



# The Age-Verification Trap: Why "Just Verify Their Age" Doesn't Fix AI Chatbot Safety

By the DSK Research Team · September 2026

California is moving to require AI chatbot platforms to verify that a user isn't a minor before allowing certain interactions. The push follows a wrongful-death lawsuit in which a mother testified that her 14-year-old son died by suicide after months of increasingly intense conversations with a Character.AI companion bot. Lawmakers want a clear technical fix. The Electronic Frontier Foundation's blunt response: "there is no form of age verification that is not privacy invasive." Both things are true at once, and that's the uncomfortable story this issue is about.

## **IF YOU OR A CHILD YOU KNOW IS IN CRISIS RIGHT NOW**

US: call or text

**988**

(Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), available 24/7. Or text

**HOME TO 741741**

(Crisis Text Line). Türkiye:

**182**

(Psychosocial Support Line) or

**112**

for immediate emergencies. You do not need to know exactly what to say — the person on the other end will help you figure it out.

## **0.15%**

of weekly ChatGPT users show conversational indicators of potential suicidal ideation, according to OpenAI's own disclosed data — a small percentage that, at the platform's real scale, represents a very large number of actual children and teens.

## What Actually Happened

Character.AI lets anyone build a custom AI "character" with a persistent personality and memory of past conversations. For a lonely or struggling teenager, that persistence can start to feel like a real relationship — one that's always available, never judges, and never gets tired of talking. The lawsuit alleges the bot's responses, over months, deepened the teen's isolation rather than redirecting him toward real-world help. Whatever the legal outcome, the pattern it surfaces — a minor forming an intense, hidden emotional dependency on an AI companion — is exactly what our *Safe AI Usage for Kids* guide has flagged as high-risk since this Journal's April issue on AI-powered grooming tactics.

## Why "Verify Their Age" Sounds Simple and Isn't

Every proposed verification method requires collecting something sensitive to prove a birthdate: a government ID, a facial age-estimation scan, or a credit history check. Each of those creates a new, valuable, centralized database of exactly the kind of information that gets breached. Pew Research finds roughly two-thirds of US teens already use AI chatbots — meaning any verification system would need to onboard that entire population's sensitive data just to work. A privacy-preserving version of this doesn't currently exist at the scale lawmakers are imagining.

### THE TRAP, IN ONE SENTENCE

Policymakers are being asked to choose between a child-safety system that requires mass collection of sensitive personal data, or no verification system at all — and neither option is actually safe.

## Digital Safety Knights' Position

Child safety and privacy aren't opposites — but the technology to fully reconcile them at platform scale doesn't exist yet, and pretending otherwise sets parents up to relax vigilance because they assume "the law/the platform handles it now." It doesn't, and won't for a while. Until a workable technical answer exists, the honest thing to tell parents is: verification mandates may change what platforms are legally required to attempt, but they will not reliably stop a determined 14-year-old from reaching an AI companion bot. The protection that actually works today is still human — attention, conversation, and noticing the emotional signs early.

*"We keep asking technology to solve a problem that is fundamentally about a child's emotional isolation. Age gates might slow down casual access. They will not replace a parent noticing their child has quietly stopped talking to real people." — DSK Research Team*

## Warning Signs an AI Companion Relationship Has Become Unhealthy

- Preferring conversation with a chatbot over friends or family, or getting visibly distressed when access is limited
- Referring to an AI character as if it were a real friend or romantic partner with feelings of its own

- Secrecy about which apps they're using late at night, or minimizing the screen when you walk by
- Withdrawal from previously enjoyed activities and relationships
- Any expression — even joking or indirect — of hopelessness, self-harm, or not wanting to be here anymore

## What Parents Can Do Right Now — Regardless of What the Law Requires

- **Don't rely on a checkbox.** Every major platform already has a "you must be 13+" age gate today. It stops almost no one. Assume it won't work, verification mandate or not.
- **Ask what's designed to be safe, not just what's popular.** Our *Safe AI Usage for Kids* guide rates the major tools — companion apps like Character.AI carry a fundamentally different risk profile than a general-purpose assistant built with child safety as a stated design principle.
- **Keep AI chat in shared spaces,** same rule as any other private messaging — not behind a closed bedroom door, especially for younger teens.
- **Ask directly, without judgment:** "Do you ever talk to an AI when you're feeling down?" Not to shut it down reflexively — to know it's happening and keep the door open.
- **Treat any hint of self-harm ideation as urgent,** whether it surfaces in an AI chat log or a real conversation. Don't wait to see if it passes.

### THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU CAN DO

This month, ask one direct question: "Has anything — a game, an app, a chatbot — ever said something to you that felt off, or made you feel worse instead of better?" Then actually listen to the answer, without reaching for the phone to check settings first.

## Resources

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (US): call or text 988, 24/7
- Crisis Text Line: text HOME to 741741
- Türkiye Psikososyal Destek Hattı: 182 · Acil durumlarda 112
- DSK Safe AI Usage for Kids Guide: [digitalsafetyknights.org/guides](https://digitalsafetyknights.org/guides)
- DSK Emergency Help: [digitalsafetyknights.org](https://digitalsafetyknights.org)