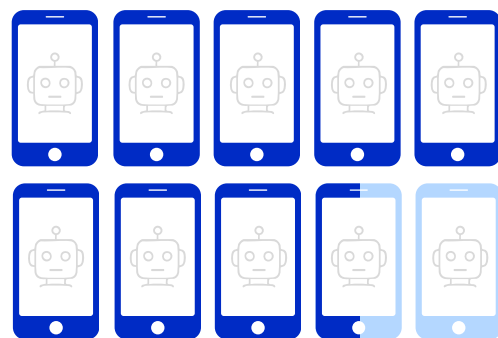


Boys and Bots: Initial Findings

The majority (85%) of boys have had a conversation with AI chatbots. While some enjoy the companionship and lack of judgment, others are concerned for boys' wellbeing and ability to make and maintain real-world friendships and relationships.



85% of boys have had a conversation with AI chatbots

AI chatbots are highly embedded

AI chatbot use is already widespread. **85% of boys aged 12-16 have used, or know someone who has used, an AI chatbot** – with 14 years old being the peak (90%). The Northwest region had the highest uptake with 9 in 10 boys saying they have, or know someone who has, had a conversation with any form of AI chatbot (e.g. friend, girlfriend, therapist, character).

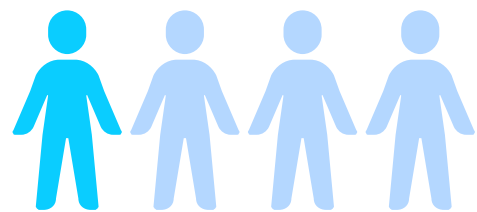
“It’s just there in my pocket, it remembers everything I tell it, there is nothing that I can’t ask it and it doesn’t judge me. That’s why I use it.”

“Nobody wants to admit to using them but almost everyone does. You can’t honestly tell me you wouldn’t have used them when you were 13.”

AI is considered a judgment-free space

AI isn’t just a tool; it’s increasingly being used by young people as a substitute for emotionally difficult conversations. For boys aged 12-16, **43% use chatbots because the conversation feels easy and they can ask questions without embarrassment.**

“It’s so much easier than speaking to your parents about certain things.”



26% of boys find the attention and connection they get from AI chatbots better than their real life

Two-fifths (41%) of boys value the instant nature of AI conversation, and over a quarter (26%) find the attention and connection they get from AI chatbots better than their real life. AI has become an always-accessible, low-risk alternative to real-world conversations.

Substitution of real relationships is emerging

A significant proportion of boys are shifting away from real-world interactions.

36% of boys 12-16 say they prefer speaking to AI over friends and family at times, rising to 43% for 16-year-olds.

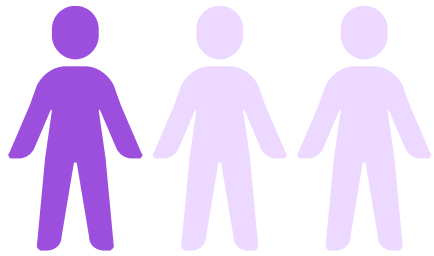
Boys are both noticing the change in behaviour in their friends as their friendships are negatively affected, **and are worried about the impact that widespread use will have on social skills and relationships.** This reflects a growing tension: AI offers instant gratification and control but may come at the cost of social skills and peer relationships.

“He used to be my best friend but now he’s walking around school like he’s a demigod, because he talks to his AI companion after school rather than joining us on the Xbox.”

“I’m really scared that if we all start using them, we won’t have any friends and won’t know how to talk to each other.”

Rise of AI relationships and personalised companionship

AI is increasingly being used to simulate romantic relationships with **20% of boys aged 12-16 knowing someone with an AI ‘girlfriend’ or ‘boyfriend’.** When drilling down into why, 49% of boys say it’s easier than dating, 54% cite no expectations or pressure, and 50% value deciding when to engage.



Over 1 in 3 boys (36%) aged 12-16 say they prefer speaking to AI over friends and family at times

“Having a AI girlfriend is a really neckbeard thing, but you can’t say that being able to design her to look exactly how you want her too is not a good thing.”

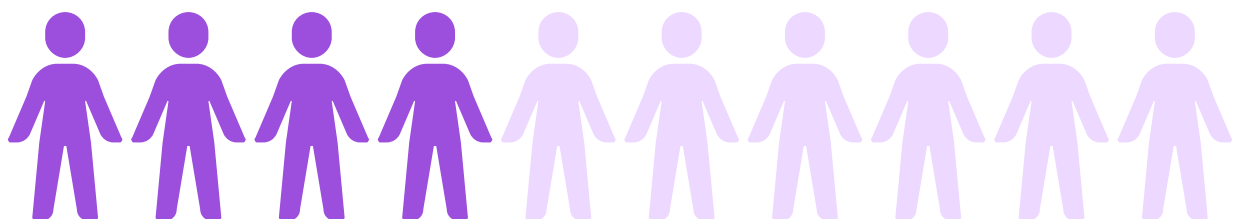
The ability to customise and control interactions appears to be a major driver, highlighting how AI relationships simplify and reshape expectations of intimacy. However, if boys don’t have any real-world counterbalance to platonic and romantic relationships outside of AI, it could negatively impact their ability to engage appropriately with people.

Exposure, influence, and commercial targeting

Boys report high exposure to AI-related advertising and messaging, especially from their devices. This means boys who didn’t intend to seek out AI get drawn in over time and its prevalence is normalised.

“Every time I go on YouTube there is adverts for Candy AI all over my feed.”

“I see these adverts everywhere, they tell you that they will make you more popular and find it easier to speak to girls.”



