WHAT TEENS ARE SAYING ABOUT AI — *RIGHT NOW*
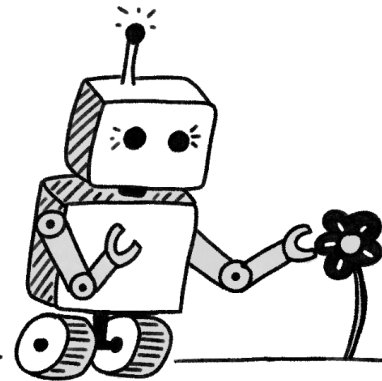
Ten timely insights from our youth advisors to help adults stay in step.

AI IS GOING THROUGH A LOT. Every day, new milestones, new mistakes, new surprises. Just when we think we have it figured out, it changes again. A bit like adolescence, don't you think?

Caring adults—from living rooms to classrooms—are already juggling the complexities of social media. Then, along comes generative AI. It's not just lapping other technologies. It's running an entirely different race. **A recent Gallup poll shows nearly half of Gen Z use generative AI weekly**. This surge is hard to ignore.

At the Center for Digital Thriving, we believe that **meeting this moment means listening to teens**—not just through data or headlines, but through their own stories and experiences. **Because *the details matter.***

In a study with Hopelab and Common Sense last year, we asked 1,500 teens what adults should know about AI. One 17-year-old's response stays with us: "It listens." This brief insight reflects something important about how teens relate to technology in deeply personal ways – and it reminds us why **adults need to listen better than even the best bots.**

This Youth Advisory Memo shares **ten fresh insights on generative AI**, heard directly from our teen advisors. It surfaces the nuanced realities of how AI shows up in their lives—from school (spoiler: it's not just about cheating) to fashion choices and beyond.

WE DON'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS. But by listening closely, we can ask better questions – and better support young people as we all experience the growing pains of living and (we hope!) thriving with AI.

– THE CENTER FOR DIGITAL THRIVING TEAM

THE CENTER FOR DIGITAL THRIVING is a research and innovation center at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Our mission is to create knowledge and research-based resources that help young people thrive in a tech-filled world. We're committed to translational science that helps educators meet the moment; we're proudly based at Project Zero, which has a long history of supporting teachers with powerful tools that enrich learners' thinking, understanding, and well-being. Visit us at centerfordigitalthriving.org or get in touch.

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TEN FRESH INSIGHTS ON GENERATIVE AI
FROM OUR TEEN ADVISORS

This Spring, our team at the Center for Digital Thriving continued exploring what teens think adults should know about their experiences with generative AI. Here are 10 things we heard that we think you should hear, too.

SCHOOL + LEARNING **1**

OUTSOURCING TEACHING

WHAT WE HEARD: "My AP calc teacher … he's very judgmental and his teaching style doesn't work with anybody. If you ask him questions, he'll literally flip out on you and act like you're stupid or like you weren't paying attention … **SO SOMETIMES IT'S EASIER TO, YOU KNOW, ASK AI**. I remember the question or write it down [in class] and then later … I'll ask AI to help me understand."

WHAT WE WONDER: Many adults assume teens are simply outsourcing their *learning*, but when and why might they be outsourcing *teaching*? When it comes to AI and school work, we've been hearing a lot of knee-jerk judgment from adults. But our conversations with teens have us curious about what motivates teens' different uses of AI related to school and learning – because it isn't just about cheating.

SCHOOL + LEARNING **2**

GUILTY UNTIL PROVEN HUMAN

WHAT WE HEARD: "One of my friends, she wrote an essay and the teacher runs all our essays through one of these AI checker things … It got scanned 75% positive for AI or something, even though she wrote it all herself … So she talked to the teacher and the teacher understood, but [my friend] did have to change her essay, like, significantly … because it was for an AP seminar class. I think the teacher didn't want her to get flagged for [cheating by the AP graders]. It was still pretty upsetting for her because she had spent all this time writing this whole essay and then **SHE HAD TO REDO IT EVEN THOUGH IT WAS HER OWN WORK**."

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WHAT WE WONDER: How are teachers managing new AI detection tools, and what dilemmas are they facing? For students, what are the impacts of false accusations of AI cheating? What does it mean for learning and assessment if students have to rewrite essays to avoid *seeming* bot-generated, even when their work is genuinely their own?

