

PARENT CONVERSATIONS

Talking to your kids about sex

People's feelings about artificial intelligence (AI) vary widely. Although the two extremes are probably most vocal—AI is the solution to every problem and AI is the problem—I believe that most of us fall somewhere in the middle. We don't mind using it for a few things (we can't really avoid it, after all), but we are nervous about how it's ultimately going to affect us and our children. Although this article is just a start, Luke Thompson leads parents through three things to think about when it comes to AI.

—Nicole Balza

I HAVE SPENT the last three years researching the relationship between theology and artificial intelligence (AI) and helping our called worker training school, Martin Luther College, prepare for AI in the college classroom. This is a wild time to be a college professor.

But I'm also a parent. I have a son just starting high school and a daughter just starting middle school. So, from one Christian parent to another, here are three things Christian parents ought to be thinking about—but might not be—when it comes to AI.

1 YOU ARE NOT TALKING TO ANYONE.

Can you think of any tool other than AI that, in order to use it, you need to pretend that it's not a tool? Where you have to treat it as a person instead? We "talk" to AI. We describe AI as thinking, understanding, deciding, responding. Yet AI doesn't really do any of those things, even though it feels like it does.

Large Language Models (like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Grok) are machine-learning systems that produce outputs that look like speech. Imagine typing in the question, "What does my dog chase?" From its training, it calculates that "cat" is highly likely to come next, "squirrel" somewhat less likely, and "elephant" extremely unlikely. So, it outputs "cat." Does it know what a dog, cat, squirrel, or elephant is? Of course

not. It doesn't know anything except which symbols are more likely to follow other symbols. There's no mind in there, no person to know what a dog is.

Yet here is the strange part: You cannot really use the technology without acting like it knows things. It's in vogue to say that you're using AI as a research assistant, but research assistants are persons! An AI agent is just as much a person as a calculator.

The problem is how we *act* slowly shapes what we *believe*. Imagine saying, "Christ's body and blood aren't really present in the Sacrament" dozens of times a day. Even if at first you don't believe what you're saying, how long until it does start affecting how you see the Lord's Supper? Or imagine you tell your spouse, "I know I love you, but I'm going to say, 'I don't love you,' from now on every time I see you." Would we think that's healthy? So, how will acting like machines are persons daily eventually change what our children believe about persons?

2 AI IS BIASED.

Large Language Models are not neutral sources of information. What AI outputs is based on roughly two sources: its training data and its programming. It was "trained" on billions of pages of text, but then programmers create filters on what can ultimately

be output. For example, ChatGPT can't use vulgar language. That's not because of its training but because its programmers programmed it not to.

I recently "asked" ChatGPT, "To what degree would you say your programmers programmed bias into you?" Its answer: "Quite a bit!" It explained that most of its programmers have very different ideas from WELS about what constitutes "the conception of the human person, freedom, happiness, sexuality, authority, harm, justice, and the good life."

Now, that's the programming. What about the training data? Much like the programming, the training data will produce an AI oriented to a different worldview than ours, because a good deal of our worldview is not respected in the training data right now (for example, our views on evolution or human sexuality).

This might seem inconsequential if you're "asking" the AI to teach your son eighth-grade algebra. But what about questions about history, politics, religion, science, psychology, philosophy, or ethics?

Part of growing up is learning who the trustworthy authorities in life are. Who is telling me this? Why do they believe it? Is what they're saying consistent with God's Word? AI makes this harder because we can't help treating it like an authoritative person, even though we know it's not. And neither can our children.

3

WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT THIS WILL DO TO DEVELOPING MINDS.

As a teacher, I think about this a lot. Researchers call having AI do the thinking for you "cognitive offloading." When you "ask" AI to summarize a book instead of reading and summarizing it yourself, you have offloaded the thinking. What happens in the long run if our kids do lots of this cognitive offloading? We don't know. The technology has only been around for a few years.

As a society, we are right now running an experiment on our children just like we did with social media and cell phones 20 years ago. We decided to let our children have unfettered access to social media. That experiment didn't go so well. Are we treating this one any differently?

Although we don't have the long-term studies yet on how using AI will affect brain development or learning, what we do know about the short term is concerning. If you stop using the muscles in your arms and legs, they shrink. You get weak. Your brain also develops when you use it. And when you stop using it, its function diminishes.

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Researchers are focusing on at least two ways unregulated AI usage diminishes the mental capabilities of users. First, mental effort diminishes. You simply don't try as hard to do mentally taxing tasks. Second, you begin to lose whatever skills you've been offloading. You might feel like you still have the skill, because AI is doing it for you, but it's just a feeling. Researchers call that feeling "the illusion of learning." The skills, the effort, they're slowly fading.

I think Christian parents can think about AI differently than the rest of society. Instead of simply asking, "What can AI do for my child?" the better, deeper question is, "What is my child supposed to become?"

Now there's no need to panic. God is in control, and he's working all things out for his church, your kids included. But there's also no need to repeat what we did with smartphones and simply hand our children a powerful new technology and worry about the effects later. Let's slow down and think about how we can best carry out our vocations as parents together in this quickly changing world.



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