RIGHTS.AI: Children's Experiences of Generative Artificial Intelligence in India

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Preface

Around the world, children and young people are increasingly encountering technologies based on generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) at home, school and elsewhere via apps, bots and other digital products and services. GenAI can answer questions or respond to prompts to create new kinds of content. It can be found in dedicated apps such as ChatGPT or Copilot, or embedded in familiar platforms such as Snapchat, WhatsApp and Google Search. Schools may also deploy AI-enabled educational technology (EdTech), and mental health services are experimenting with GenAI chatbots, among many other emerging applications.

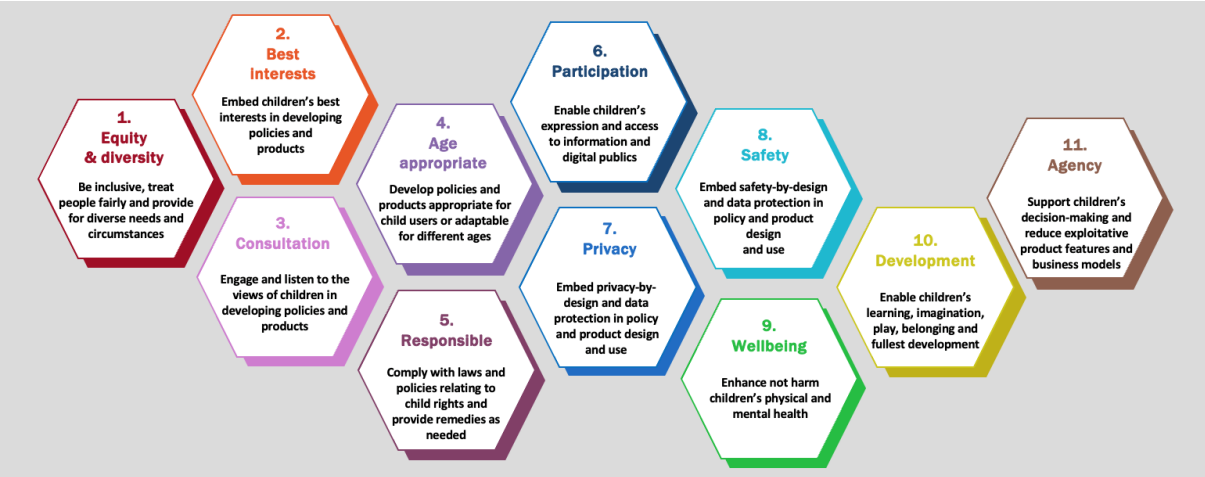
Such technological innovation stimulates children's curiosity as well as raising public concerns. As GenAI technologies evolve rapidly, policymakers are scrambling to keep up and find ways to balance innovation with protections. We have witnessed a range of international and regional AI regulations and policies being introduced, primarily from the Global North, calling for responsible and ethical development and use (e.g., by the Council of Europe, European Commission, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and the World Economic Forum). Yet very few of these focus on children.

At the Digital Futures for Children centre (DFC), we are committed to recognising children's experiences across diverse circumstances, especially in the Global South, which is underrepresented in research. We are delighted to have partnered with researchers in Brazil, Kenya, India and Thailand to explore children's experiences of and perspectives on GenAI. With a methodology designed in cooperation with the EU Kids Online network, this is one of several reports presenting the research, in answer to four overarching questions:

1. What are children's experiences with and perceptions of GenAI?
2. What is the potential impact of GenAI on children's rights?
3. What do children want to see in terms of GenAI regulations and protections?
4. What insights are offered by cross-country comparisons?

This work is framed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)[1] and *General comment No. 25*[2] on the digital environment. Our child rights approach is encapsulated in the 11 principles of Child Rights by Design.[3] Taken together, these provide a holistic framework to understand children's encounters with GenAI.

Figure 1: The 11 principles of Child Rights by Design[4]



We hope the findings are of value to the policymakers, educators, regulators and others now designing policies for GenAI that impact on children, as well as the civil society actors and other organisations that advocate for children's rights. Ultimately, our role is to contribute to an evidence base that can be used to empower children, parents and educators by increasing awareness and understanding of Gen AI technologies.

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[1] UNICEF (1989).
[2] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2021).
[3] Livingstone & Pothong (2023).
[4] Livingstone & Pothong (2023).

Executive summary

This report presents findings from a qualitative study on Indian children's understanding of and engagement with generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 18 children aged 13-17, it outlines the nature of GenAI use and literacy as it relates to the 11 principles of Child Rights by Design:[5] equity and diversity, best interests, consultation, age appropriate, responsible, participation, privacy, safety, wellbeing, development and agency. While acknowledging the immense diversity of contexts and social and material infrastructures that children in India experience, the report offers a snapshot of their interactions with and ideas about GenAI.

The children in the study came from different socioeconomic backgrounds and attended a diverse range of schools. Interviews were conducted in three different cities: Ahmedabad, Hyderabad and Mumbai. All the participants had used some GenAI tools, with ChatGPT being the most popular, followed by Meta AI (within WhatsApp) and browser-embedded tools such as Copilot and Gemini.

The children used GenAI to help with homework and projects, and for fun, to explore creative pursuits such as art and music. A few engaged with AI chatbots. They were beginning to think about the ethical and unethical uses of GenAI, and the potential cognitive harms that could accrue from overuse, although most mentioned that there was little or no discussion of these issues in school.

Indian children's understanding of privacy-related harms or the limitations of GenAI output, however, was quite low, suggesting that

[5] Livingstone & Pothong (2023).

deeper literacies need to be built in this regard. When prompted, participants were able to see how GenAI might be deployed to help overcome disadvantages arising from disability or socioeconomic status. The participants believed that it was necessary to 'control' GenAI through state regulation or by technological safeguards (such as an 'off button') that would keep it from becoming too powerful. They also showed a level of acceptance or belief in the inevitability of technology becoming a feature of their lives. This, too, is reflective of the broader public discourse in the country around technology, particularly digital tools.

The findings suggest that there is a need for more discussion in classrooms around the ethics of GenAI use and the possible harms, particularly of data capture and privacy intrusions, but also, and perhaps more urgently, of the cognitive costs of dependence on such models. Given the emphasis on productivity in Indian society, and on academic performance, children use these tools as shortcuts when under pressure to meet the demands of schoolwork. Conversations around GenAI use could prompt deeper reflections on the nature and meaning of learning and human creativity, while also building a critical awareness of the potential to use GenAI in interesting and productive ways. Most importantly, our recommendations focus on how we might broaden the discourse and concentrate education and literacy efforts on bringing intergenerational understandings of GenAI into policy formulation efforts. This includes ensuring that GenAI tools are truly diverse in their affordances and mindful of potential physical, material and cognitive harms. But it also means supporting key stakeholders – parents, teachers, communities – with literacies and mechanisms that help them mediate between young users and their technological infrastructures.

Country context

It is a cliche, overused to the extreme, that India defies simple categorisation on any level. So, to do research in India is to acknowledge and disclaim at every step. While we draw on some of the available numerical descriptors to lay out the context, the statistics offer only broad boundaries within which to think.

At the last count,[6] India's population stood at a little over 1.4 billion, with a sex ratio of 943 females for every 1,000 males. It is home to people of practically every major faith in the world, with Hinduism being the dominant religion, followed by Islam, Christianity and Sikhism, and with smaller yet significant numbers identifying themselves as Jains, Buddhists and Parsis (Zoroastrian). The literacy rate, as reported across different surveys, ranges from between 73 and 84 per cent, with higher levels in urban areas.[7] Literacy, along with other socioeconomic parameters, also varies depending on geography, religion, caste and gender. The Constitution of India currently lists 22 languages, with English and Hindi recognised as 'official languages', but the 2010 Census reported that more than 122 languages were spoken across the country, and other surveys list hundreds more.[8]

Children in India

India is home to the world's largest population of children and young people in the age group of 10-19,[9] estimated to make up one fifth of the country's total population. Even as this group is recognised to make what is popularly known as the country's 'demographic dividend', and considerable public policy attention is focused on issues of adolescent health and child education, it is fair to say that young people are almost never consulted in the process of policy formulation or implementation. For instance, the Department of Youth Affairs of the Government of India has several initiatives aimed at capacity building and engaging young people in development projects,[10] but these have been designed by experts and implemented in a top-down manner. Civil society organisations such as Divya Disha[11] have more recently worked in a more consultative manner, bringing children's voices into public discourse.

[6] Census of India (2025).
[7] Waghmare (2024b).
[8] Office of Registrar General & Census Commissioner, Government of India (2025).
[9] UNICEF (2025).
[10] Open Government Data (2022).
[11] https://divyadisha.org

Gender gaps persist in this group as in other age groups, with girls' access to education, technology, work and leisure opportunities much below that of boys, a gap that widens in rural areas. Girls and women in poorer families most often do not own their phones, accessing connectivity through an instrument belonging to a sibling, spouse or son.[12] The *Annual status of education report*,[13] a survey done at household level, has, for many years, been a barometer of learning levels across the country. The 2024 report presents a patchy picture of education attainment, with 7.7 per cent of boys and 8.1 per cent of girls (15-16) surveyed out of school, a number again that skews higher in rural areas. In 2024, ASER also assessed digital access and literacy among older children (14-16) and reported near-universal access to smartphones, although less than 40 per cent own their devices. Levels of digital literacy were also relatively high, with over 80 per cent understanding basic operations and safety.

However, it must be kept in mind that ASER, while working with a large sample, focuses on rural households and some urban pockets. There is another India that lives in middle- and high-income neighbourhoods, is globally connected and has a lifestyle similar to privileged groups elsewhere. And there are many Indias in between. India was ranked 130 among 193 countries on the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Index in 2024,[14] with high levels of disparity across many socioeconomic dimensions. Yet the country is home to more than 200 billionaires, ranking third globally in this regard.[15] According to a Pew Research study, the number of poor people in India has more than doubled since before the Covid-19 pandemic.[16] A total of 22.6 per cent of the national income went to just 1 per cent of the population in 2022-23, the highest percentage since 1922.[17] Data collected by the National Sample Survey Organisation show that only 50 per cent of the population in the poorest states, like Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and others, have, on average, five years of schooling.[18] This is in part owing to their large rural populations, where there is a lack of infrastructure, not enough teachers and lack of schools at a reasonable distance. The same study also notes that Scheduled Tribes[19] and Scheduled Castes are generally deprived of schooling, particularly noted in states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and

[12] Kasturi & Chebrol (2022).
[13] ASER Centre (2025).
[14] UN (2025).
[15] Financial Express Online (2025).
[16] Special Correspondent (2021).
[17] Bharti et al. (2024).
[18] Garg et al. (2022).
[19] Broadly, the caste system divides Hindu society among four groups: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, traditionally based on occupation by birth. Of these, Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas are considered to be 'upper' or 'high' caste, while Shudras are considered 'lower' caste. Within these four broad categories are hundreds of subcastes that vary by region. Subcastes falling under the fourth (Shudra) category are further divided into Other Backward Castes (OBC), Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) with special reservations in government and education allotted to them. All Hindus fall into one of these four broad castes, while many underprivileged non-Hindus (including those who have converted to Buddhism, Christianity or Islam) categorise themselves under the OBC, or SC and ST categories. For a more detailed understanding of caste in India, see Jodhka (2016).

