

One rainy Tuesday evening, Gabrielle H., 15, opened her ongoing conversation with ChatGPT. *What should I wear to homecoming? The theme is Met Gala*, she typed. Within seconds, outfit ideas appeared on her screen, complete with dress colors, styles and accessories. It was faster than any of her friends could have replied via text and, tbh, “the selects were pretty solid,” says Gabrielle.

This wasn’t the first time Gabrielle had turned to ChatGPT for the kind of tips she might usually seek from friends or family—for help navigating tricky situations.

A few weeks earlier, her bestie asked for dating advice. “My friend had been hanging out with this guy for a while, and she wanted to end it in a kind way. I’d never broken up with anyone, so I asked Chat for some ideas on how she could do it. It gave some good examples,” Gabrielle shares.

Artificial intelligence apps like ChatGPT and Gemini are built to understand and respond like humans, often seeming to have all the right answers. And unlike people, AI responds ASAP.

If you wanted to, you could talk to it all day, asking it what you should make for lunch, what kind of flirty text to send to your crush or to quiz you on algebra.

And plenty of teens do: According to a new study by Common Sense Media, more than 70% of teens have used tools like ChatGPT and Gemini, and half of teens use them regularly.

But even though these chatbots may sound like people, it’s important to remember that they’re actually...not. And as more of us rely on AI to navigate life’s big (and small) challenges, knowing exactly when—and how—you should be engaging bots is key. It can mean the difference between getting guidance that’s helpful...or surprisingly harmful. To help make sense of AI, we asked the IRL experts to break it down.

YOU NEED HELP WITH YOUR HOMEWORK.

Use AI? YES. While copying and pasting an AI-generated essay is never a good idea (that’s plagiarism, FYI), a chatbot can be a superb study buddy.

AI ethicist Catharina Doria says to think of it as a tool. It can be terrific at tutoring—breaking down concepts you’ve covered in class but are still struggling to understand.

Confused about the Krebs cycle? Ask ChatGPT to walk you through it step by step, then generate 10 practice Q’s to make sure you’re crystal clear before your biology quiz.

AI can also help you save time. Say you have an essay due for English class. Gemini can help you narrow down your topic ideas and draft an initial outline.

Bots are also awesome at creating personalized study plans and assignment to-do lists. Working on a group project? You can ask ChatGPT to map out everything your team needs to prep, complete with suggested deadlines.

The key is using AI to enhance your learning and productivity—not to take the easy way out.

YOU ARE FEELING VERY DEPRESSED AND WANT SOMEONE TO TALK TO.

Use AI? NO. No matter how convincing they sound, bots aren’t qualified to give advice about complex human emotions.

Jasmine A., 13, says she’s asked AI for tips on calming her nerves before a big class presentation. But she stops short of asking for help with anything more serious.

Dr. Ritu Goel, an adolescent psychiatrist, says this is exactly the right approach. It’s OK for general suggestions (think: “What are three strategies I can use when I get nervous about public speaking?”), but for anything that’s really bothering you, it’s important to talk to a real person.

Chatbots pull information from all across the internet. That means the advice you’re getting could come from a trained professional—or just some random person on Reddit.

The fact is, the information AI provides can be completely inaccurate and, in some situations, even dangerous (as recent court filings suggesting a link between AI and self-harm have shown).

Dr. Goel emphasizes that talking to chatbots about your problems can never replace talking to a parent, therapist,

teacher, guidance counselor or another trusted adult. These people actually care about you—unlike AI.

YOU WANT HELP LOSING WEIGHT.

Use AI? NO. While chatbots can be helpful for general wellness tips (like ideas for high-protein snacks or healthier menu swaps at Starbucks), AI should *never* replace advice from a trained dietitian or medical doctor.

Think about it: Everyone’s body is different. A bot doesn’t have your personal health records, family history or body composition, so it can’t give guidance that’s truly tailored to you.

“If you ask for diet or exercise advice, what it tells you may not be appropriate for your age or goals, which is why you need to ask someone who is actually trained,” Doria says.

Another thing to keep in mind: Chatbots don’t always update their data in real time, so there’s no way to verify that you’re getting the most current information. Just one more reason to turn to an actual professional.

YOU HAVE AN EMBARRASSING BODY Q.

Use AI? YES AND NO. Curious if nipple hair is normal? Worried about a weird bump near your vagina? For questions you don’t want to ask your parents, Doria recommends using Google instead of a chatbot. That way, you can check the sources and see where the information is coming from.

It definitely bears repeating: Insights from ChatGPT and Gemini aren’t always accurate or pulled from leading experts—and do you really want to take health cues from some random forum?

Just like you wouldn’t trust a stranger on the bus with your mental, physical or emotional health, be cautious about the advice you get from AI.

YOU WANT TO TEXT YOUR CRUSH BUT DON’T KNOW WHAT TO SAY.

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