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS:

→ A New Headache for Honest Students: Proving They Didn't Use A.I. (Callie Holtermann at The New York Times)
→ Students Are Humanizing Their Writing–By Putting It Through AI (Julie Jargon at The Wall Street Journal)

A GLOWING RECOMMENDATION (COURTESY OF CHAT GPT)

WHAT WE HEARD: "I'VE HAD SEVERAL TEACHERS TELL ME THAT THEY'RE JUST GOING TO WRITE MY RECOMMENDATION LETTER WITH AI JUST TO SAVE THEM TIME … I would obviously prefer it if it wasn't written by AI. It's more authentic. I don't know [if AI] can sum up a personality or someone's, I guess, intelligence, willingness to learn …
[AI] doesn't know you on a personal level like a human does."

SOME ADDITIONAL CONTEXT: Teens in our advisory were conflicted about teachers using AI for recommendations. They were not uniformly opposed. Some voiced a sense that their teachers are overburdened and overworked, and they could see the value of AI – even as they grappled with the loss of authenticity. They also made distinctions between activities like teachers using AI for lesson planning versus using it for letter writing.

WHAT WE WONDER: Are adults talking out of both sides of our mouths? Is it fair to ask teens not to outsource tasks *we* see as important, while at the same time outsourcing tasks *they* see as important? More generally: how might AI-generated recommendations impact college admissions?

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS:

→ Students Found Out AI Will Help Read Their Names at Commencement. Protest Ensued (Taylor Swaak at The Chronicle of Higher Education)
→ Teachers Use This High Tech Hack to Knock Out Recommendation Letters (Alyson Klein at Education Week)

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CHEAT TO COMPETE?

WHAT WE HEARD: "I was always anti-AI because I thought it was better to do the work yourself and all that kind of stuff – and I still do – but I started learning that I was up against a lot of people that were using AI and cheating with AI. [Now], I use it to help advantage myself … just to get on the even playing field with other people. **AND I THINK THAT KIND OF SUCKS BECAUSE I NEVER WAS GOING TO USE AI TO CHEAT OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT, BUT NOW IT FEELS LIKE … I HAVE TO DO IT … TO MAKE SURE THAT, YOU KNOW, I'M NOT BEING LEFT BEHIND.**"

WHAT WE WONDER: Do teens feel pressure to use AI tools, even when they might not want to? In our [earlier research on "grind culture"](#) we learned that achievement pressure is felt by more than half of American teens. Now, [recent Pew data](#) shows that American teens are increasingly using ChatGPT and other generative AI tools for school work. As adults investigate these adoption curves, how can we identify pressures that push teens toward uses that are out of step with their instincts or values?

AI SKEWS THE CURVE

WHAT WE HEARD: "[AI] relieves the pressure in, like, math and science classes because it'll just [take] me through the process of how to do things, but then if it's an english class, it adds pressure because a lot of the people in my class use AI to write their papers. And **I FEEL LIKE I HAVE TO WRITE AT THE SAME LEVEL THAT AI DOES, WHICH I REALLY CAN'T AS, LIKE, A 17-YEAR-OLD.**"

WHAT WE WONDER: How is AI "skewing the curve" in different areas of life and learning? Where do we need new literacies to bridge emerging divides? In our current IMAGINE project, we're co-developing a [tool](#) to answer a related question: How can we help students think *with* their teachers about different uses of AI related to class assignments in ways that build habits of reflection, integrity, and intentionality around AI use?

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS:

→ [The Future of Math Class: How AI Could Transform Instruction](#)
(Arianna Prothero at EdWeek)
→ [Will the Humanities Survive Artificial Intelligence?](#)
(D. Graham Burnett at The New Yorker)

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THE BOT WILL SEE YOU NOW

WHAT WE HEARD: "I actually just went down the sickness rabbit hole, too, and it was really eye opening. And I actually didn't know this, but there's something like DoctorAI. **AND YOU TELL IT YOUR SYMPTOMS, AND IT'LL TELL YOU WHAT PERCENT CHANCE YOU ARE OF HAVING THE SICKNESS OR WHATEVER, WHICH IS VERY DANGEROUS FOR A PERSON LIKE ME** who thinks that every time I get sick, I'm going to have something really serious … You tell [the AI] your symptoms. And it'll ask extra questions like, you know, 'is there weakness or fatigue that you didn't mention or all that kind of stuff? And then it told me like there was like 40% of this, 40% chance of this, a 30% chance of this."

WHAT WE WONDER: When teens search for health information, what kinds of AI tools are they finding, and how can adults help them make thoughtful decisions about use of those tools? For the teen quoted above, what started as a simple search about symptoms led her to a chatbot that offered medical information. She kept expecting a login screen or paywall, but instead got a series of questions and then a set of potential diagnoses. We wonder how teens are making sense of the health information they receive from AI, and how this information impacts their health behaviors?