Uttar Pradesh. Research has noted the rising role of private schooling in India,[20] with the enrolment share of private schools increasing from 19.30 to 45 per cent between 2007 and 2017.[21]

Technology policy

In India, technology of all kinds has been seen as a path to development, a means of leapfrogging out of a traditional society into modernity. Computers and information and communications technology (ICT) are seen as key drivers of this change, with major investments by both government and the corporate sector since the 1980s infusing ICT into all spheres of activity.[22] This techno-solutionist approach has fostered a strong belief in the transformative power of technology, a strong societal preference for technical education, and a largely uncritical adoption of digital tools. In recent years, digital literacy has become a key element of school and college curricula, with some attention to harms and risks, but mostly aimed at productive use.

Policy in this area has thus largely focused on creating an environment that encourages technology adoption and competitiveness, and it is only in the last decade or so that attention has been paid – reactively – to regulating its use, including issues related to harms arising from problematic content (fake news, deepfakes, hate speech and pornography), digital social networks (trafficking and grooming) and dissemination (the sharing of objectionable or inflammatory material, scams, etc.). Young people as active users of digital tools and participants in networked environments have only received explicit consideration in regulation since the mid-2000s. Some of the regulations have taken the form of expanding the scope of existing laws around the protection of minors, such as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012. Unsurprisingly, the framing of the public discourse around children and young people in the digital age has been paternalistic and protectionist, carrying over into regulation as well. While 2024-25 has seen a growing concern around the impact on young people of AI tools embedded in social media, there is no movement towards framing a specific policy to address this. However, recent IT-related legislation has included mention of children (those under the age of 18).

The Information Technology Act 2000 lays down the groundwork for data protection legislation in India, specifically outlining cybercrime offences and their penalties. A Personal Data Protection Bill was initially drafted in 2018 but tabled for a while after many modifications by the Indian Government. This draft matured into the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA) 2023, defining consent and regulations around

[20] Kingdon (2017); Kumar and Choudhury (2021).
[21] District Information System for Education (2010); Unified District Information System for Education (2018).
[22] Dedrick & Kraemer (1993); Subramanian (1992); Subramanian (2006).

data collection, analysis of datasets, transfers of data (health information, for instance) and non-personal data (relating to group or aggregated information). Even though the DPDPA became an Act in 2023, it will not come into force until certain provisions are operationalised through 'rules'. In the Indian context, this refers to the manner in which the policy will translate into action. For instance, the DPDPA demands 'verifiable consent' from a guardian before the data of a child is processed, but how this consent is to be obtained is not yet clearly defined.[23] It forbids any kind of data processing that may prove to be detrimental to the child, and prevents tracking, behavioural monitoring and advertising targeted at children. In early 2025, the government released a draft of rules which stated that children below the age of 18 should not be able to create social media accounts without verifiable parental consent. While this Act does not specify AI tools, it will be applicable to AI-based processing of data, including when data is collected and processed to train AI models.[24]

AI strategy is quickly emerging as an important concern in national planning across the world, including in India, not only as a tool to advance science and technology but also in economic and social development. Over the last few years, the Indian Government has been developing its national AI policy and strategies. In 2018, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry set up the Artificial Intelligence Task Force consisting of technical and administrative experts to explore the potential role of AI in manufacturing, healthcare, agriculture and public services, but recommendations related to children are absent.[25] The 2018 Niti Aayog *National strategy for artificial intelligence* report focuses on healthcare, agriculture, smart cities, transportation and education.[26] Even as the report's emphasis is on the strategic use of AI as a tool to improve performance across these sectors, it does note that certain 'barriers' need to be addressed, including putting in safeguards related to privacy and security, but it does not include any specific reference to children.

This is not to say that there is no discussion around the many concerns and opportunities that the digital world offers to young people, even as it is to be noted that regulation around these issues has been slow and most often reactive to specific crises, most often related to sexual exploitation or privacy violations. Several civil society groups in India working more broadly on child rights (including Divya Disha,[27] Nanhi Kali,[28] Akanksha Foundation[29] and Social Media Matters[30]) have advocated for more proactive legislation that will both protect children while recognising their right to

[23] Shaharbanu & McDonald (2024).
[24] Dhanoa & Rishikaa (2025); Mohamed (2024).
[25] Artificial Intelligence Task Force (2018).
[26] Niti Aayog (2018).
[27] https://divyadisha.org
[28] www.nanhikali.org
[29] https://akanksha.org
[30] www.socialmediamatters.in

participate in the digital world for education, socialising and leisure. On the other hand, the state has, through a variety of youth-focused initiatives,[31] recognised that young people represent the country's future, calling for investments in their education and skill development. However, these projects, like most digital literacy efforts, have aimed to increase levels of skill and productive use of digital tools (now including AI). The main bodies concerned with school education in the country – the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) – have both articulated positions on developing 'digital literacy' as key to achieving the goals of the National Education Policy 2020.[32] Schools, therefore, have introduced courses aimed at building digital literacies at the middle and high school levels, most of which now also include modules on AI.[33]

Overall, the nature of the discourse and the direction of regulation of digital tools specific to young people (or its limitation to access, education and productivity) is reflective of the cultural imagination of childhood as a period of supervised growth and children as subjects requiring protection and nurturing, but mostly without agency.

Attention given to media and children in India has been patchy and has emphasised technopanics,[34] with a concern for the possible negative effects of media on children.[35] However, it is also clear that young people in India are leading increasingly digitally mediated lives, although levels of access and use are differentiated by socioeconomic status,[36] as reflected in much of the popular conversation in the mainstream press. In some ways, this has extended the technopanics conversation, with anxieties expressed in newspaper opinion pieces or public panel discussions about the harms of fake news, image manipulation, and now, the use of AI tools like ChatGPT.[37] Recent scholarship explores how young Indians navigate the gaps between formal education and the skills needed to gain employment in a digital world, using digital technologies to access virtual learning resources and peer interactions to compete in the emerging platform economy.[38] This is reiterated in a recent op-ed in *The Hindu*, a leading English newspaper, which acknowledged that children and adolescents are an insufficiently understood group, but noted that 'the nature of digital services means that many cutting-edge AI deployments are not specifically designed for them but are nevertheless accessed by them.'[39]

[31] Ministry of Skill Development, Entrepreneurship, Youth Affairs and Sports (2014).
[32] Central Board of Secondary Education (2022).
[33] Central Board of Secondary Education (2025).
[34] Sarwatay & Raman (2022).
[35] Kasturi & Raman (2023); Pathak-Shelat (2023).
[36] Banaji (2017); Sarwatay & Raman (2025).
[37] Assisi (2024).
[38] Bhatia et al. (2021).
[39] Gupta & Deb (2023).

This study aims to broaden the conversation around young people's use of AI and GenAI tools like ChatGPT, Gemini and a host of others by drawing on the lived experiences of individuals in the age group 13-17, trying to understand the ways in which they interact with these technologies and make sense of them. As has been observed,[40] children's views and experiences around their digital lives are rarely considered as inputs to policymaking or even literacy initiatives. Studies in other contexts have underscored the fact that young people occupy a very different world from these policymakers and educators, one in which their everyday encounters with society, relationships, learning and work occur within a digital environment.[41] If we are to support their digital lives with forward-thinking regulation that encourages creative, ethical and productive engagement with potentially transformative tools like GenAI, we have to begin by listening to what they have to say.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study was guided by the larger collaborative project designed by the Digital Futures for Children centre (DFC) initiative, jointly run by the London School of Economics and Political Sciences (LSE) and the 5Rights Foundation. The broad aim of the project was to understand children's experiences with GenAI, discover the potential impact on their rights, and to gain insights to inform regulation and remedies. The research was approved by LSE's Ethics Committee (Ref: 439180). The interview guide was developed by the team at DFC and used with adaptations where necessary to suit the local context. The guide included questions and discussion points around awareness, use, digital practices and speculations around ethical implications, using a variety of scenarios that prompted reflection and response.[42] Participants were also encouraged to share experiences and ideas related to GenAI and digital media use more generally that may not have been raised by the interviewer.

The study in India employed a convenience sampling method to recruit a sample of 18 children for qualitative interviews concerning their usage and understanding of GenAI Apps and tools. Children were recruited by the three researchers in their respective cities (Ahmedabad, Mumbai and Hyderabad) in roughly equal numbers. We attempted to gather a diverse set of contacts including a hostel and an NGO (non-governmental organisation or non-profit organisation) that housed or worked with underprivileged youth, as well as neighbourhood and personal contacts to ensure a varied sample in terms of age, gender and socioeconomic class. The wide range in socioeconomic class

[40] Sarwatay et al. (2021).
[41] Byrne & Burton (2017); Livingstone et al. (2017).
[42] For further details about the methodology, see Stoilova et al. (2025).

also ensured a diversity of schools, education systems, native languages and access to technology. This approach facilitated our access to a diverse subset of children aged 13-17, who may have otherwise been difficult to reach through traditional methods. However, a sample of 18 cannot be representative of the breadth of diversity within the Indian subcontinent, and this study serves as an entry point into understanding children's use of GenAI, while establishing the need for further research that addresses different contexts across region, gender, caste and class. We interviewed children who had some familiarity with using GenAI, which already selects for children with relative privilege in terms of language, income, schooling, access to technology, etc.

Following informed consent from the parents and assent from the children, semi-structured interviews were almost all conducted by the three authors in person, at the participant's residence, at a cafe (in the case of one child), and in the premises of the NGO, and audio-recorded with consent from both participants and guardians, ensuring ethical standards were maintained. One interview was done over Zoom, due to difficulties in coordinating schedules and managing travel time. Participants were given a short description of the project in simple language, and understood that their involvement was entirely voluntary, with the option to stop the interview and withdraw at any point.

Interviews lasted on average around 45 minutes, were automatically transcribed and translated, and manually verified by the respective interviewer, checking for correctness against the recording. The transcripts were read closely to derive individual insights and to connect themes across participant conversations. The AIRights coding framework was applied to organise themes deductively, while the close readings helped contextualise the themes and add nuance. Participants' experiences and ideas were organised along the various dimensions listed in the framework. However, we would like to note that the interview guide did not directly ask children about their rights and was not structured according to the 11 principles for Child Rights by Design, as we expected that children might struggle with this framework. Instead, the guide followed more intuitively children's own perception of GenAI, asking about activities, literacy, support, etc. Children's rights were addressed more directly via seven rights-based scenarios (e.g., on equality, education and wellbeing), presenting children with dilemmas and asking for their reactions. For the analysis, the 11 principles were extracted deductively or surmised from the broader conversations and reactions to the scenarios. This is reflected in the different balance between how much data was available for each principle. For instance, 'Age appropriate' and 'Consultation' were covered less as children in India tend to be rarely asked about their personal opinions, even about matters that affect them.

