

Human Connection in the Age of AI:

Reclaiming Agency in Education

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About me

A systems designer working at the intersection of :

1. Mental health,
2. Education and,
3. Technology,

focusing on how we support young people navigating systems that were not built with them in mind.

Rithm Project?

An initiative fostering human connection and authentic relationships for young people in the age of AI.

Why this conversation

Exploring how shifting youth landscapes impact places of learning and the work of educators.



Anchor for today's session:

Human connection in the age of AI is not a soft skill, it is the foundation of how we learn, lead, and make decisions.

Yet young people are more disconnected than ever

1 in 5

22% of high schoolers considered suicide in 2021. 4 in 10 experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.

2x

Young adults report 2x the levels of loneliness than senior citizens —despite this group being the most socially isolated.

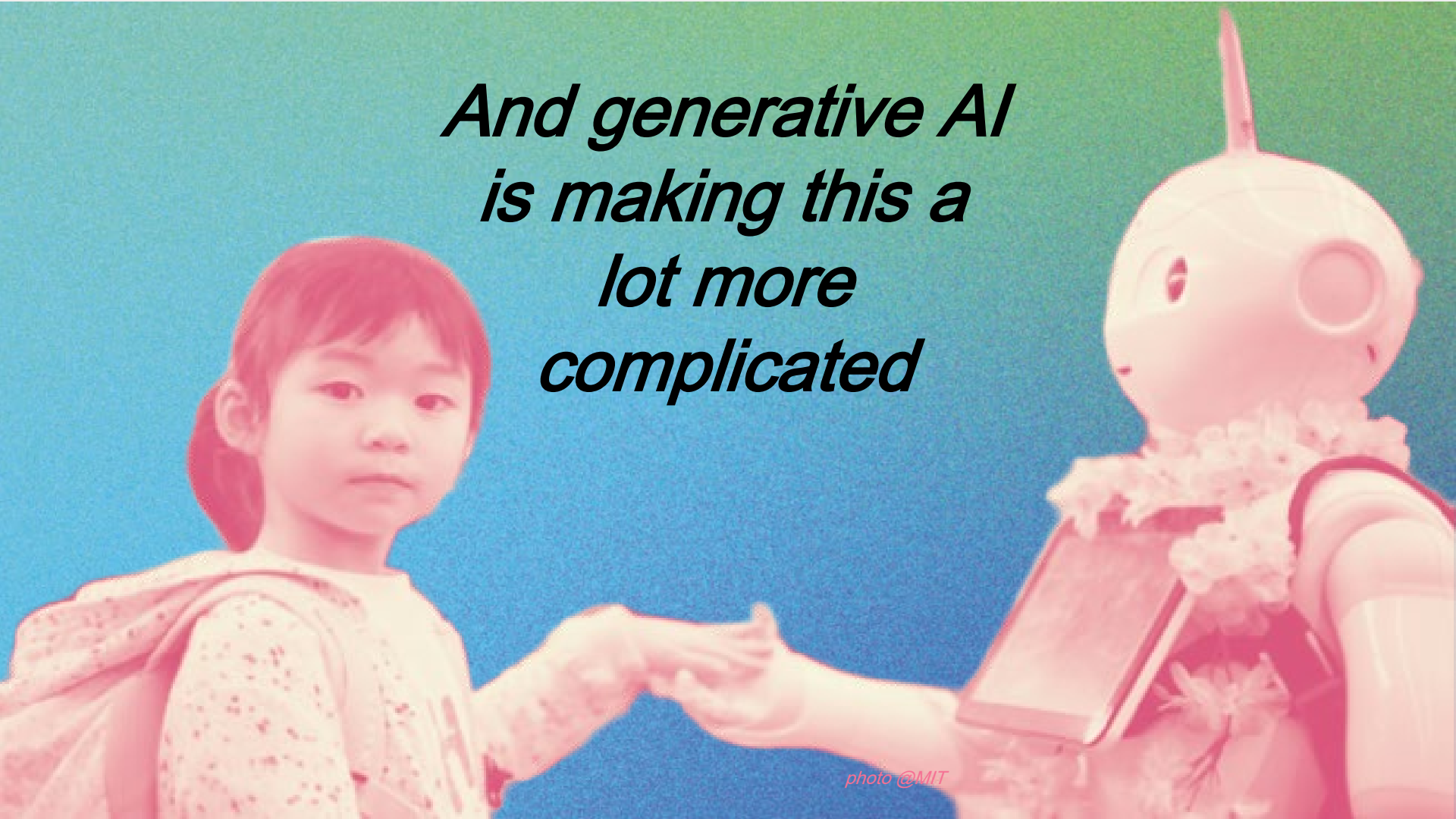
20%

Social interaction with friends dropped 20% for 12th graders (from 2.5 times/week in 2012, the first year most teens had smartphones, to fewer than 2 times/week).