> **WHAT'S IN THE NEWS:**
>
> → [How Gen Z Uses the Internet to Self-Diagnose and Get Help](#)
> (Rebecca Ruiz at Mashable)
> → [Dr. Chatbot Will See You Now](#)
> (Teddy Rosenbluth at The New York Times)

AI INFLUENCERS

WHAT WE HEARD: "**YOUTUBERS WILL DO A CHARACTER.AI OF THEMSELVES** and talk to themselves and see what happens."

WE ALSO HEARD: "I have seen **YOUTUBERS CHAT WITH SPIDER-MAN CHARACTERS** … if it is not harming anyone, then what is the issue?"

WHAT WE WONDER: How will influencers shape teens' AI uses in ways that are helpful, harmful, or both? How might "AI streaming" support AI literacy? How might it be an on-ramp to risky behavior?

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STYLED BY AI

WHAT WE HEARD: "I've used AI to put together outfits when I have, like, limited outfits because I have to wash stuff. I'd be like, '**HEY, WHAT COLORS GO WITH THIS?' SO I CAN HAVE A DECENT LOOKING OUTFIT.** I would take a landscape photo of my wardrobe and be like, 'hey, what would go with which?' I thought it did a pretty decent job. I was like, oh, okay, I can definitely wear that."

WHAT WE WONDER: How are teens using AI in their everyday lives? Fashion advice is just one example shared with us in our Spring advisory groups. Teens also describe using generative AI as a sounding board for creative decisions, to come up with nicknames for friends, and in other ways related to their personal habits, appearance, and everyday lives. Their stories leave us wondering how teens' uses of generative AI will influence their self-perceptions and self-expressions. Might we see an AI-version of amplified appearance consciousness?

SECRET SHARED, JUDGEMENT SPARED

WHAT WE HEARD: "**THIS IS KIND OF A SECRET … I USED AI FOR SOMETHING THAT I WAS TROUBLED WITH IN TERMS OF, LIKE, EMOTIONS, … BECAUSE I DIDN'T WANT TO TELL MY PARENTS.** Because I felt like: 'oh, they're gonna sit me down, we're gonna talk for hours' and I didn't want to go through that. So I just used AI to help me get at least a basic understanding, you know … I didn't really trust it, but I still had a few answers that I was like, 'oh, okay, this makes sense' … and yeah, I don't know, it just feels easier to me to do that."

WHAT WE WONDER: How does a bot's advice compare, in teens' minds, to advice from family, friends, or even people on social media? The teen quoted above eventually talked with a parent, but didn't mention turning to generative AI before coming to them. How will bots respond to the intimate questions teens are developmentally primed to ask? And how might tech companies use data from those deeply personal disclosures?

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS:

→   How People Are Really Using Gen AI in 2025
    (Marc Zao-Sanders at Harvard Business Review)

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MENTAL HEALTH CHATBOTS HAVE ENTERED THE CHAT

WHAT WE HEARD: "I have tried out mental health chatbots and I am not a fan. It feels impersonal or my awareness that I know it's a bot … it feels kind of foolish. **I AM GOING THROUGH REAL PROBLEMS SO WHY WOULD I CHAT WITH SOMETHING THAT ISN'T REAL?**"

WHAT WE WONDER: New data from a randomized controlled trial conducted by Dartmouth-based researchers shows benefits of chatbots for treating clinical-level mental health symptoms in adults. How will teens experience such bots, and how might their experiences differ from adults in important ways? How will teens' developmental needs be considered (or overlooked) as mental health chatbots are created?

TECH KEEPS CHANGING, SO WE KEEP ASKING TEENS: WHAT ARE ADULTS MISSING THAT YOU MOST NEED US TO UNDERSTAND?
We'll keep sharing what we learn. Thanks for being part of an ecosystem that's creating space for empathy, youth voice, and research in the pursuit of digital thriving. .

Until next time,
THE CENTER FOR DIGITAL THRIVING TEAM
Emily Weinstein ✽ Eduardo Lara ✽ Beck Tench ✽ Carrie James ✽ Lauren Palazzo

Methods note: The insights in this memo came from six 45-minute virtual discussion sessions with 10 teen advisors. We met in groups of varying sizes based on teens' availability, but most often in small groups with approximately three teens and two adult members of our team. The teen advisors we spoke with come from a wide range of backgrounds and are currently in grades 9-12. They attend various types of schools across the U.S., including public, private, charter, and homeschool settings. We convened these teen advisory sessions with help from In Tandem, which bridges the gap between youth and organizations to foster collaborations for impactful, youth-centered solutions.

Read more about our approaches to youth voice work in our Youth Voice Playbook, co-created with Hopelab, Character Lab, and In Tandem.