Care was taken to have a mix of children from working-class and middle-class families as well as from more affluent families. The participant group (see Table 1) includes 9 girls and 9 boys, ranging in age from 13 to 17, with 5 attending international schools, 7 national board schools, and 6 subsidised state board schools. All the participants lived and studied in urban settings. Interviews were conducted in a mix of English and the local language (Hindi, Gujarati or Telugu). While the limited sample size precludes broad generalisation, the interviews conducted nevertheless allowed for initial insights into children's GenAI usage that were contextually grounde

Table 1: Country sample (India)

Participant (pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Type of school[43]	Area of residence[44]	SES[45]	Type of school	GenAI used
Yasar	17	M	Private subsidised, state board	A	Low income	Personal smartphone	ChatGPT, Meta AI
Advaya	13	F	Private elite, national board	H	Middle income	Parent's phone, laptop, and tablet	ChatGPT, Grammarly
Manisha	16	F	Private elite, international board	M	High income	Personal laptop and smartphone	ChatGPT, Gauth AI, Meta AI, Canva AI
Riya	15	F	Government school, state board	M	Low income	Personal basic smartphone, shared computer in school	ChatGPT, Gemini, My AI, Canva AI, Other
Ishika	15	F	Government school, state board	M	Low income	Personal basic smartphone, shared computer in school	ChatGPT, My AI, Meta AI, Perplexity, Other
Shreya	15	F	Government school, state board	M	Low income	Personal basic smartphone, shared computer in school	Gemini, Meta AI, Other

[43] For reference, we categorised the schools into four: private elite, private mid-range, private subsidised and government schools. Private elite schools have the highest tuition, and so these usually have students from affluent families and typically teach the curriculum developed by Cambridge level, IB (International Baccalaureate) or national level school boards such as CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) or ICSE (Indian Certificate of Secondary Education). Private mid-range schools, while not as expensive as private elite schools, still consist of students from upper-middle-class families and teach CBSE or ICSE board curricula. Among the participants, some went to schools run by charitable institutions, which we labelled as 'private subsidised'. These schools typically intervene as social institutions to provide education to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Government schools are usually free of cost to attend and follow the curriculum developed by the state-specific education board.

[44] A = Ahmedabad, H = Hyderabad, M = Mumbai.

[45] In our sample, the household income varied between INR 200,000 a year to over INR 10,000,000 a year. We categorised these into four groups: low income (under INR 500,000), middle income (between 500,000 and 5,000,000) and high income (over INR 5,000,000). In addition we used 'upper middle income' and 'lower middle income' to designate income levels at the lower and higher ends of this spectrum. This categorisation is based on our sample where we selected for children who had some experience with using GenAI, and is not indicative of low-, middle-, or high-income figures for India. More information about India-wide figures is available from Azim Premji University (2024).

Kavita	15	F	Government school, state board	M	Low income	Personal basic smartphone, shared computer in school	ChatGPT, My AI, Meta AI, Other
Sameer	15	M	Private elite, international board	M	High income	Personal smartphone, and laptop	ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, Other
Aditya	17	M	Private elite, international board	H	High income	Personal iPad	ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Character.AI
Sagar	14	M	Private mid-range, national board	H	Middle income	Parent's laptop	ChatGPT, Sora, Gemini, Copilot
Anya	13	F	Private mid-range, national board	H	High income	Personal iPad	ChatGPT, Meta AI, NotebookLM
Vishnu	15	M	Private elite, international board	H	High income	Parent's laptop, personal iPad, smartphone	ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, Canva AI
Mohan	13	M	Government school, state board	H	Low income	Parent's smartphone	ChatGPT, Meta AI
Tara	15	F	Private mid-range, national board	H	Upper-mid income	Personal tablet	ChatGPT, Meta AI, Character.AI, QuillBot
Govind	16	M	Private mid-range, national board	H	High income	Personal laptop	ChatGPT, Meta AI, Copilot, Gemini
Trisha	14	F	Private mid-range, national board	H	Middle income	Father's laptop, parents' smartphone	ChatGPT, Character.AI, GrokAI
Nadeem	17	M	Private subsidised, government board	H	Low income	Personal smartphone	ChatGPT, Meta AI, TurboLearn
Sanjeev	14	M	Private elite, international board	A	Lower-mid income	Parent's laptop and tablet	ChatGPT, QuillBot, Grammarly

Findings

The 18 young people who participated in the study expressed varying levels of familiarity with and understanding of GenAI tools, but all had interacted to some extent with them. While they were comfortable describing their engagement with the tools, and responded thoughtfully to the ethical and functional dilemmas presented in the scenarios as part of the interviews, it was, almost without exception, difficult to get them to talk expansively about their use of these tools outside the educational context.

As we applied the principles in the Child Rights by Design Framework to the analysis of the interviews, we noted that the participants were able to speak to some principles more than others. Socioeconomic background, level of ability to speak and write in English and the type of school they attended were all factors that seemed to moderate the nature of their responses and the level of detail they felt comfortable sharing. The findings are presented here with the responses under each theme (principle) preceded by a short account of children's general use of GenAI, digital literacy, knowledge and skills.

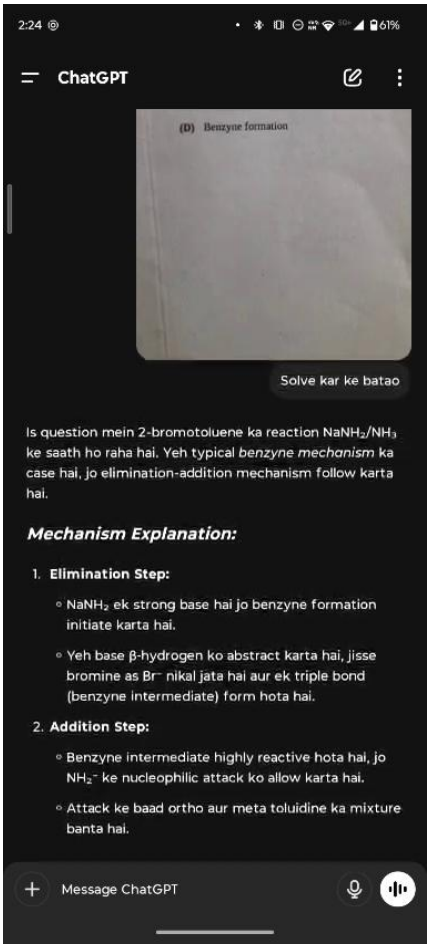
Children's use and understanding of GenAI

The participants used a range of devices to access GenAI tools. Some had their own phones or tablets with internet connectivity while others borrowed devices (usually laptops or phones) from their parents. Their entry points to GenAI varied, with ChatGPT and Meta AI (embedded in social media apps including WhatsApp) being the most commonly used. Others mentioned were Gemini, Grammarly, QuillBot, My AI (Snapchat), Character.AI, Copilot, Perplexity, GrokAI and Suno (a music-generating tool).

As with other kinds of technology use, children in India are expected to use GenAI mostly for educational purposes, and this was reflected in our study. Use of GenAI can be broadly categorised into: for schoolwork, for general information or knowledge, and for leisure.

The participants seemed to use GenAI outside of school, when they needed further guidance about homework, or if they felt a question may be too simple to raise in class. Nadeem (17), for instance, talked about asking GenAI about the scientific reasoning for his chemistry schoolwork, such as 'Why does water sometimes not freeze at 0 degrees Celsius?' (see Figure 2). He believed that such questions were too simple to ask a teacher, but were essential to his understanding of the subject matter.

Figure 2: Nadeem asking GenAI questions about chemistry reactions



The participants aged 15 and under tended to use GenAI particularly for grammar correction and style improvements in their essays. Sameer (15), for instance, described the help he got from GenAI for his schoolwork:

> ***For school, we have to prepare a speech to make it more engaging [or] more funny sometimes. [Or we have] to make it short... I use it for those purposes. I also use them for research sometimes, like, to give case-based answers. Like I upload an image and tell the AI, 'Can you please explain this thing in this image?' so it does a good job of explaining it to me.***

As part of schoolwork, the participants might use GenAI to create outlines for group or individual projects, or other circumstances that may require brainstorming ideas for creative questions, such as drawing a comic. Interestingly, only a few explicitly mentioned asking for sources when interacting with GenAI. This was usually because they had received some guidance in school or from parents regarding GenAI use.

Using GenAI for school percolates into using it for general knowledge needs or asking GenAI questions that the participant was generally curious about. For instance, Aditya (17) said,

> ***I use AI to find out anything, anything that I'm curious about. Like, just the other day I was thinking about dinosaurs. So I looked up what was the first dinosaur that they found.***

These curiosities varied across socioeconomic backgrounds and needs, but it is clear that the participants were asking GenAI questions that were more general in nature, ranging from questions about dinosaurs to religion.

The participants generally began to use GenAI for help with schoolwork, and for some, this then expanded into leisure use. Generating images for entertainment was a common use among those we interviewed. Sameer (15), for instance, discovered, after

using GenAI for questions related to mathematics, that it was also good at 'creative things' like 'making jokes'. Manisha (16) talked about asking Meta AI to entertain her when she was bored,

> ***The other day, I was a little bored so I opened Meta AI on, you know, WhatsApp, and I asked it to write me a poem about, I don't know, something about the moon or something like that.***

In most cases, the participants used GenAI either on their own or (rarely among our cases) with some supervision from their parents. When using GenAI for group projects at school, they admitted to occasionally using it to play around with friends. For example, Sagar (14) and Manisha (16) made unusual and funny cards and posters for their friends and family, Ishika (15) created stories to share with her friends using prompts and ideas from an AI tool called Short Story Prompter, while Riya (15) talked about creating rap music with her friends using Beatbox AI. Sagar (14), Tara (15), Ishika (15) and Trisha (14) all used chatbots on various apps to chat about their favourite shows, films or actors. Ishika talked to a chatbot version of her favourite actor Emma Watson, and Sagar used chatbots for 'shenanigans' with his friends.

Literacy, knowledge and skills

Most of the participants had a general sense of how GenAI worked, with varying levels of sophistication. Their responses ranged from Trisha's (14) vague 'It is a bot which helps us gather information about various things', to Ishika's very basic 'it generally copies all the information from the internet' and Sanjeev (14) and Advaya's (13) explanation that GenAI was something that had been taught to mimic the human brain.

Some of the participants from more privileged backgrounds were slightly more knowledgeable, using terms like 'machine learning', 'neural networks' and 'training databases' in their explanations. For example, Sagar (14) explained:

> ***I mean, it is a trained model of AI. So, it has a large database. So, it consumes a lot of data. It's also deep learning AI. So there's also the three subsets of AI. So AI, ML and DL. So deep learning, this is one of them. It also uses some artificial neural networks. That's what I know.***

This level of understanding correlated to the kinds of schools they attended, as well as their parents' education and careers – with parents and schools being aware of the possibilities and concerns around GenAI, and communicating this at some level to their children/students. For those attending international schools there were some rules surrounding use and engagement with GenAI, with teachers talking about plagiarism

and ethics. The levels of understanding – in terms of knowledge about how the technology of GenAI works and higher levels of understanding about who and what trains, controls, owns or uses the information – were, for the most part, correlated with socioeconomic background. According to Sameer (15), from an upper-middle-class household,

> ***So, I know about neural networks which train these AIs to think like a human and I think that they collect the data which they have been prompted. They train based on that, like, what is right, what is wrong. They are manually entered, that you should talk like this, you should not say rude words like that. So I think … it's called assisted supervised learning in AI. So yes, I think I know how that works, but I'm not entirely sure.***

Still, there was a lot of naivete around technology and its implications. Regardless of how much they understood about how GenAI worked, most of these young people viewed technology as a neutral tool to be used, and tech companies were seen as largely trustworthy.

