Generative AI in Youth Work: Insights, Ethics, and Practical Implications

EVIDENCE BRIEF

Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) is rapidly reshaping our personal and professional lives, introducing opportunities, raising ethical questions, and forging unchartered paths to supporting young people. This Evidence Brief synthesizes existing knowledge to provide a snapshot of current perspectives, outline concerns and considerations, and propose practical applications for youth workers and youth programs.

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 and Youth Mental Health: Four Key Takeaways & Five Practice Implications for Youth Work, *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

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.[1,2,3]

AI for health (AIH) includes the use of applications like **chatbots**, navigation tools, summarization, risk prediction, and administrative support, often framed as augmenting service delivery in a strained system.[4]

Chatbots (and other **conversational agents**) are AI-enabled tools that interact with users through conversation. In mental health contexts, they may deliver psychoeducation, coping prompts, journaling exercises, cognitive-behavioural techniques, or companionship-like interactions.[4,5,6]

Generative AI, sometimes called **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.[3,7] 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.).[8] 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.[3] *In short, Gen AI does not 'know' things; instead it predicts answers based on patterns.*

Recommender algorithms (common in social media) are AI systems that rank and recommend what a person sees next (videos, posts, accounts). In mental health contexts, these systems can shape wellbeing 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, while ignoring or excluding other viewpoints).[6,9]

PERSPECTIVES AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

01. Youth Perspectives on Gen AI

Youth are increasingly engaging with Gen AI tools. One US study found that 50% of young people aged 14-22 have used Gen AI,[10] and another found that 50% of teens aged 14-17 were using Gen AI apps on their personal devices.[7] Nine in 10 youth in a national Canadian study shared that they have been using AI in some way.[1] A study of global higher education found that 71% of postsecondary students use *ChatGPT*.[11] Experts anticipate that as the use of Gen AI becomes more and more normalized, more young people will use these tools.[1,12]

Youth use Gen AI in a variety of ways. Some are using Gen AI to get information and to brainstorm, often to support school work.[10,12] Youth also report using Gen AI in ways that the adults in their lives may be unaware of, including to ask questions they won't ask adults, for emotional support, or for academic shortcuts.[10] Their use of AI is often self-taught; youth learn how to use Gen AI tools from trial and error or on social media.[1]

Youth have a nuanced understanding of Gen AI, recognizing its potential for both positive and negative impacts and grappling with their own ethical concerns.[8] Young people who anticipate mostly *positive* personal impacts from Gen AI describe that broader access to information will help with school, work, and supporting their communities, and that the tools help enhance creativity and foster opportunities for advancement.[10] Young people who anticipate mostly *negative* impacts from widespread use of Gen AI cite worries about the potential loss of jobs, intellectual property theft, mis/disinformation, and concerns about privacy, climate change impacts, and existential concerns such as technological advancement that results in humans losing control of Gen AI.[10] Young people, then, want adults to learn about the uses of Gen AI and to educate youth.[10]

02. Adult Perspectives on Gen AI

Adults, including parents/caregivers, youth workers, and educators, express additional concerns about the impacts of Gen AI.[1] While Gen AI has been posed as positive for youth development, many adults are unsure of its benefits for youth.[13] Parents share concerns about misinformation and the opportunities for cheating on school work.[1] Educators further report low confidence in young people's ability to use these tools critically, responsibly, and effectively.[1]

Many adults are still in the early stages of engaging young people in conversations about AI. One report found that nearly half of parents hadn't discussed AI with their teens and only 37% of parents whose teens use AI think their child has used this technology.[12] Similarly, only 41% of educators reported teaching students how to use AI tools.[1]

At the same time, educators widely recognize that understanding and working with AI is increasingly important for students' future success.[1] Educators express openness to learning about Gen AI and developing skills to support young people. However, many educators report not using AI regularly themselves, citing limited confidence in their own skills, low trust in Gen AI tools, and insufficient access to resources or professional development opportunities as barriers to frequent use.[1]

03. Key Ethical Considerations

Gen AI is designed to be reliable, sycophantic, and gamified. These tools pose a risk to young people for excessive use,[14] especially teens who are in a critical period of brain development.[7,13]

Biases, including discrimination, are often present in Gen AI outputs, given the documented use of *unrepresentative training data* and *lack of diversity* of input in product testing and development, as well as the fact that these tools are *designed by human adults*.[13,14] These biases can result in the use of derogatory language, normalizing contested socio-political framings, or maintaining gendered expectations. For example, Gen AI may perpetuate harmful biases through responses that ignore Indigenous sovereignty, use examples of political leadership that only include men, or associate racialized youth with harmful stereotypes and undesirable social outcomes.[13]