Sources: Jean M. Twenge, CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary and Trends Report (2011–2021), Loneliness in America: How the Pandemic Has Deepened an Epidemic of Loneliness.

*And generative AI
is making this a
lot more
complicated*



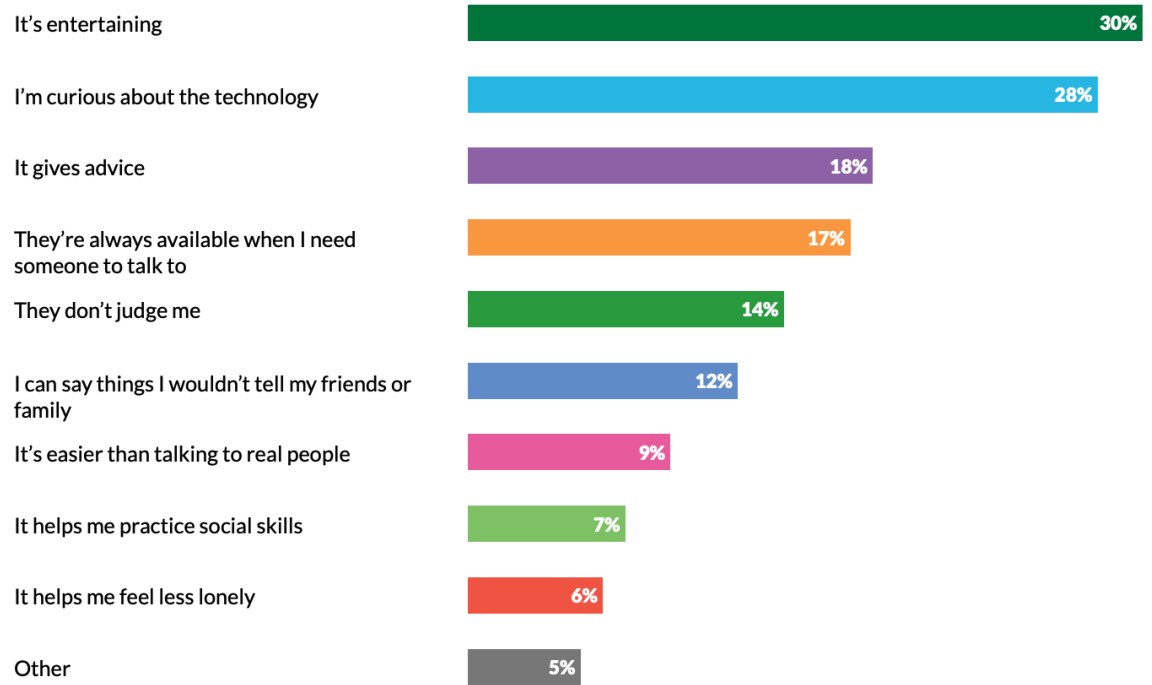
72% of teens have
used AI for
relational
purposes.

52% are regular
users.