Many of the participants used the most easily available tools, that is, those built into apps or sites they were already using – like Gemini, Meta AI and Copilot. ChatGPT has become a euphemism in India for GenAI, so all of the participants were familiar with it and had used it, mainly on school computers or laptop browsers where it was not required to download the app separately. Others had come to understand which tool worked best for what purpose, using 'humaniser' AI tools like QuillBot to avoid being caught out by teachers, and reminding us that the key to efficient use was in learning to write the right prompts, which was seen to be a skill in itself. Here, Sameer (15) explains how the correct language must be used in GenAI prompts in order to get a precise answer:

> ***Well, I did learn that with AI, you have to be to the point. Like, nothing is assumed and everything you need to state upfront. Like, you know, there's a common phrase like, 'it's fire' to mean that it's really cool in our modern language. But for the AI, you cannot use such language because they are literally GenAI. So, they're neither Gen Z nor, you know [Gen Alpha].***

While the participants from more privileged backgrounds tended to have some amount of direction and supervision from parents and teachers with regard to use of AI, for those from middle-class and working-class families, there was very little supervision or help; they tended to discover it themselves and figure out how to use it on their own and by sharing information with their peer group. When asked about how they learned how to use it, all the participants said that it was very easy to use: 'there is nothing to

teach' and 'you will learn it once you use it'. This ease of use, and the quiet (almost sneaky) yet large-scale adoption of GenAI tools, seems to have occurred partly due to the way in which GenAI tools have seamlessly been integrated into already popular apps like Google Search and WhatsApp, presenting itself as just a shiny new feature of a familiar tool.

Equity and diversity

How the participants understood issues of equity and diversity seemed to be a function of the exposure they had through school, home or their neighbourhood. Most of the participants interacted with GenAI tools in English, even in cases where they were less comfortable conversing in the language. While a few mentioned the issue of linguistic marginalisation (or diversity) with digital tools in general, they had not really given much thought to other forms of exclusion.

All the participants used the free version of the GenAI applications they mentioned. They were cognisant of the potential advantages of GenAI in the classroom (and outside) for people with different abilities, and identified various situations where GenAI could help make life easier, although these uses were hypothetical rather than something they had personally encountered.

> ***It's not like we should encourage, but it is easier for people who are old and alone at home who cannot go and meet doctors in real life. (Trisha, 14)***

> ***I think it can definitely help people a lot with health, say, with, like, directions or something like that within a city, or say, providing legal help to people who are who are underprivileged or things like that. Definitely, with the breadth that AI is covering now, there's a lot of scope for positive impact, helping different types of people with different types of problems. (Manisha, 16)***

The participants welcomed the use of GenAI to create audio or visual transcripts for those with hearing or visual impairments. Nadeem (17), for instance, talked about TurboLearn, a GenAI app that can be useful to a child with a hearing impairment:

> ***Earlier, when the teacher would come and teach, he would not understand… Now, as I told you, with TurboLearn, it changes what the teacher used to teach into notes. It has become very good. It was not useful for me because it was giving me extra information I did not need. There were no questions***

> ***related to NEET.46 Now for that child, what is happening is that the teacher has converted what she is saying into notes.***

The participants could also imagine GenAI helping students wanting to learn at their own pace. For instance, Tara (15) recalled a lesson in English where a computer and a robot helped a child learn lessons at his own pace in his own home. She described a scenario where the child was not expected to learn faster just to keep up with the rest of the class.

Figure 3: Yasar asking AI questions in transliterated Urdu and script Urdu

The current language support of GenAI is impressive, but there is a lot more to accomplish with regards to local languages. For instance, Yasar (17) primarily used ChatGPT in Urdu, sometimes with transliterated Urdu, but usually with the Urdu script. He described some grammatical and spelling errors in the Urdu script, which were corrected when he used the text-to-speech option. These mistakes did not significantly impede his ability to use ChatGPT, but it was something he was very aware of (see Figure 3).

Sameer (15) describes how AI translated Hindi very literally, which could be jarring:

> ***Like, I had to write a speech in Hindi and … I had to recite it, and obviously with Hindi it is much less easy to use AI because they don't work in multiple languages so you basically have to write a speech in English and then translate it to Hindi. And the problem with translation is that it takes the literal translation so the proverbs will actually sound much weirder in English.***

While the participants were aware that GenAI was not perfect at answering in Indian languages, this did not seem to be a major disadvantage for those already using AI. It could, of course, be an entry barrier to those not already comfortable with digital tools or with English.

[46] NEET is the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test, the Indian medical entrance examination administered nation-wide for students who have passed high school, i.e., Grade 12.

While representations of religion did not come up in most conversations, two of the Muslim participants asked GenAI for information about Islam, and were largely satisfied with the responses. Nadeem (17) said:

> ***Yes, for entertainment we tell it, there is a person who is standing on the mountain, praying or doing something, you make a photo of him. Or like Independence Day comes, we all want the flag with my name written on it. So it makes that image.***

Similarly, Yasar (17) also described asking ChatGPT a question about Islam and the ritual of fixing graves:

> ***So I asked questions about it, like, some people fix graves, they cement it. So he47 [ChatGPT] said that it is not written anywhere, so it is wrong to do this. So first he told me about the Hadith and the Quran. So, he told the different groups that they believe this and that. Yes, he told in detail that the different groups believe this is right and this is wrong. Then, he gave arguments from the Quran and Hadith that yes, it is written like this. So, you do as it is written in the book.***

In this way, Yasar (17) believed that he was able to receive answers about topics that he cared about, and felt satisfied with the answers.

Overall, the participants expressed some dissatisfaction with language support when using GenAI, but it was not significant enough for them to stop using the tools. It is important to note here that some basic knowledge of English is absolutely necessary for a child to be able to use GenAI, knowledge that may be inaccessible to many children in India. Additionally, the participants believed that GenAI could be a useful addition to classroom teaching, particularly for those who may be differently abled or have special learning needs.

Best interests

The participants seemed to be grappling with the trade-off between their own development as opposed to using GenAI for schoolwork. They understood that

[47] Yasar and Nadeem's interviews took place mostly in Urdu/Hindi, and both referred to the AI tools they were using in the masculine 'he'. This is partly because in Hindi/Urdu all non-living objects are assigned a male or female gender – there is no neutral gender. This assignment, however, does not necessarily have a logical connection to physical characteristics or gender assignment. However, because this was not a direct line of questioning in the interviews, the researchers refrained from making meaningful conclusions from the use of 'he' for GenAI tools. Other participants referred to GenAI as the neutral 'it'. Some research in chatbot design alludes to the gendering of technology, but further research is required. See Bastiansen et al. (2022); Feine et al. (2020).

overusing GenAI may mean that they were not learning what they needed to learn at all. Trisha (14) said,

> ***So if we're going to really try to understand something, we just have to ask it, but not every time. We can't always go to ChatGPT and search for answers or we are going to depend on it forever … the companies also should limit and maybe create robots only for certain professions.***

This concern did not seem to arise from the fear of getting caught by teachers, but from the understanding that using GenAI impeded them, as students, from being confident in their ability to work on problems themselves. Vishnu (15) said,

> ***Problem solving is a skill, and if you use AI for that, then you're not going to develop the skill, but only if you have no time left maybe you can use ChatGPT just to finish the work, but for homework only. If you're stuck on something and you can't ask anyone, that's when you should use AI.***

The participants were constantly treading the line of how much help they should be taking from AI. Advaya (13), for instance, specified that she did not directly copy answers from GenAI output, but only used it as inspiration or as something to build upon. For instance, when she was expected to write about terrestrial landforms for homework, she used GenAI to understand the different kinds of landforms that exist and to make an outline of what needed to go into the assignment. She then developed this further using other materials like textbooks and encyclopaedias.

While the participants thought that GenAI could be very helpful in terms of learning, some described the value of having a human teacher. Aditya (17) described the emotional connection that a teacher has with their students as a way for teachers to understand what students may specifically need:

> ***I think, when it comes to students, if we're talking about a teacher, it should be human. Because if there is no connection with the teacher and the student, that emotional connection, AI may not understand what a student actually needs. Because in classrooms, you'll find students of different levels. You won't find all the students having A grades. So the AI may not know what each student needs, what kind of attention they deserve. So, it will not work out for all the students. But then it can work out for some students.***

Trisha (14) described a similar opinion, in that GenAI could be 'knowledgeable and intelligent, but they cannot understand our emotions, nor can they show their emotions

towards us [like human teachers can]'. In this sense, the participants were aware of ways in which GenAI could not fully replace human teachers despite its efficiencies.

Talking to GenAI about personal feelings and experiences was brought up by the participants, usually with the caveat that it was always better to speak to a human being and make a connection. On the one hand, Nadeem (17) said that it was great to ask GenAI for advice because he could ask questions multiple times without fear of being reprimanded or judged, but on the other, he believed that it was good for his overall development to call up a family member and speak to them, even if they may not always say what he wanted to hear. Similarly, Aditya (17) mentioned that,

> ***I think the cause would be loneliness because the person may not have people to talk to, and then talking to these bots and developing that connection with them makes it worse because when they do that, after they get attached to that certain bot they cannot actually go and talk to others. The bots are not realistic because they are made to say things that you want to hear. So when … they actually go and try to talk to a real person, it may not give them the same satisfaction that they get from talking to the bot. So that closes them off completely.***

Most of the participants recognised the dangers of too much use of GenAI, that it could hamper learning and skill building and human creativity. Ishika (15) explained her feelings about GenAI use, saying,

> ***Because if … I use it for writing entire poems and entire stories, then at some point I won't be the one writing the story. It's AI itself that's writing it and it will just damage my creativity.***

Yasar (17) used the Urdu-Hindi word *kaamchor*, meaning a person who is lazy and avoids work, when he talked about his GenAI use:

> ***I became a person who avoids work and took help from it [AI]. But then when the teacher found out, he got angry and I felt bad. I could have done it myself, but I didn't do it. I was a kaamchor myself. Yes, it is a kaamchori thing. It is better to do it yourself.***

In summary, the participants questioned if GenAI was good for their development even as they increasingly used it for more than schoolwork. They were aware that it was not in their best interests to directly copy what GenAI output, and that doing so would harm their ability to learn. Additionally, they valued the presence of a teacher who could be emotionally present in the classroom. Finally, they worried that their social relationships might suffer if they relied on GenAI to talk about their feelings.

Consultation

Young people in India in this age group are often not part of the general conversation when it comes to issues of design and regulation, treated both by industry and the state as recipients and consumers of technology. Children traditionally have been constructed as a group that requires protection and nurturing, and not as active agents who can influence their contexts.[48] In most traditional Indian families, children are not encouraged to express their opinions, and many topics (such as sex, sexuality, gender politics, caste inequality and religious hegemony) are not openly discussed within families, creating a culture of silence around them, or accepted ideas are simply transmitted normatively. However, several of the participants seemed to be from more progressive households with a less hierarchical orientation. Even so, we had to coax them out of the idea that we were looking for 'correct' or 'acceptable' responses. The larger culture of technology adoption plays out, as mentioned earlier, against a broader social acceptance, and even celebration, of digitality's promise.

Thus, the participants generally did not see themselves as stakeholders in the process of GenAI development – they were usually not consulted by their parents or teachers regarding the few rules that they were supposed to follow with regards to GenAI use. Some went to schools where teachers discouraged direct GenAI use for writing, but these decisions were not usually made in consultation with them.