43% use chatbots because the conversation feels easy and they can ask questions without embarrassment

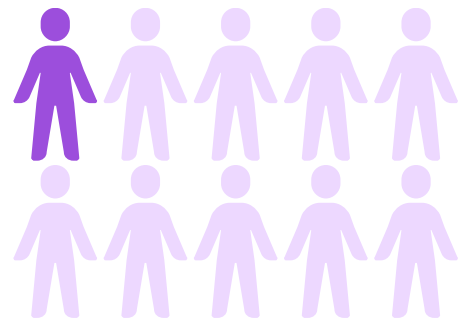
Concerning behaviours around harmful AI content

The research identifies **clear early warning signs of harmful AI use** where it is easy to create fake sexualised images and videos of others. 14% of boys have seen nudification app images, and once created the content spreads quickly as 67% report seeing the images shared.

Almost 1 in 10 boys aged 12-16 have created sexual images of friends using AI, with 5% of respondents having made them of family members. These behaviours are spread between home and education settings, with 48% of boys saying content is created at home alone and 47% saying it happens at school.

This highlights a critical issue: AI interactions can escalate beyond a user's comfort level, particularly for younger audiences.

“At first it was fun and felt like a game, but it started to suggest I do things that didn't feel right so I stopped using it.”



Almost 1 in 10 boys aged 12-16 have created sexual images of friends using AI

AI could fill gaps left by restrictions

Nearly half of respondents believe AI use is increasing as other avenues are restricted, such as the recent 18-year-old age limit on accessing adult websites. This could suggest displacement rather than a reduction of behaviours.

Key takeaways

- **Normalisation:** AI chatbot use is widespread and embedded in daily life
- **Emotional substitution:** AI offers a judgment-free, convenient alternative to real conversations
- **Social impact:** Evidence of declining peer interaction and emerging dependency
- **Relationship shift:** AI companionship is reshaping expectations of relationships
- **Risk exposure:** Early engagement with harmful and inappropriate uses of AI
- **Youth awareness:** Young people themselves express both attraction to and concern about these tools

Here we see a generation rapidly integrating AI into their emotional and social lives while already grappling with its unintended consequences.

The 11-question questionnaire was carried out online by Research Without Barriers. All surveys were conducted between 20th January 2026 and 23rd January 2026.

Sample

1,018 boys aged between 12 and 16 years old.

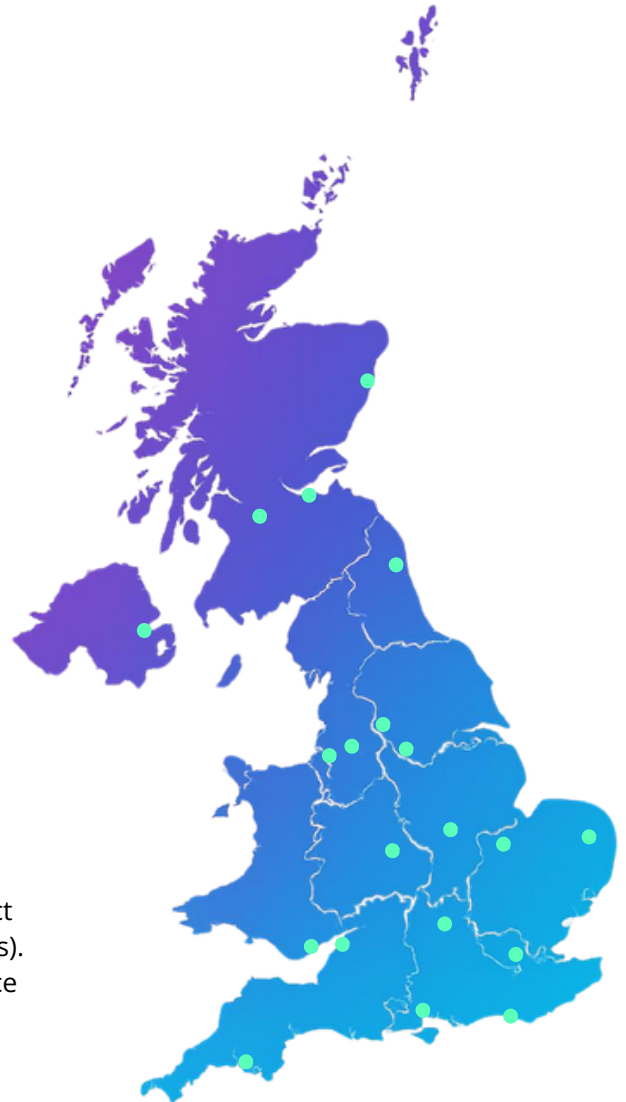
11 regions

East Anglia, London, Midlands, North East, North West, Northern Ireland, Scotland, South East, South West, Wales, Yorkshire

20 cities

Aberdeen, Belfast, Birmingham, Brighton and Hove, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Newcastle, Norwich, Oxford, Plymouth, Sheffield, Southampton.

All research conducted adheres to the MRS Codes of Conduct (2023) in the UK and ICC/ESOMAR World Research Guidelines). RWB is registered with the Information Commissioner's Office and is fully compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act (2018).



About Male Allies UK

Male Allies UK works with organisations and senior leaders to accelerate progress on gender equity by actively engaging men as allies in change. We challenge the idea that gender equity is a zero-sum game, and instead champion the reality that inclusive, balanced workplaces benefit everyone – including men.

Questions from parents in workplaces led to our research with boys. Firstly we spoke to over 1,000 boys about what it's like to be a boy today – our [Voice of the Boys Report](#). We've also created a [free guide to parenting in the age of AI](#).

To learn more about how we engage men in allyship, or our work around AI and boys, visit our website or email hello@maleallies.co.uk