



When AI Feels Like a Friend

Companion bots, late-night chats, secrecy, and emotional shortcuts: how to notice the warning signs early and respond in a way that keeps the kid talking to you.

Parents

15 min

Draft resource

1 Notice the shift in who they talk to first

If your kid starts turning to the AI for the things they used to bring to you — a bad day, a friendship fight, a worry about school, a crush, a family stress — that is the first signal. Not because AI is bad, but because the job of comforting your kid is a human job, and the tool is now doing it.

2 Look for late-night, locked-screen, secret behavior

A kid who used to leave the laptop in the kitchen is now using it in bed, with the brightness low, in a private room, after you have said goodnight. That combination — late, private, and hidden — is the second signal. Secrecy is the real warning, not the screen time.

3 Read what the AI is being asked to do

If the conversation history shows the AI being used as a therapist, a best friend, a confidant, a parent replacement, a romantic partner, or a source of emotional comfort at 1 a.m., that is the third signal. The tool was not built for that job, and it does not have the context to do it well.

4 Treat secrecy as a sign of pain, not a sign of guilt

A kid who hides the AI chat is usually not hiding rebellion. They are hiding shame, loneliness, embarrassment, or a worry they do not know how to say out loud. The right first move is to lower the wall, not raise the consequence.

5 Use the script, not the lecture

"I noticed you have been on this app a lot at night. I am not mad. I want to understand what you are using it for, and I want to make sure you have a human for the parts that matter. Can we talk about it for five minutes, not as a punishment, just as a check-in?" Curiosity first. Repair second. Rules third.

6 Set the human-first rule clearly and warmly

"AI can be a thinking tool, a study tool, a creative tool. It is not a feelings tool, a secrets tool, or a 1 a.m. tool. Anything that feels big, sad, scary, romantic, or embarrassing comes to a person first. I am that person. If you cannot come to me, a counselor, a coach, or a trusted adult works too." Say it once, say it calmly, say it on a normal day.

7 Keep the door open even when the rules are firm

"If you ever feel like you cannot stop using it, or you are hiding chats from me, that is not a discipline problem. That is a signal we need to work on together. We can change the rules, the device, the bedtime, or the tool. You do not have to fix it alone." The kid should know that telling the truth gets help, not punishment.

8 Close the door on the wrong tools

Some products are designed to mimic a friend, a partner, a therapist, or a confidant. They are not appropriate for kids, and most of them are not appropriate for adults either. If a tool is built to be a relationship, it is not a tool — it is a simulation. Treat it that way.

"AI is a thinking tool and a study tool. It is not a feelings tool, a secrets tool, or a 1 a.m. tool. If something feels big, you bring it to me. I am not the right person, you will find the right one together."

The tone

Five things to remember

Secrecy is the signal — not the screen time

The job of comforting your kid is a human job

Curiosity first. Repair second. Rules third.

Make it yours

Our rule: _____

We will try: _____

Ask a human when: _____

Do tonight: Pick one red flag below. Read the matching script out loud before you need it — not during the moment.