The participants did express opinions about how GenAI *should* be, especially regarding how it was used and what decisions it was capable of making. For instance, Govind (16) wondered if a GenAI self-driving vehicle could make the choice between saving the person inside the car as opposed to saving a pedestrian – if it came down to it.[49] He worried that if GenAI was deployed so deeply into a system in the real world, it might have far-reaching consequences for everyday life. Vishnu (15) also said:

> ***I don't think the Google health advice is good. It's not accurate at all. It exaggerates it a bit too much. I think [Ada Health] should be better because it's designed for a specific task. Most health apps always say, recheck this information with a doctor. I think that should be enforced. Obviously, it can't really be enforced, but maybe the app could give some information that it's certain about. If it's not really certain about some information, it should just not give it.***

[48] Kaur (2021).
[49] This is a common scenario that is often used to describe the complexity of training ethical AI models that possibly Govind had been exposed to in a classroom discussion.

The participants thought it was important to provide accurate and consistent information, and the older participants seemed to understand that GenAI did not always do that. By and large, they believed that it was necessary to verify the information they got on GenAI by asking for sources and checking them. Because they understood this, many believed, as Aditya (17) put it, that it should be clear 'what AI is capable of' so that 'they know what they can use it for and what they shouldn't'.

Age appropriate

Children are likely to be convinced by the deceptive design patterns of GenAI chatbots. Because of the conversational way GenAI responds, there is a certain trust that is built that obfuscates issues of privacy, safety and misinformation.[50] This is in line with a report by Australian scholars who have advocated for the need for more critical digital literacies.[51] Among the participants we spoke to, most of them did not quite understand how GenAI worked, or how it was able to answer questions with precision in such little time. Some of them speculated or guessed how they thought it worked, but none of them seemed to fully understand the technology. The participants described GenAI as 'reading their mind' or learning how to answer from knowledgeable experts. Sanjeev (14) described GenAI as being 'just a brain without a heart'. Rarely, a participant mentioned that GenAI might not be appropriate for someone their age. Tara (15), for example, said,

> ***Firstly, it's not age appropriate. Even for older people, it's not. But for young people to watch it, it's quite dangerous, right? And it gives ideas. I saw 4th graders[52] talking about stuff they shouldn't be. Even 2nd graders started dating and everything. All schools, all students do that. They know about dating and everything.***

She was implying that children found out about things from GenAI that were beyond what they should learn at that age, particularly without the knowledge of their parents. This kind of self-reflection was, however, rare in our findings. Most of the participants did not express concern for age-inappropriate content in GenAI conversations without specific prompting.

When asked how they thought GenAI worked, many described it in terms of a search engine, imagining a tool that searches, ranks, and displays relevant links on a page. The predictiveness of GenAI was not mentioned at all. Tara (15), for instance, understood that the data of what questions she asked GenAI would be stored in 'their database', but was sure that 'no one checks it'. Similarly, when we asked Yasar (17) if he worried about

[50] Kapania et al. (2022); Shen & Yoon (2025).
[51] Leaver & Srdarov (2025).
[52] Usually aged 10-11.

his data, he could not understand why he should worry because 'why would an important person like the owner of a specific AI company be interested in what [he is] asking AI?' This suggests that children could benefit from learning more about possible data harms from AI models.

This lack of awareness about how GenAI works reflects the reality that even parents and teachers do not seem to limit GenAI use among the children. In some private schools, teachers seem to discourage use that can be categorised as plagiarism, but among more disadvantaged sections, adults are likely less digitally savvy than their children. Ishika (15), who belongs to a working-class family, informed us that her parents did not know about AI at all, so there was no question of them making rules about her usage. Nadeem (17) and Yasar (17), who also come from a similar background, did not think that their parents could (or should) guide them on how to use AI. Mohan (13) used GenAI tools to help his mother promote her services as a cook. On the other hand, Advaya (13), whose parents were both highly educated, only used GenAI with her mother's permission. Her mother, in fact, taught her how to verify information that she read on ChatGPT. Age appropriateness, therefore, is a complex matter that intersects with parental education and socioeconomic status. That said, the design of GenAI may lead to a kind of obfuscation of inner working or data collection that children are particularly unaware of.

Responsible

The responses with regard to this theme fell into two main categories – responsible use of GenAI on an individual level, and an understanding of responsible development and regulation of AI technologies. With regard to individual use, all the participants agreed that there could be ethical issues related to the use of GenAI tools. For instance, for schoolwork they more or less uniformly agreed that taking credit for something generated by AI was either wrong or ethically ambiguous, although they each had varying approaches to using and rationalising its use. However, here, too, the participants fell into two main groups.

One group said they would never take credit for something generated by AI, and would also never use it as a substitute for their own work. They emphasised its use for 'fun' (possibly what they saw as low-stakes) activities like creating cards, music, stories and poetry, and for homework help, rather than the homework itself. They used it for researching topics, better understanding concepts, looking for practice questions and answers, or as a more sophisticated search engine that was 'better than Google'. They were unambiguous in their statements about using GenAI only in these 'ethical' ways.

Kavita (15) shared what she would tell her teacher when she used GenAI tools for homework:

> ***I will tell my teacher that I have understood … that time I was not able to solve this question, but now I am able to solve it.***

Sagar (14) explained why he would not want to take credit for GenAI-generated work:

> ***It's important to say it's AI or not because it's your creativity if you did something. Because if it's AI, it's not really a big deal. AI can basically do everything. So if you do it, it just feels different. Because you can say you did it because it's your creativity.***

Some participants expressed their thoughts about using GenAI in cases where the teacher's explanation was not enough. Tara (15) mentioned that using GenAI was helpful for students who didn't grasp concepts as quickly as others, while another participant said it was embarrassing to ask the teacher to explain a concept over and over again, but they could ask GenAI as many times as needed. Govind (16) explained:

> ***There is an impact on our learning sometimes … yes, we have a problem because … our concepts are not clear. If our concepts are clear we don't need all those apps and we can make it on our own.***

The other group took a different approach, candidly admitting to using GenAI for schoolwork that was either too difficult or too time-consuming, or arguing that since giving the right prompt was important, they could legitimately take partial credit for the work. The decision to take credit for GenAI work would, according to Tara (15), depend on the audience – 'If it's close friends then yes, I'll tell them. If it's relatives, I won't because they don't really understand or know about AI' – and according to Sameer (15), it would depend on how busy he was: 'If I'm too busy with other more important subjects, so I'll have ChatGPT write the essay or make the presentation'. Curiously, and perhaps understandable given the social emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), many participants said it was 'okay' to use GenAI to write essays or construct stories but not to complete homework in science or maths.[53] In a general way, they expressed that the context would determine the level of use as well as the decision to pass off GenAI work as their own.

[53] In India's highly competitive, productivity-based educational context, STEM subjects are seen as harder, requiring more intelligence, and having more value since they are believed to lead to better paying jobs. Therefore, a student may believe it's okay to 'cheat' with GenAI for tasks like essay writing, while choosing to spend more time studying science and maths, and doing the work without help from apps.

Some admitted to what others referred to as 'cheating', with a sense of indifference and also of mischief, as if they were somehow gaming the system and gaining a sense of satisfaction over that choice – as when Tara (15) candidly explained how she used QuillBot to disguise her ChatGPT-generated answers and said 'Yeah, this is mainly for cheating', with a slight smile.

However, there was a sense of inevitability. The participants seemed to think of GenAI tools as being here to stay – everyone used them, so they had to use them as well to stay competitive. Trisha (14), for instance, acknowledged the dangers of too much GenAI use, but seemed to think its use was unavoidable and therefore accepted it:

> ***My friends do mix their code with chat GPT code and write essays and do many projects. And even in our classwork and records, we use chat GPT to write answers to certain questions.***

While Vishnu (15) said,

> ***The teacher just scolds them a little [when they use GenAI for homework]. Nothing much. So there are no real consequences to it.***

Responses from another participant, Anya (13), suggested that children like her were not really concerned with 'responsible' use. But she was aware of the need to acknowledge creation with GenAI and that there may both be legal and ethical issues involved, even though she was unclear on the details.

The second aspect of how the participants referred to responsibility was with regard to responsible development and regulation. There were varied responses, an important one being that technology is inherently neutral, and responsible use depended on the individual who used it.-For instance, Sanjeev (14) said:

> ***Let's say someone wants to commit a cybercrime or something like that. He gets the answer and he commits a crime. That person is responsible... I heard an example of someone using it for cybercrime... I think our thinking is responsible. Unethical thinking.***

While questioning the participants about what they would do in case of inappropriate or 'wrong' use, they offered various suggestions, with the simplest being reporting to parents and teachers, going all the way to filing a formal complaint to the cybercrime unit of the local police department. There was also a sense that governments and tech companies themselves should take responsibility if anything went 'wrong', although most found it difficult to imagine what exactly could go wrong.

Tara (15) suggested government regulation, but then quickly shook her head, saying 'The company should have limitations. Government can't do anything about it.'

Sameer (15) thought that everyone was implicated in responsibility with regard to AI. Like a few others, he said that it depended on the individual, but it was also the responsibility of (to a limited extent) parents and teachers, but mainly governments, and the community as a whole, to monitor and encourage responsible use.

Manisha's (16) comment revealed that some young people understood the importance of state regulation and for companies to abide by it:

> ***ChatGPT, for example. And yeah, huge amounts of profit over there. But if something goes wrong, then I think it would be traced back to the company itself. So, we need to hold them accountable. Yes. And if there have been any … understandings between the company and the government, if the government has also been involved in, say, the regulations of the company or just giving the company the license to do things like these that impact so many different people, then even the, well, even government should be held accountable.***

The participants also expressed the need for tech companies to design and develop better interfaces to encourage responsible use. One participant suggested that companies have 'ways' to better monitor the matching of age-appropriate content to users; another suggested that 'filters' be added for a similar reason; some suggested more government regulation; and all felt – to varying degrees – that tech companies needed to add guardrails to ensure privacy, safety and wellbeing. One participant even believed that tech companies had (or should have) an 'off' switch, should it lead to something dangerous. Sameer (15) noted:

> ***… technology companies, they are also at fault because if something does go wrong then they should have the veto power to be able to control it and immediately suppress it. They should not allow AI to be controlling them and definitely you should have an off switch … you should have something that can, you know, turn it off or … delete the repercussions.***

The participants did discern the need for someone to take responsibility for the possible negative consequences of GenAI use, but not all were clear about who this should be. While a few did mention parents and teachers, many seemed to allude to bigger players – the government and the technology companies – offering very specific suggestions to do with design.

Participation

Many of the participants used GenAI for entertainment – to generate images or comics they could share with their friends or family, to tell them jokes, or create characters that they could chat with, and also to compose music. For instance, Mohan (13) used GenAI to create images of cars and shared them on his Instagram account. Yasar (17) also described how he experimented with ChatGPT to generate an image of a boy sitting in a metro train, altering his prompts slightly to get the image that he had in mind (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Yasar experimenting with GenAI prompts to generate different images

Yasar also mentioned asking ChatGPT for advice about what colour to wear for the festival of Eid,

For example, I had to decide the colour of my clothes on Eid. That's why I asked [AI]. Because when you ask people, they have different opinions. Everyone has different opinions. So, I directly asked [AI] about my skin tone and what colour I should buy. [AI] told me some colours like grey and some light colours that you will like. [AI's] opinion was also good.

For these kinds of uses in particular, the participants experimented with prompts to see what gave them the most relevant answers. These experiments were almost playful – they did not have a specific aim in mind, but seemed to be simply interacting with a toy. Yasar (17) and some of the other participants understood that to get good answers from AI they needed to add as many details as they could. He thought this was a big difference between GenAI and using a search engine like Google; in the latter, too many details meant that you would not get a good match. Vishnu (15) said it was better to not be very vague and to give it more context to get better answers. Sameer (15) also thought that it was okay to take credit for something generated by AI: 'It will be to my credit that I gave the right prompt and I, you know, tinkered with the right things.' In spite of this, he did say that it would be wrong to not disclose that he had used AI.

