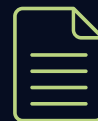


# Generative AI and Youth Mental Health: Four Key Takeaways & Five Practice Implications for Youth Work



EVIDENCE BRIEF

This Evidence Brief explores how Generative AI (Gen AI) is being used to support youth wellbeing and provides practical recommendations for youth workers to guide and support young people in using this technology, emphasizing the need for human oversight. Although there is potential for Gen AI to support youth workers' goals if used carefully, there is also potential for harm, especially around privacy, bias, crisis, and relational dependency.

*This Evidence Brief was produced in Spring 2026. YouthREX acknowledges that generative AI technology is evolving in real time and that new evidence is emerging about potential benefits and harms. To learn more, read Generative AI in Youth Work: Insights, Ethics, and Practical Implications, another Evidence Brief on the topic of Gen AI from YouthREX, and visit the AI and Youth Work collection on the Knowledge Hub.*

## DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

In Ontario, 38% of students rated their mental health as fair or poor in 2023, and 51% reported moderate-to-serious psychological distress.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, youth mental health support is often fragmented and under-resourced, creating pressure to expand access and reduce burdens on providers and youth-serving systems.<sup>2,3</sup>

**Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI)** has been posed as a solution to closing this gap, enabling youth to access informal support through online tools and youth mental health and substance use programs to more efficiently support service users.

**Artificial Intelligence (AI)** refers broadly to computer systems that perform tasks associated with human intelligence, such as learning from data, making predictions, generating text, or recommending content.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

**Gen AI** is a type of AI that can create new content (i.e., text, images, audio, video, or code) in response to user prompts.<sup>6,7</sup> Popular Gen AI tools include

ChatGPT (from OpenAI), Claude (from Anthropic), Gemini (from Google), and Copilot (from Microsoft). Gen AI can also be embedded into apps or programs for more subtle use (i.e., predictive text, personalized recommendations, etc.).<sup>8</sup> Gen AI works by learning patterns from large amounts of available data and then using those patterns to generate original outputs in response to users.<sup>6</sup> *In short, Gen AI does not 'know' things; instead it predicts answers based on patterns.*

## SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: FOUR KEY TAKEAWAYS

### 01. Gen AI is filling a gap in addressing youth mental health needs.

Youth workers are often the trusted adults on the frontlines of the youth mental health crisis, supporting early identification, coping, connection, and navigation to care. Gen AI enters this context in two ways that matter for youth work: (a) it shapes the digital environments where young people spend time and (b) it increasingly shows up as a support tool, especially chatbots and other conversational agents used for advice, coping, and companionship.<sup>3,9,10</sup> **Chatbots** are digital tools that can engage with

people through spoken, written, and visual languages using natural language processing.<sup>5</sup> Some chatbots are specific to mental health programs, while other mainstream chatbots, such as *ChatGPT* or *Claude*, are general use programs that youth are utilizing for mental health support and information, including self-harm and suicide;<sup>11</sup> evaluations of such broad-use Gen AI chatbots demonstrate that these tools provide clear information on self-harm and suicide *without transparency* on how these conversations are followed up on.<sup>11</sup>

As of Spring 2026, youth exposure and adoption to Gen AI tools for wellbeing are happening faster than governance, evaluation, and youth worker preparation. Young people share that Gen AI mental health content feels helpful because it's quick and judgement-free, and some report using tools like *ChatGPT* for mental health advice.<sup>10</sup> Nationally-representative US data similarly suggest a meaningful minority of youth have used Gen AI for mental health advice, with frequent use among those who do use it and high perceived helpfulness.<sup>12</sup>

In Canada, the regulatory landscape remains in flux. For example, a major federal initiative ([Bill C-27](#), including the proposed Artificial Intelligence and Data Act) did not reach enactment and remained at committee stage in the previous parliamentary session, contributing to an environment where youth-facing Gen AI tools may not be governed by clear, enforceable safety standards.<sup>13</sup>

## 02. Gen AI is being used in youth mental health programming.

The youth mental health system is also increasingly integrating Gen AI tools into their programming.<sup>5</sup> The American Medical Association shares that 66% of US-based clinicians report using Gen AI for administrative tasks,<sup>14</sup> with increasing numbers of clinicians expressing curiosity about its use directly with patients.

Experts agree that Gen AI has significant *potential* to improve the youth mental health landscape<sup>5,15</sup> by enhancing:

- **Early detection of crisis signs.**  
Example: The American-based *GoGuardian Beacon* app analyzes the use of school-issued devices to detect early signs of distress in students.
- **Personalized support referrals.**  
Example: UK-based *Limbic Access* is a conversational Gen AI agent that provides mental health referrals for those 16 and older.
- **Direct access to conversational support.**  
Example: *Woebot* is a chatbot with built-in mental health tools, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy tools, mood tracking, and mindfulness practices.
- **Research to better determine appropriate care.**  
Example: Drawing on large-scale fMRI (Functional MRI) databases to determine how to localize treatment in the brain.<sup>15</sup>

There has been a particular focus on the use of **psychotherapy chatbots** for youth. A review and analysis of Gen AI chatbots among adolescents and young adults found small to moderate effects in reducing mental distress and small effects in promoting health behaviours, with outcomes varying by chatbot design and engagement.<sup>16</sup> Additional evaluation work found that widely-used Gen AI psychotherapy chatbots may be accessible and often avoid overtly harmful statements, yet perform poorly in therapeutic approach and risk monitoring, with additional concerns about crisis handling and transparency of privacy and model training.<sup>17</sup>

While some view the possibilities as exciting, clinicians are advised to “use AI tools only within their area of expertise, apply them strictly within their defined therapeutic scope, and ensure alignment with legal and professional standards.”<sup>15</sup>

### 03. There are risks and limitations to using Gen AI for youth mental health.

Despite Gen AI being used to support youth wellbeing, these tools can come across as ‘caring’ without being caring, produce biased or incorrect information, generally lack expert review, and inaccurately interpret a young person’s context.<sup>10</sup>

**Gen AI outputs should be treated as information or prompts to discuss, not advice to follow.**

Evidence indicates that Gen AI tools are insufficient for crisis situations. Practitioners worry about crisis management limitations,<sup>2</sup> and evaluations highlight weak risk monitoring and poor crisis handling.<sup>17</sup> Kids Help Phone specifically recommends connecting youth with humans for urgent help, suicide-related coping, and safety planning.<sup>10</sup> Youth should understand that escalation to human support is not ‘failing’ at self-help but appropriate risk management.