*And often for
understandable
reasons.*

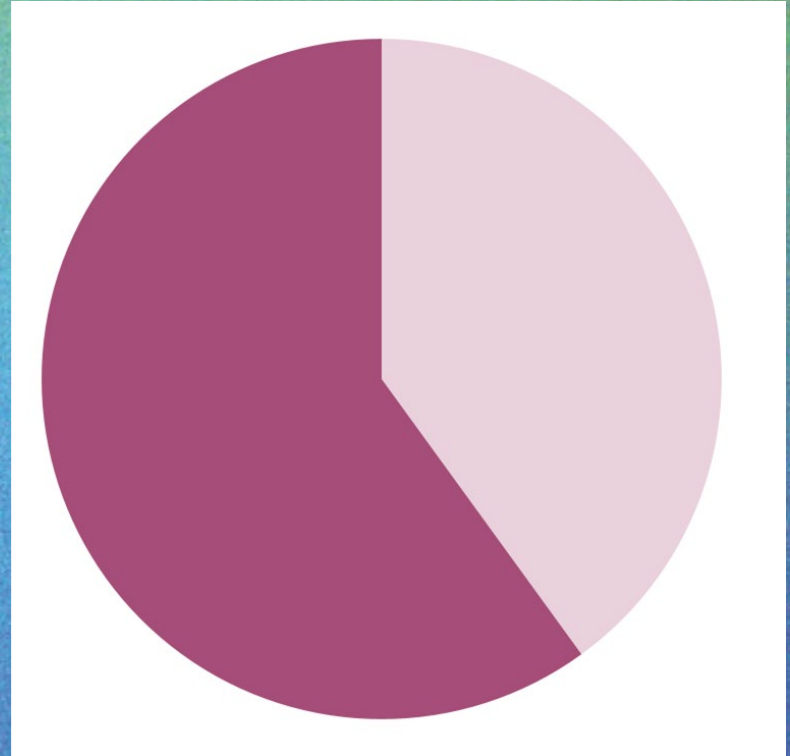
Figure C: What AI users use AI companions for.

Base: Uses AI companions (n=758) • Select up to 3 responses



**Young people are experimenting
on their own.**

60% of youth report their
parents/ guardians know
“little to nothing” about
their AI use.

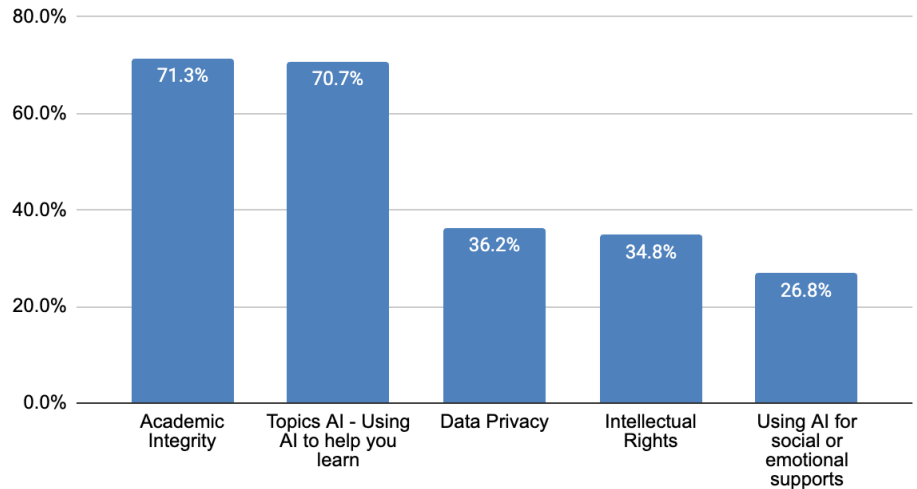


Sneak peak at early findings

And when adults are talking to young people about AI, the convo is...

1. Largely about academics and cheating.
2. Feels judgmental and fearful.
3. Reveals that adults aren't savvy about these tools either.

Topics about AI adults have talked about



Research shows that relationships are essential for students and societies to thrive



EDUCATION

Connected youth are more resilient and perform better academically (Search Institute).



WELLBEING

The impact of social disconnection is similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Harvard).



EMPLOYMENT

Social capital is critical to careers but is deeply inequitable. Human skills will become critical in the age of AI (Clay Christensen, JFF).



DEMOCRACY

Fraying connection fuels polarization, with fewer than 30% of Americans feeling they can “reliably trust other Americans” – an all-time low (Pew).

Social and relational skills are not “soft.” They are becoming the "hard edge" of human intelligence.

Strong social skills have been more important than mathematical skills to labour market success in recent years

Trends in employment and real wages, split by relative importance of mathematical and social skills in the job (index, 1980 = 100)



Sources: American Community Survey; O*Net; [The Growing Importance of Social Skills in the Labor Market \(Deming, 2017\)](#)
FT graphic: John Burn-Murdoch / @jburnmurdoch
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Someone with high social skills + low math now outperforms someone with low social skills + high math.