While the participants did not express a 'sense of achievement' when getting good answers from AI, some of them did think that it saved them time and enabled them to study the way they wished to. Sameer (15), for instance, said,

> ***Yeah, like, I feel it's not worth my time to sit down and write about the causes of climate change. The main issue for me is whether I know the concept or not. If I don't know the concept, then I usually try to research and write it on my own as then I remember it better. But if it's of low relevance to my knowledge, then I don't really spend much time on it.***

The participants were constantly evaluating what deserved their time and what did not. Advaya (13) was very clear about not using GenAI to directly copy, but to give her a structure or some ideas to work with as she prepared to do her homework. When she was generating a comic about pollution for class, she said that it saved her some time because GenAI could give her ideas that she could use as a starting point. Struggling to generate original ideas to begin with is not something that she thought was important to her learning.

Something that emerged from the discussions with many of the participants was the potential of GenAI to enable children to participate more fully in class and support them to overcome some of the barriers of socioeconomic disadvantage. Nadeem (17), for instance, was not fully comfortable with English because until the previous year, he had studied in a school that used Hindi as the medium of instruction. ~~school~~ In class now, therefore, he was sometimes unable to understand the question, which he translated later through GenAI. While the translation was not perfect, he thought it was enough for his own understanding. Nadeem also used GenAI to find out how to get an EWS[54] certificate for himself without having to ask people who might not be able to give him accurate information. He asserted that GenAI gave him a definitive list of the documents required to get an EWS certificate, and informed him that he needed to go to his hometown to get it done. Similarly, Yasar (17) also asked for GenAI information about the Waqf Amendment Bill, a recent political amendment in India. As a student who did not have much access to newspapers, especially in a language he was comfortable with, he believed he received unbiased and clear information about the bill through AI. This enabled him to participate in political conversations that were relevant to him.

Nadeem (17), too, mentioned using GenAI in instrumental ways, for instance to ask for information about government schemes that were tedious to access and usually required a lot of running around. Similarly, he mentioned that he used it to seek advice

[54] EWS stands for Economically Weaker Section, which refers to those from families with a combined income of less than Rs. 8 lakh per annum. The EWS category provides a 10 per cent reservation in government jobs and educational institutions for eligible individuals.

on dealing with emotional situations like handling the aftermath of a fight with a friend. He also felt more comfortable using GenAI to ask questions:

> ***Yes, it feels like a tool. It is such that it will not tell anyone. And until I feel satisfied, I can ask it all the time. And it will keep answering me. And it is not so emotional that it will ask why are you asking this or not.***

This also suggests that there was an uncritical faith in the outputs provided by GenAI, and in issues that might be of a politically or culturally sensitive nature, this could lead to complications. Neither Nadeem (17) nor Yasar (17) alluded to the possibility of 'hallucination' attributed to GenAI tools in multiple instances. Their searches were, of course, specific, limited and factual, but in both cases they preferred to query the GenAI tool over asking another person.

Privacy

Most of the participants had only a vague understanding of data privacy and how data collection and data mining worked. Some of them did recognise in theory how privacy could be breached by GenAI tools, but didn't really feel it applied to them. As frequent (and often quite sophisticated) users of GenAI tools, mainly for school and 'fun', they didn't exhibit any sense of personal liability regarding their own privacy. But Sagar (14) offered a note of caution:

> ***… the most important rules of AI are don't share, I mean your personal information, respect the AI, I mean don't use any or don't try to generate anything explicit… I mean mostly … there's some set of ethical rules which you follow generally.***

Overall, the participants' understanding of privacy was extremely individualised. In their minds, privacy was understood with regard to only certain kinds of information. As long as they did not share information of an extremely personal nature – such as about family dynamics, personal relationships (including romantic and/or sexual relationships) and details related to their 'feelings' – and kept their interactions with GenAI to more general topics related to school, study, careers and hobbies, there was no danger of a privacy breach. Several shared some variation of the idea that privacy was not an issue because they only interacted with GenAI tools in a rational rather than emotional way. Riya (15) said succinctly, 'That's why we do not be so personal' and Kavita (15) explained,

> ***While talking with Chat GPT, we should be present in a mental way, talk with our mental mind. We should not be in a flow, talking in (an emotional) flow.***

Govind (16) said:

> ***So you then keep giving it information, right? It starts off by saying 'How are you today?' and then you say something and then it will ask another question … some hackers or other people can take that information and scam or fraud us. So it's better not to give more information to all these people (AI), only the required information.***

With regard to Meta AI, encountered as the chatbot on WhatsApp, Sagar (14) explained why he was not overly worried about privacy:

> ***Because you're not sharing anything, it's your own personal thing. It's your message, you can edit it, you can delete it and anything. And WhatsApp … it has a secure connection. So once you talk to someone, it only goes to them. Everything else is encrypted.***

This lack of understanding and concern seemed to have a couple of underlying reasons. First, the participants could not imagine that anyone would care about or want the data surrounding their interactions with the GenAI tools. In their minds these were commonplace interactions that everyone in their peer group was participating in and it was all fairly innocuous. Second, despite some being aware of the concept of digital and data privacy, they had had no personal experience of a breach, and did not understand how exactly this might occur. Many only had a generalised understanding of how AI worked through its easy accessibility and widespread use among their peer group. There was a level of trust in the large companies that embedded AI tools into their existing platforms, thus sidelining the issue of privacy – a concept that is culturally not as dominant as it possibly is in Western societies.

When asked if he would trust a GenAI company when it said it would store or misuse user data, Sameer (15) said simply: 'I mean, I have trust on Google, so yes, I would trust it.' Finally, since they didn't see the tech companies as predatory, but recognised that people could be potentially dangerous, their focus was on who *else* could read the chat, rather than who *owned* the chats. This came through in several of the interviews where participants felt strongly that data should not 'get out' or be 'leaked', or when they were concerned about who could gain access to their devices, or were worried that things like personal photos could be morphed into embarrassing images by AI.

Riya (15) suggested that they should be,

> ***… careful with the information that I'm telling the AI because at some point you can think of AI as someone who can listen to your problems but you have to be super-careful with what news you're giving to it. You can say in***

> ***broad [terms], and [use] words that can confuse the AI itself, so if someone is reading all the messages they won't get the actual idea of what is happening.***

Manisha (16) was one of the very few who expressed some real concern about privacy and placing too much trust in tech companies:

> ***I think at this point we've already reached the stage where we're putting an inordinate amount of trust in all of these companies because even with, say, Google Photos, we don't know how intimate those photos are or how personal they are. We're still trusting it to the company to store it on the cloud or whatever. So … trust issues … we've already crossed that barrier now.***

She was in the minority, however; for the most part the participants felt that the tech companies and their policies (of encryption, deleting old chats, indifference, etc.) would prevent any serious breach of digital privacy.

Ishika (15) explained confidently,

> ***Actually, in Character.AI there is this policy that they do not save the chats of deleted messages, so if you are worried that you might have said something super-personal, just delete the messages. They won't have records on the messages.***

Some of the participants' responses seemed to indicate that their use of GenAI for unsupervised play, to connect widely and to ask 'personal questions' about relationships or family dynamics without involving adults in any way, gave them a sense of control over their privacy, rather than the feeling that it was being undermined.

For instance, Tara (15) noted: 'I don't know [who owns my chats] … maybe it is mine and also the company's'. She gestured to show that it did not really matter as long as her parents and teachers did not know – indicating that for her, the boundaries to be protected were those she held with her peers. This is in line with work in other contexts where children have been found to be more concerned about privacy related to interpersonal connections.[55]

[55] Stoilova et al. (2020).

Safety

As with privacy, most of the participants had no clear understanding of, or had not personally faced, significant digital/online safety issues, although some mentioned possible harms. Many viewed safety mainly as it related to physical space, and it required further conversation and exploring for them to think of some connections between use and safety. This was surprising, given that such problems as online child sexual abuse, trafficking and sharing of pornographic deepfakes has received considerable media attention in India, and underscored the fact that there needs to be more conversation around these issues in classrooms and within families.

Nadeem (17), for instance, recognised only vaguely that there may be potential safety issues with GenAI use. He suggested that misinformation given by a GenAI chat may be harmful in some way for the person reading it, and considered that trolling or 'making fun of someone' could be hurtful.

For several of the participants, the theme of safety significantly overlapped with privacy. There was some recognition that a breach of privacy may lead to safety issues. The overarching assumption, however, was that if they kept their interactions impersonal and unemotional, and restricted their use to activities such as schoolwork and creative hobbies like music, art or creative writing, then safety was not a matter of concern.

When we probed further, some of the participants began to consider issues of safety in the digital space, and specifically with GenAI use. Aditya (17), for instance, connected safety with vulnerability, saying:

> ***I think it's really, really unfair and I don't think it [our data] should be that accessible. AI has no censorship limits. I do not think it should be made that accessible and it should not be created in fact.***

Vishnu (15), too, thought of it in terms of misuse of data and its harmful effects. Similarly, Sameer (15) mentioned online bullying as potentially unsafe and therefore a concern to be addressed. He also recognised the connection between mental health issues caused by online/AI use and safety. Ishika (15) and Tara (15) both mentioned a newspaper story about ChatGPT encouraging a student to commit suicide, and flagged the dangers of such interactions.

Sameer (15) suggested that actions such as online bullying were a violation of digital privacy and that people had a right not to be harassed. Sagar (14) referred to the Asimov story, *I, Robot*, to suggest that there was always a fear that GenAI could turn against us,

and that ethical and responsible use was a way to stay safe, including in terms of sharing personal information.

Riya (15) explained:

> ***I think [that] before conversation we should be in limit, we should be aware what we are saying … as it may collect some of our private information and that will later harm us in any way. So it is better [that] … we remind ourselves … we cannot be telling super-personal things.***

Overall, the participants had only a vague idea of the potential safety-related consequences of GenAI use, gained mostly through news stories, science fiction and peer interactions. While they vaguely recognised the dangers, they did not really view safety as a personal problem, as they considered themselves to be 'safe users'.

Wellbeing

Not all the participants thought of their use of GenAI as in any way relating to wellbeing. At least 7 of the 18 said that they viewed it mainly as a tool for schoolwork – to research topics for study, for careers and for general information. They considered it as an enhanced and more convenient version of search engines such as Google. They felt that they had no emotional engagement with it, and so there was no question of GenAI either contributing to their wellbeing or being detrimental to it. For instance, Riya (15) said, 'It helps us but that's what I was saying, that it can't replace us but can assist us.'

Advaya (13) responded simply, 'I don't think that I need AI to give me amusement. I have people.'

Some of the participants, however, did have ideas and interactions that related to wellbeing. Several expressed the idea of wellbeing as negatively related to GenAI use. They shared concerns about overuse and dependence, about GenAI killing creativity, making them lazy, hampering skill building such as writing and maths. Trisha's (14) related observation was both pessimistic and funny: 'People are going to become lazy and lazier day by day. They're going to use AI to even stand and sit.'

