within the mainstream of U.S. popular opinion — should find their own AI platforms. Grok is one that exists now. It might also be useful to come up with a testing and certification protocol that would let parents know which platforms are least likely to indoctrinate their kids with undesirable propaganda. There are already [research protocols](#) for that that could be expanded.

Limiting kids' exposure to screen time (or in the case of voice access, talk time) might help too, but in fact, as the illustration at the beginning indicates, this can be a powerful teaching tool for kids. Parents may not want to sacrifice that, and policing kids' access to screens is increasingly difficult as computers are everywhere.

But mostly I just noted that the world is moving closer to the soft-dystopian scenario I predicted back in 2023, and thought it worth pointing out. Your thoughts on how to respond in the comments will be welcome.

First published in [Glenn's Substack](#)