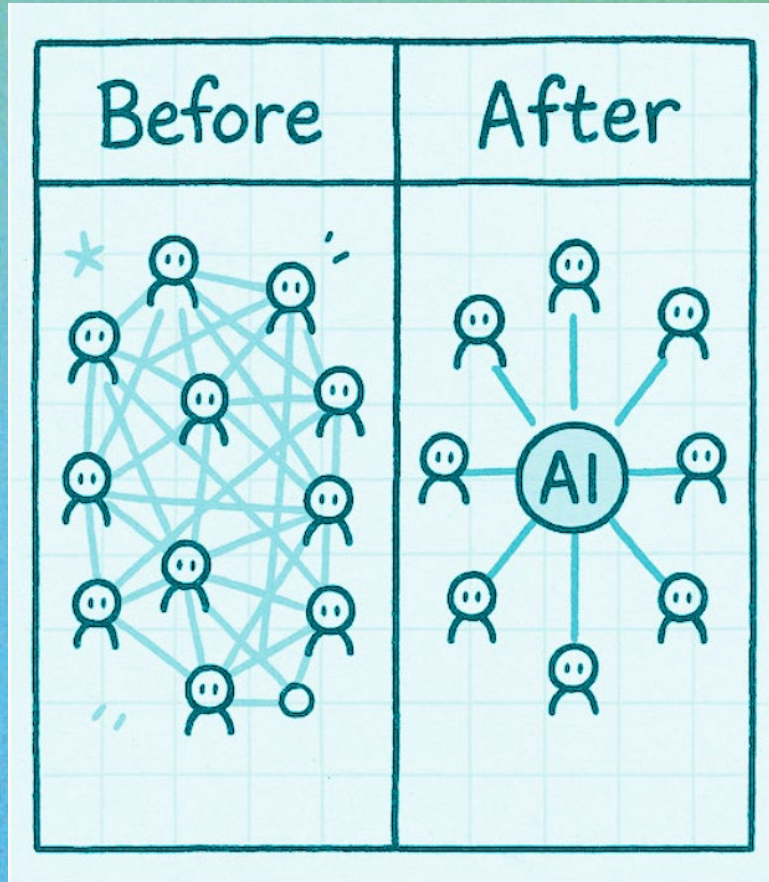
AI is blurring our notions of
relational trust,
shifting our sense of what is
“real” and *“authentic.”*

Models are built on biased data.

This deepens inequities in who gets to be represented *accurately & in asset based* ways.



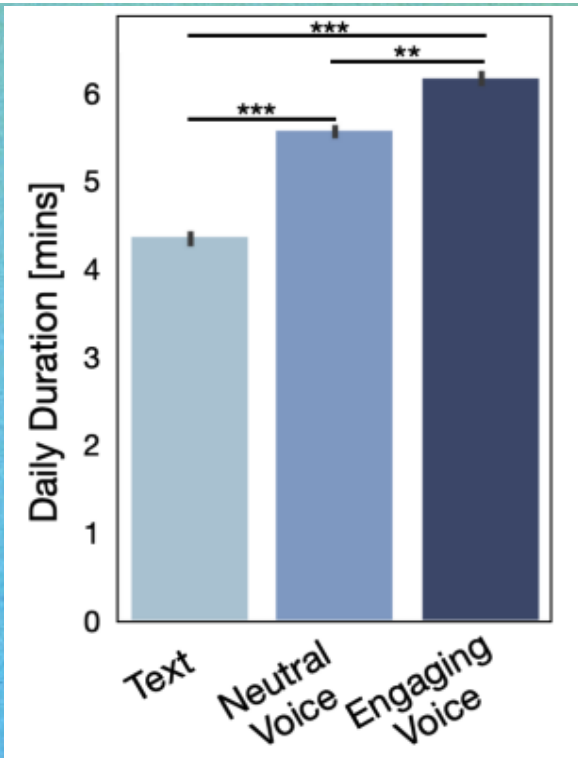
We are moving from building
relationships *through* technology,
to building relationships *with*
technology itself.



47% of students who use AI for personal and relational purposes told us that they are *turning to AI more than to people* when they're upset or alone*.