Govind (16) referred to concerns he had for a friend, saying:

> ***I think my friend has used [too much AI] because he always does gaming on the laptop and all those things. He never eats food and sometimes he gets sick and all those things.***

Ishika (15) spoke about the harms of getting emotionally attached to virtual characters or chatbots:

> ***There was some … boy was talking to some fictional character and he got really emotionally attached and … in the chat you can have fights so they were having fights and he got really sad.***

There were also concerns about misuse, inappropriate use (like morphing or creating images using AI), being hurtful and the impact of these actions on mental health and wellbeing. Trisha (14), for instance, referred to 'blackmail' through pictures or generating rumours that might have dangerous consequences: 'People are going to get sensitive. People are going to get very depressed. They will lead to suicides and all.'

Aditya (17), too, was concerned with overuse of GenAI and its effect on emotional wellbeing:

> ***I think the cause [of dependence on a chatbot] would be loneliness because the person may not have people to talk to and then talking to these bots and developing that connection with them makes it worse because when they do that after they get attached to that certain bot they cannot actually go and talk to others.***

Several participants expressed either explicitly or implicitly that their GenAI use contributed to their wellbeing – being able to ask questions about friendships, dealing with confidence issues and even fashion (e.g., a fight with a friend, advice as to what to wear on Eid).

Yasar (17), too, used GenAI for a variety of purposes that he recognised as contributing to his wellbeing, even though he didn't actually use the word. He mentioned using it for information regarding an important exam, when the GenAI app gave him the entire study schedule. He used it for reassurance when he did badly on a test:

> ***Like, I told it about myself… Then it wrote that 'you like music and poetry, which reflects your creative and soulful side. Overall, you are a thoughtful, hardworking and emotional person, who keeps following his dreams with passion'.***

He even used it for fashion advice, as mentioned earlier, asking GenAI what colours suited his skin tone so he could choose the right clothes for an Eid celebration: 'But still, I got a lot of benefits from this. It's better than to ask someone.' Nadeem (17) used GenAI for personality development, although he later mentioned that at the end of the day, it was probably better to talk to a person rather than AI.

There were also indications that the participants used GenAI to help them with difficult schoolwork, and in that way it eased their burdens, by reducing study and exam-related stress. For example, Tara (15) mentioned that GenAI was helpful to students who were struggling in school, including herself, because they could ask for concepts to be explained without fear of embarrassment or humiliation from classmates and teachers.

Sameer (15) also explained how he used GenAI tools for tedious or boring tasks:

> ***But there are these other things where you focus less on the content, I have to worry more about the formatting and how you will put it, so, for the climate change example, like, I know the causes of climate change, but it would be like a waste of time for me to actually put it all in a neat way, organised, so I think that if I already know something and if it's worth my time to use AI, then I use it.***

Finally, several of the participants, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds, recognised that using GenAI tools helped them in ways that contributed to their wellbeing, given their challenging life circumstances. They were able to use GenAI tools like ChatGPT, Copilot and Gemini to research career and study materials that they otherwise did not have access to, and they used Grammarly to help improve their vocabulary and grammar for greater English fluency since their parents and peers would not have the ability to help as much.

Overall, the participants expressed that engaging with GenAI in these specific ways gave them a new perspective on a topic or idea, helped them build confidence in their skills, offered suggestions on actions to take, and created a greater sense of wellbeing.

Development

The participants uses GenAI most for development-related purposes, particularly for education and schoolwork. Even though expertise with digital technologies closely aligns with socioeconomic status, GenAI has the potential to aid disadvantaged children to gain access to exactly the information that they are seeking. Yasar (17), who comes from a working-class background, for instance, asked GenAI about various scholarship programmes in the US and Canada and received thorough information. However, we know that even with access to information via the internet, there are many obstacles and challenges to equitable education in a country like India.

Children with educated and wealthy parents are able to use GenAI to achieve better outcomes in more diverse situations; they go to schools where assignments are based on real-world requirements and problems, and they are trained in soft skills like

communication almost as much as they are taught specific subjects. These (and other) advantages accumulate over years of schooling, and the ability to use GenAI effectively may be one more in this list of differences. For instance, Nadeem (17), who is appearing for the country-wide medical entrance exam NEET, thought that GenAI was not useful for him to directly prepare for this exam. He asserted that NEET consisted of multiple-choice questions based on advanced conceptual problems, and left little room for the creative thinking that GenAI could help him with. While there are free GenAI tools available for NEET preparation, Nadeem was unaware of them. On the other hand, Advaya (13), who is much younger, went to an international school that prioritised practical skills such as designing and implementing a research study in the students' neighbourhood. For this project, Advaya was able to use GenAI to help her design and plan the structure and methodology of her research study.

As mentioned before (see 'Children's use of GenAI' and 'Participation'), the participants used GenAI for schoolwork to understand concepts better, summarise difficult topics, generate structure for assignments or group projects or for grammar and tone correction in essays. When probed about how they learned to use AI, most thought that it was fairly self-explanatory; they asserted that you had to use it yourself to know how to use it. They also understood the advantage of GenAI in that it provided the answer faster than it would take if they made a similar search on a search engine. Tara (15) said that she liked that '[she doesn't] have to search for hours for something [she] can just get in seconds'. However, some participants wished that GenAI could give more personalised or specific answers to their questions. Riya (15) said,

> ***I was searching for career opportunities. What can I have in the future? But I was searching in the chemistry field. Even in the chemistry field, it gives the broad information. I have specifically mentioned my skills, my hobbies and all. But even after those, it gives the broad information.***

Riya was referring to requiring more information about career options at a crucial stage, and GenAI seemed to be fulfilling this need. However, this use also points to existing gaps in the education system that GenAI might be filling for now.

Under 'Participation' we outlined how children from disadvantaged backgrounds may use GenAI for help with schoolwork or to get information about government programmes. In addition to this, children learn how to use digital technologies through more leisurely practices, and this may help in the development of digital literacies, as some scholars from the Global South have pointed out, in the context of playful use of social media.[56] Through leisurely use, Nadeem (17) showed an interesting way that he

[56] Arora & Rangaswamy (2013); Bhatia et al. (2021).

experimented with AI. On receiving the correct answer when he asked GenAI what the functional unit of life was, he repeatedly told GenAI that that was the wrong answer. Nadeem was amused by the fact that in doing so, the GenAI apologised and might change the answer slightly. It was through this kind of experimentation that he had learned how to ask better questions to GenAI to get the answers he needed.

Many participants admitted that they thought that relying on GenAI too much would make humans unable to do certain tasks on our own. For instance, Aditya (17) said,

> ***So as I said, we use it as a tool. If we don't, everyone gets a little lazy when they start using AI … and in the long term they lose that capacity to think for themselves. So I think it should be used as a tool to give them suggestions. If we're talking about making music, give them suggestions on how they can start getting ideas of their own to make music, because I think AI is good at that – it's good at giving you suggestions and it's good at making stuff as well and I think that will only progress throughout the years, and it will get better, but I think that will make us worse so we should use it as a tool, or it could make it worse for us.***

Earlier we outlined how the participants thought that GenAI might not always be in their best interests – whether in terms of how they might not learn the necessary skills because they relied on GenAI too much, or that their interpersonal relationships might suffer because they chose to interact with GenAI instead of their friends or family. In addition to this, a few of the participants expressed the notion that GenAI may have 'developed bias' and therefore provide 'irrelevant answers'. However, habitual use of these tools, these young people noted, could lead to dependence on and acceptance of the outputs, despite a lurking awareness of the flaws of the large language models (LLMs).

Agency

The participants mainly showed agency in the way they chose to use GenAI tools in their lives. All made deliberate and strategic decisions about which tools to use and when, choosing different ones for different tasks. For instance, they mentioned deliberately choosing Copilot, ChatGPT or Claude AI for schoolwork, and using other GenAI apps like Character.AI, Beatbox AI or Canva's AI tool to have fun and create content for leisure purposes. Some showed strategic thinking in who they shared their GenAI use with, and in what contexts. Tara (15), for example, specifically mentioned who she would tell about her AI use (friends) and who she would avoid telling (teachers, relatives and parents).

Several participants considered GenAI a 'tool' that could be used as needed, but with some thought. Manisha (16) said,

> ***I see it as a tool, yeah, I am … I am awestruck by the things that it can do but it remains at awe, it doesn't go … doesn't go any further than that. So sort of, like, sometimes it's a last resort. Yes exactly… And I would prefer that it remained that way as well.***

Aditya (17) shared how he used GenAI to assist his creative process: 'I wanted it to help me out with chords. I wanted it to give me a certain note that I could use in my song that would harmonise with the other ones.' Explaining this further, he said: 'I think anything is best if we learn by doing it ourselves. So I think it was best that I spoke to ChatGPT and then I learned from it and then it learned from me.'

Almost all of the participants experimented with various GenAI tools in ways that worked best for them, knowing how to tweak and change prompts to get the desired results – for example, as a way to research subject topics in the curriculum, format school presentations, and even use it to write essays. Vishnu (15) explained: 'I don't use it for all the subjects, only research because it's not accurate in math. I also use it to give ideas for a birthday gift or an invitation. I can also use it just for fun. Sometimes it's fun to create images.'

Even as very few of the participants used GenAI playfully, those who did, did so with a sense of being in control. Trisha (14) used it to indulge her fascination with anime, while Mohan (13) played around with generating images of cars, and Aditya (17) used it to make music (albeit unsatisfactorily), to help him figure out the right beat for a composition. This may be how they subverted the 'inevitability' that they perceived in the entry of GenAI to their worlds to retain a sense of agency even as they understood it could be exploitative at different levels.

While several acknowledged that too much use of GenAI tools could lead to dependence and 'laziness', some chose to use it even when it felt like cheating – to keep up with the burden of a heavy workload and high expectations from parents. For example, Sagar (14) said that 'the only reason we use AI is because it automates things, makes things faster… I mean, you don't have time. Maybe you have 10 minutes left to write something … you just use AI maybe for a short science question. Maybe you need to know the answer and you don't feel like searching the textbook.'

Trisha (14) summed it up succinctly by saying GenAI allowed for 'less hard work and more smart work!'

All the participants were either bilingual or trilingual, and while all used GenAI in English, several also tried out using GenAI tools in their native languages. Yasar (17) described how he experimented with GenAI prompts in Hindu/Urdu, trying out what worked well. In a sense, he was training the model to work better for him in his own language. Similarly, Ishika (15) and Tara (15) experimented with GenAI tools – mainly Snapchat – in their native languages of Marathi and Telugu respectively.

With their continued use of GenAI tools and repeated attempts at prompts, these participants have come to believe increasingly in the trustworthiness of the GenAI responses they are getting. After checking with teachers or parents, and using other ways of cross-checking the information (like their textbooks, other reference sites found through Google, etc.), they have come to rely on what they see as the accuracy of their GenAI responses.

Sameer (15) elaborated on his strategic use:

> ***I have been checking it. They say the rule of three, get your information checked at least on three valid websites. So I used to, like whenever I get something, some new information, I used to check it. From other places... I try to make sure that I am never completely dependent on AI. I kind of think of it as a luxury where I can do it if I want to but if I can't, then, worst case, I have the skills needed to do it myself.***

One important aspect that emerged from these conversations was that for the most part the participants made their own decisions about how and when they used GenAI. The adults in their lives (parents and some teachers) either did not understand what it meant, had given up regulating it (like teachers), as very few schools had a rigorous school policy or guidelines for GenAI use, or they decided to make autonomous decisions without telling the adults in their lives the details or extent of their use of GenAI tools. We speculate that this is an area that runs under the radar for many adults, and that children therefore seize the opportunity to make decisions on their own, giving them a level of agency and autonomy that they may not often have in other aspects of their lives.