An advisory from the American Psychological Association (APA) warns that adolescents may have heightened trust in AI characters, struggle to distinguish simulated empathy from real understanding, and risk erosion of real-world relationships and unhealthy dependency.<sup>18</sup> For adolescents in particular, AI literacy to understand the context of Gen AI and its implications for social and supportive interactions in the ‘real’ world is especially important.

The broader ‘AI mental health’ picture must include AI-driven social media environments. A review focused on Generation Z youth highlights how attention-optimizing algorithms can amplify negative emotions and contribute to toxic digital environments, with cyberbullying and harmful content exposure linked to mental health harms.<sup>9</sup> Conversations about Gen AI with youth provide opportunities to explore and understand the risks they may face with social media, such as ‘doomscrolling’, strategies to curate or limit content, and reflective debriefs after upsetting content exposure.

### 04. Youth workers can shape safer systems with youth and communities.

The evidence highlights the need for system-level safeguards, especially because direct-to-consumer Gen AI tools used in mental health contexts raise significant concerns about crisis handling, privacy, bias, and transparency.<sup>17</sup> The APA advisory likewise argues for safeguards, reminders that the user is interacting with Gen AI, and clear human support pathways.<sup>18</sup> **Use a child and youth rights lens as default.** UNICEF’s guidance sets out requirements for child-centered AI, including ensuring safety, protecting data and privacy, ensuring nondiscrimination and fairness, and providing transparency and accountability.<sup>19</sup>

Youth workers can translate these recommendations into organizational expectations for partners and vendors. Example assessment questions to explore include: “Show us your safety protocols,” “Explain how you handle youth data,” “Show fairness testing,” and “Provide clear explanations youth can understand.”

## SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: FIVE YOUTH WORK PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

### 01. Integrate an ‘AI check-in’ into conversations with youth.

Kids Help Phone provides concrete reflective questions youth can use to explore:<sup>9</sup>

- what they want from AI
- whether what they share is private
- how they will fact-check outputs
- whether the chosen tool aligns with their values
- how they feel during and after use
- what they will do if content is upsetting
- what boundaries they want to set
- how to spot AI-generated or deepfake content

Youth workers can turn these questions into a short check-in script or group activity to support critical assessment and safer use.

## 02. Hold a clear line: AI can assist, but cannot replace human care, especially in crisis.

Practitioners and evaluators cite crisis limitations, lack of empathy/clinical judgment, and poor risk monitoring in widely-used Gen AI tools.<sup>2</sup> Youth workers should have **transparent conversations about the limitations of Gen AI for mental health support and make youth aware when to seek human support** (e.g., suicidal thoughts, abuse concerns, safety planning, severe distress).

## 03. Use AI internally and only with safeguards.

Youth-serving organizations should **develop internal governance with appropriate safeguards**. This could include a list of approved tools (for example, using a structured assessment matrix to evaluate partner/vendor claims), data handling rules, staff training expectations, incident reporting protocols, and clear guidance for responding when a young person brings AI-generated advice or crisis content into a session.

If your organization uses Gen AI for planning or documentation, always **avoid including identifiable youth data** and **adopt a ‘human in the loop’ standard**, which can be operationalized as: (a) a staff member reviews all AI outputs before use, (b) AI never makes final decisions, and (c) staff document when AI was used and how outputs were checked.<sup>19</sup>

## 04. Include bias and algorithm literacy in supporting youth.

Treat inequity as a predictable outcome unless actively prevented: AI tools can reproduce bias through training data and development processes, and AI-driven social media systems can reinforce harmful patterns.<sup>20</sup> Youth workers should monitor for differential impacts: who is harmed, who benefits, and who is excluded, monitoring language and ensuring cultural safety and inclusion.

Educate youth on how **recommender algorithms** work – AI systems that rank and recommend what a person sees next (videos, posts, accounts). These systems can shape mental health indirectly by influencing exposure to harmful content, misinformation, or reinforcing social comparison and ‘echo chambers’ (encountering information, opinions, or beliefs that reflect or reinforce your own).<sup>9,17</sup> Support youth in understanding how mis/disinformation spreads and how to use ‘break the loop’ strategies, such as pausing autoplay, resetting recommendations, curating supports, and seeking offline connection.

## 05. Build youth co-design into AI-related policy and programming.

Adolescents and young adults are not sufficiently involved in shaping ethical guidance for AI-powered mental health services and supports, making participatory co-design a key strategy.<sup>20</sup> Youth workers can operationalize co-design through youth advisory groups reviewing AI guidance, co-writing safe-use agreements and consent practices, and helping define what Gen AI use looks like in a specific mental health setting. Be sure to meaningfully engage youth experiencing marginalization who may be underserved and unrepresented in such processes.

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### HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX’s online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: “youth mental health” OR “youth wellbeing” AND “AI” OR “Generative AI”. We also used *Claude* to generate available information on Gen AI use in the youth mental health sector to supplement our search.

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