*sometimes, often, all the time"

Modality Text Neutral Voice Engaging Voice

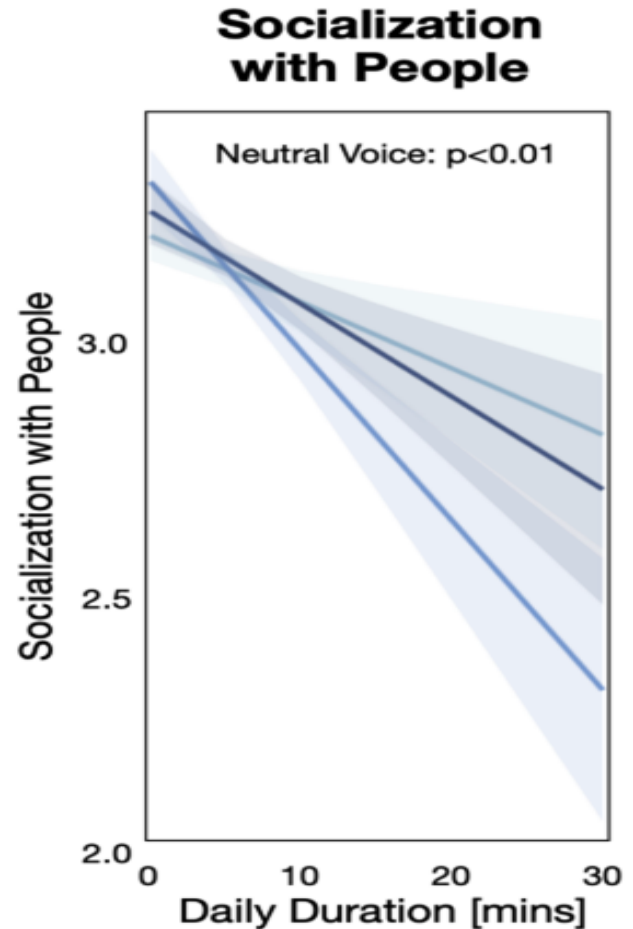


Design choices shape usage.

Using Voice modes resulted in more time spent on ChatGPT, per day...

...and less time spent
socializing with people in real
life.

Soon AI will have even more
ways to personalize its
responses.



What might this mean for places of learning?

1

Redesign schools to develop relational intelligence *alongside* academic mastery.

2

Develop students as critical consumers and producers of AI

3

Prepare educators to lead curious, non-judgmental conversations about relational AI.

4

Grow the research that reflects how young people are truly using AI, and how it's shaping their lives.

The AI Effect

Let's
play!



DIRECTIONS

You'll need:

- 3 Pink “Opinion Cards” (Supports, Erodes, It Depends)
- 3 Blue “Use Case Cards”

Game Play: (10 min)

- Read your blue cards. Select the one you think is “juiciest” for discussion.
- Choose one person to go first. They play their selected blue card.
- Countdown: 3 -2- 1. All reveal their “opinion card”
- Discuss! Mine for dissenting views in the group to foster deeper learning
- Play as many rounds as time permits.

Talking to an AI
preserved version of
a beloved deceased
relative or ancestor.

SUPPORTS

Human connection

ERODES

Human connection

IT DEPENDS

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What struck you from your conversations?

Two people allow their AI agents to “talk things out” after a fight before they re-engage in person.

You and your best friend sync your AI agents to help coordinate plans, share updates, and keep your friendship “on track.”

Using AI that tracks your emotions and translates them into visual art that others can see (like a public “mood ring”).

The
Rithm
Project

IT
DEPENDS

ERODE
HUMAN CONNECTION

SUPPORT
HUMAN CONNECTION



WHAT WE CAN DO NOW

Immediate Action

What leaders can implement immediately

1. Equip your teams with shared language + frameworks (decks, facilitation tools)
2. Invest in research that reflects real student behavior, not assumptions
3. Deploy practical toolkits that help students navigate AI and relationships in real time

WHAT WE CAN DO NOW

At the System Level

(What must be built intentionally)

1. Design learning environments that develop relational intelligence alongside academic mastery
2. Build systems that treat human connection as infrastructure, not enrichment
3. Integrate AI in ways that strengthen human relationships, not replace them

We are not teaching AI.
We are reframing what it means to be
human in an AI world.