Recommendations

Our conversations with these 18 young people offered an array of insights about their attitudes, expectations, knowledge and, most importantly, their practices in relation to GenAI, a technology that is rapidly becoming seamlessly integrated into the digital environments and tools they routinely use for schoolwork and for leisure. The barriers for entry into an AI-enabled future seem extremely low, given that these young people are already comfortable with the platforms they run on. A GenAI tool then becomes just one more app to load on their smartphone or a widget to be clicked on as they work in a browser window. This plays out against the backdrop of a rather patchy policy environment in which children's lives and their needs and desires are simply not key drivers. However, it is also an opportunity to insert into such policies as the Digital Personal Data Protection Act or the IT Act[57] the consciousness children bring from their daily interactions with GenAI. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) of India has recently called for inputs to the proposed AI governance guidelines[58] from citizens and civil society organisations, which, even at this point, does not reflect the interests of children.

GenAI has entered these young people's lives at a point when technology use has not only become normalised in most aspects of life, but in the Indian context, into an environment where there is a high degree of trust in most 'modern' tools. Even where there is initial hesitation to adopt, as in the case of mobile banking or mobile payment apps, the rate of adoption of technologies that reduce friction has been high.[59] GenAI, on the other hand, has slid quietly into our every day, on the backs of platforms we are already dependent on. As one of the participants noted, for a child used to habitually using Google Search, the transition to querying ChatGPT seemed natural, raising few questions or concerns about possible consequences, and a perfect way for dark patterns to enter undiscerned into their daily interactions with GenAI apps.

Our findings also make clear that it is important to equip young people with the critical skills and the intellectual and psychological tools necessary to live fulfilling and meaningful lives in a world where GenAI is changing the nature of learning, play and interaction. But it is also equally, if not more, important to advocate for guardrails – through regulation and design – that will prevent the runaway adoption of GenAI and its

[57] Government of India (2000).
[58] IndiaAI (2025).
[59] Pal et al. (2019); Thakur (2013).

integration into spheres of life that should be preserved for the development of human creativity and joy.

Our recommendations stem in part from the broader context within which young people's use of GenAI unfolds. Clearly, children in India are already well into the age of AI. While the participants are in the age group 13-17, teachers have reported children as young as 7 and 8 (2nd and 3rd graders) are aware of tools like ChatGPT and talking about their use in the classroom.[60] Some of the things pointed out by the participants – inadequacy of classroom instruction, the problems of language (the dominance of English) and the emphasis on product over process – are intrinsic to the schooling system in India, and young people are using GenAI to sidestep or negotiate their way around them. The panic around GenAI then becomes a way to avoid deeper conversations around education reform. Similarly, a retreat into chatbot interaction may be a reaction to an alienating social environment rather than a technology-generated problem. Clearly, we need to be talking about GenAI harms in a more nuanced fashion, in more public forums, with a wider range of stakeholders, while also acknowledging its many exciting possibilities – as indeed, the participants pointed to.

Here are our key ideas for moving this conversation forward.

- **Achieving a balanced perspective on GenAI use.** As young people's use of GenAI suggests, it holds great promise while also posing risks. While education around harms is important, we would also be served by placing a greater focus on developing specific GenAI capabilities that can foster inclusion and empower otherwise marginalised children and young people to participate more seamlessly in education, work and cultural life. This would also mean making such tools available to users, accompanied by initiatives and programmes that would equip them to use these tools in creative and ethical ways.

- **Promoting diverse use.** Advocating with GenAI developers to design tools and interfaces that allow a broader range of young users to creatively and efficiently engage with these technologies, including making interfaces multilingual, and enhancing the discoverability of underrepresented knowledge bases.

- **Consulting children.** Create opportunities for young people to be consulted on their opinions and recommendations for GenAI use. Children are using GenAI for far more than just their schoolwork, and this must be adequately accounted for when evaluating potential outcomes or harms. In India, government-backed use of GenAI in education is on the rise, but these policy measures do not fully

[60] Raghavan (2025).

consider the consequences of children using GenAI for other purposes. This kind of use remains invisible until policymakers and other stakeholders specifically seek it out.

- **Educating children about the inner workings of AI.** It is essential to teach young people about how GenAI works, both from a technological and a business perspective. As a type of 'sociable technology' that appears to 'talk like a person',[61] GenAI elicits excessive trust in the information it delivers. Younger children are particularly vulnerable to such dark patterns. Children should be made aware of how GenAI employs a predictive mechanism from already existing data (which may be unreliable), how the data is stored, and about the implications of data ownership.

- **Building awareness about child rights related to the digital environment, especially regarding safety and privacy.** Children also need to be made aware of their existing human and digital rights, with a specific recognition of safety and privacy. This should probably begin early in the school years, with appropriate reinforcement as they progress to higher levels. Issues of safety and privacy regarding GenAI can often manifest differently in the Global South, where 'AI authority' gains further infallibility due to local cultural vulnerabilities.[62] Further research within these contexts can help us discover how vulnerable populations may be harmed by biased data sources.

- **Emphasising digital literacy and online resilience** to promote greater wellbeing among young people and their interactions with AI/social media. The lessons from social media use and 'addiction' can be considered as we move into the GenAI age, particularly the use of chatbots.[63] This would also involve a clearer categorisation of digital skills when it comes to the use and application of GenAI across various domains of activity.

- **Advocating for policy initiatives that emphasise data protection regulation** and online safety regulation, as these can facilitate a child rights perspective in digital design.[64]

- **Supporting parents** to play a more substantial and guiding role in their children's digital lives, including the need for verifiable consent. Parental mediation in India tends to be either restrictive or completely hands off, when

[61] Alberts et al. (2024).
[62] Kapania et al. (2022).
[63] Vissenberg et al. (2022).
[64] Pothong & Livingstone (2025).

> there is little or no understanding of the technology; the need for open conversations around GenAI use needs to be emphasised.[65]

Young people are enthusiastic early adopters of technology, in general, and they make it their own at a speed and in ways that the old order (parents, teachers, even tech companies) cannot fit into existing logics. In the Indian context, this also means attending to the many inequalities and access gaps that exist and often limit children from all backgrounds from participating in their digital futures. What they need are thoughtful and flexible infrastructures of care that operate along the many domains they travel through, supported by the delivery systems we have at our disposal: education, parenting, regulation and design.

[65] Sarwatay et al. (2021).

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Appendix I: India statistics

Table 2: Share of people who use the internet (% of total population)

2019	29.52
2020	43.41
2021	
2022	
2023	57.54

Figure 5: Share of people who use the internet (1995-2023) (as % of the population)

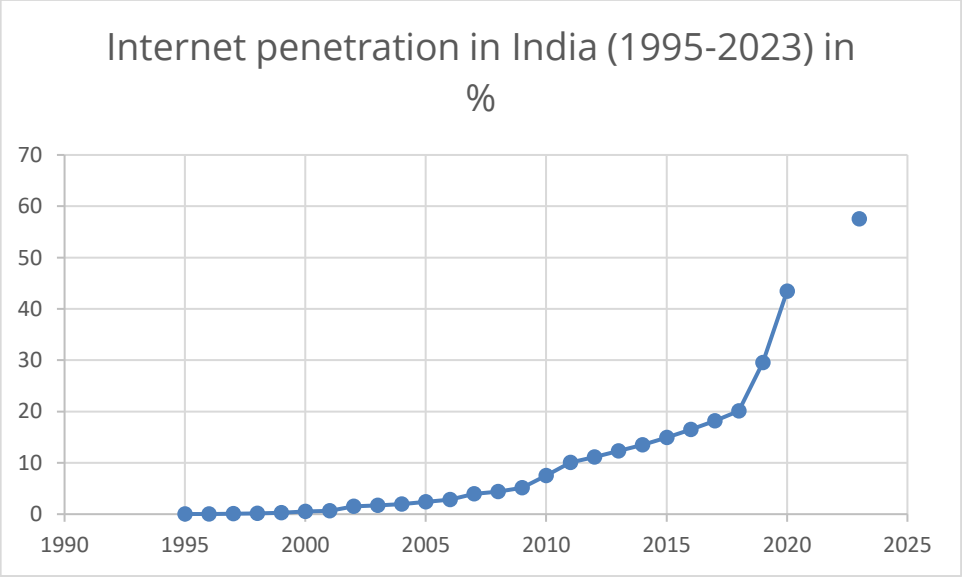

Table 3: Mobile phone, smartphone and internet usage in India[66]

Age group	Indicator	Rural		Urban	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
15-24 years	Percentage of people who own a mobile phone	74.8	51.7	82.7	69.5
	Percentage of people who used the internet during last three months preceding the date of the survey	95.7	91.1	97	95
	Percentage of people who sent messages with attached files during the last three months preceding the date of the survey	87.7	80.4	91.9	87.7
15 years and above	Percentage of people who own a mobile phone	80.7	48.4	90	71.8
	Percentage of people who own a smartphone among those who own a mobile phone	79.2	75.6	89.4	86.2
	Percentage of people who used the internet during last the three months preceding the date of the survey	72.1	57.6	85.5	74
	Percentage of people who sent messages with attached files during the last three months preceding the date of the survey	67.2	50.9	79.1	65.8
Households	Percentage of households that possessed at least one smartphone	82.1		91.3	
	Percentage of households that have access to the internet within household premises	83.3		91.6	

[66] Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation (2025).

Table 4: Share of Indians who use mobile phones and the internet by education (%)[67]

	Mobile phones		Internet	
Educational level	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**
Higher education	100	99	96	95
Secondary	97	94	79	74
Primary	90	82	46	36
Illiterate	62	45	13	8

Table 5: Share of Indians who use who mobile phones and the internet by income (%)

	Mobile phones		Internet	
Income quintile	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**
Poorest	84	67	50	34
Second	89	73	58	41
Middle	91	77	63	46
Fourth	94	83	69	53
Richest	97	90	82	69

Table 6: Use of mobile phones by gender (ages 15 and above) (%)

Gender	Exclusive use	No use	Shared use
Male	47.61	8.61	43.78
Female	27.18	21.32	51.50

[67] Waghmare (2024a).

Table 7: ICT skills by age group (2023) (%)[68]

ICT skill	Teens	Twenties	Thirties	Forties	Fifties	Seniors
Connect and install devices	25	30.80	19.30	10	5.10	2
Create presentations	8.10	12.80	7.40	3.40	1.70	0.60
Download and install software	35.80	40.50	26.60	14.20	7.20	2.90
Send emails	36	44.90	30.10	17.40	9.70	4.50
Send messages	75.20	79	64.10	41.30	23.50	11
Transfer files between devices	28	33.60	21.30	11.20	5.80	2.50
Use formulae in spreadsheets	11.90	17.30	10.40	5.20	2.80	1
Write programs/code	0.70	1.90	1	0.30	0.10	0.10

Table 8: ICT skills by demographic group (2023) (%)

ICT skill	Region	Men	Women
Create presentations	Rural	4.80	2.30
	Urban	16.10	9.70
Install software or apps	Rural	23.90	11.70
	Urban	42.70	27.10
Send and receive emails	Rural	26.10	13.30
	Urban	47.80	32.10
Use formulae in spreadsheet	Rural	7.30	3.50
	Urban	21.50	12.90

[68] Waghmare (2024a).

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