Access to Gen AI is unequal, as paywalls to advanced versions restrict access only to youth who are able to pay for these services.[11] Without intentional intervention to reach underserved youth, AI may widen, rather than reduce, existing inequities.[15]

The increasing popularity of Gen AI tools also poses additional risk to the environment, a key concern for many young people. Gen AI uses significantly more data and therefore requires the construction of new data centres that use huge amounts of water to cool servers and generate electricity; this use is only expected to increase.[16]

The rising popularity of Gen AI also poses unprecedented privacy risks for young people who may not understand how their data is being used.[14] Gen AI tools are always collecting and processing data, often requiring youth to provide personal information and hiding data-use policies.[14] This may lead to harmful targeted advertising, increased risk to data breaches that can expose sensitive information, and surveillance of student learning patterns and behaviours.[14] When we don't understand and inadvertently elevate these privacy risks, we miss opportunities for critical engagement with how Gen AI engages in manipulation based on its understanding of our personal data.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

01. Supporting Youth AI Literacy and Skills

There is a **'preparedness gap'** between how many youth are using Gen AI and what they report they know about this technology.[1]

Increasing AI literacy for youth can support shifting young people from the passive use of Gen AI to **active use** that encourages the consideration of Gen AI as a tool rather than as a stand-in for other forms of learning and engagement.[8] Gen AI chatbots pose responses as facts, but they may be inaccurate, resulting in the need for greater discernment when using these tools.[13] Active engagement encourages youth to **critically analyze responses**, rather than immediately accepting them as factual. Teaching youth about privacy concerns and how unauthorized data collection can negatively impact them is also recommended to support more active engagement.[14]

02. Applying Gen AI in Youth Work

That same 'preparedness gap' in Gen AI use and literacy exists for youth workers.[1] Many youth programs recognize that young people want to learn more about Gen AI tools to be successful in work as the AI sector continues to boom, and programs that focus on teaching AI skills for the workplace are increasingly offered.[15,17]

Evidence suggests that the use of Gen AI is most defensible when used for low-risk support functions rather than for tasks where empathy, judgment, and crisis management are central. Those who work in youth mental health service contexts see value in AI for psychoeducation, system navigation, and administrative tasks, potentially reducing the burden on staff and supporting increased access to services.[4,14] **To use Gen AI ethically, youth organizations can prioritize 'augmentation tasks' over 'clinical tasks'.**

Youth programs can begin with **low-risk uses**: drafting generic outreach text, summarizing notes with non-identifiable information, brainstorming workshop activities, or compiling publicly-available referral resources, while **keeping decision making and relational support human-led**.[4]

Youth organizations can 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.[18]

Youth workers can further **avoid inputting sensitive information into non-approved tools**. Privacy concerns are consistently raised in youth work, youth rights framing, and youth privacy reports.[2,9,13,14,18] Youth organizations should assume that many consumer AI tools can log prompts and may use them for model improvement unless explicitly stated otherwise. Therefore, **youth workers must de-identify data, minimize the sharing of information, and follow organizational privacy policies and consent expectations**.[18]

Using a **structured tool assessment matrix** before adopting AI can also support the ethical use of Gen AI. These matrices can evaluate tools using indicators such as human agency and oversight, technical robustness and security, privacy and data governance, fairness, accountability, and organizational considerations.[19] (One example is the *Map of Trustworthy AI-Powered Solutions and Assessment Matrix*, a structured guide to support youth workers in navigating the fast-growing landscape of AI technologies and developed by the European project AI 4 Youth Work.)

Rather than investing in Gen AI tools alone, an investment in staff competence is needed. Youth workers require competencies to support young people to thrive in the AI era and to leverage AI responsibly in their own work, including skills related to assessment and evaluation and empowering youth to use these tools responsibly.[19] Youth workers with access to educational resources about AI perceived them as useful for increasing their understanding of AI tools and strengthening their ability to apply AI in practice.[19]

03. Engaging Youth in Gen AI in Ethical and Inclusive Ways

Youth want to be involved in conversations about how Gen AI is being used and how to leverage the opportunities while mitigating the risks.

A case study described a 10-week youth program in Spain where underserved youth received mentorship and resources to use Gen AI to solve environmental, social, or economic issues that young people identified as important.[15] Teams were able to learn about Gen AI and apply the tools to a problem of their choosing, critically assessing the usefulness. This program is an example of how directly engaging youth – particularly those who may not have regular access to advanced Gen AI – in learning and project-based action can increase their ability to responsibly apply AI as a tool, rather than as a replacement, for their own thinking.[15]

HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Semantic Scholar, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "youth" OR "adolescents" AND "AI" OR "Generative AI". We also used *Claude* to generate available information on Gen AI use in the youth sector to supplement our search.

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