

GRADES 3–5 · AGES 8–11 · 45 MINUTES · PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS

Can a computer be your friend?

THE PROPOSITION

"A chatbot that talks to you every day can be a real friend."

A gentle first pass at the big questions – does a chatbot feel anything, and what makes a friend a friend? Philosophical chairs lets kids switch sides as their thinking moves, which is exactly what we want them to notice.

STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO

- List what a friend does that a chatbot can and cannot do.
- Explain that a chatbot's 'kindness' comes from patterns in text, not feelings.
- Name one thing you should never tell a chatbot and why.

VOCABULARY FROM THE FIELD GUIDE

Large language model (LLM) · Consciousness (in machines) · Privacy (when using AI) · Artificial intelligence (AI)

WHAT'S IN THIS PACK

- Teacher guide: background, vocabulary, agenda, format, positions, questions, roles, rubric.
- Student handouts (photocopy one per student): position organizer, sentence starters, exit ticket.
- Standards: CCSS ELA SL.3.1 / SL.4.1 / SL.5.1; CCSS ELA SL.4.3 / SL.5.3 (identify a speaker's reasons); ISTE Students 2.d (personal data awareness).

PRINT

US Letter, plain paper, duplex. Teacher pages once; student pages one per student. Free to photocopy for classroom and homeschool use. Not for resale.

Background for the teacher

Read this before class. Students get a version of the same facts on their handout; you get the framing and the traps.

Companion chatbots are marketed to kids and teens, and many children have already talked to one through a game, a toy, or a phone app. They are fluent and warm because they were trained on a great deal of human conversation – not because there is anyone home. Nobody can prove a machine feels nothing, but nothing in how these systems are built suggests they do.

This lesson does not need to settle the consciousness question – philosophers have not. It needs kids to separate 'says caring things' from 'cares,' and to notice that a friend who never disagrees, never needs anything, and is available at 3 a.m. is missing something friends have.

The privacy piece matters at this age: chatbots usually store what you tell them, and a company can read it. 'Don't tell it anything you wouldn't put on a poster in the hallway' is a rule kids can hold.

RUNNING DISCUSSION IN GRADES 3-5

Short rounds, concrete examples, lots of moving. Fairness and friendship are the live wires.

- Keep each speaking turn under 30 seconds and rotate fast. Nobody speaks twice until everyone has spoken once.
- Use bodies, not just words: four corners, stand-if-you-agree, thumbs. Movement keeps the quiet kids in.
- Model changing your mind out loud. "I thought X, then Sam said Y, now I think Z" is the skill.
- Name the AI examples kids already know – the tablet voice assistant, the homework helper, the video app's recommendations.

Vocabulary

Pulled from the Hi, Bot AI concepts field guide (hibot.space/learn/concepts). Read each card aloud, then have the class rewrite it in ten words or fewer.

Large language model (LLM)

The kind of model behind most chatbots – a very advanced next-word guesser.

An LLM is trained on enormous amounts of text and learns to predict what token comes next given everything before it. That simple objective, at scale, produces fluent answers, code, and summaries – but fluency is not the same as understanding or truth. Most consumer "AI chat" today is an LLM plus safety layers, tools, and a user interface.

WHERE PEOPLE ARGUE

Calling an LLM a "stochastic parrot" vs. "reasoning engine" is a whole philosophical industry. The practical middle ground: it's pattern completion that often looks like reasoning because language encodes reasoning patterns.

Consciousness (in machines)

Whether a system can "experience" anything – mostly unsettled and contentious.

Philosophy of mind asks if machines could be conscious, sentient, or merely simulating conversation without inner experience. Current LLMs show no evidence of subjective experience; they generate text about feelings without necessarily having them. Ethical treatment of AI systems may eventually hinge on this

question – today it's largely theoretical.

Privacy (when using AI)

What you paste into a model may be stored, logged, or used to improve products.

Privacy in AI use means knowing whether your prompts are retained, reviewed by humans, used for training, or shared with subprocessors. Enterprise tiers often offer "no training on customer data"; consumer free tiers may not. Treat prompts like email to a third party: don't send secrets you wouldn't want leaked.

Artificial intelligence (AI)

Software that performs tasks we used to assume required human judgment.

A broad label for computer systems that recognize patterns, generate text or images, make predictions, or take actions based on data – without a human executing each step by hand. In casual conversation "AI" might mean a chatbot, a photo filter, a warehouse robot, or a stock-trading model. The term is intentionally wide: it describes a family of techniques, not one single product.

WHERE PEOPLE ARGUE

People fight over whether "AI" should mean "anything statistical" or only "systems that approach human-level reasoning." In policy and marketing the word gets stretched; in engineering it usually means a specific model or pipeline.

Warm-up

5 minutes.

On the board: 'A friend is someone who ____.' Collect ten endings fast. Circle the ones a computer could do. Leave the rest – those are the debate.

Agenda - 45 minutes

Minutes	Segment	What happens
0-5	Warm-up	'A friend is someone who ____.' Sort into could-a-computer / couldn't.
5-12	How the chatbot talks	Read the LLM card: it guesses the next word from millions of conversations. Do a class demo – start a sentence, kids call out likely next words. That's the trick.
12-32	Philosophical chairs	Two lines: Agree / Disagree, plus an Undecided row. Rule: before you answer, say back what the last speaker said. Switch seats any time. Teacher tracks how many switches happen.
32-40	The privacy corner	Ask: 'Who can read what you tell a chatbot?' Establish the hallway-poster rule together.
40-45	Exit ticket	Students complete the handout: can / can't lists and one privacy rule.

How philosophical chairs runs

Chairs face each other in two lines – Agree and Disagree – with a short Undecided row at the end. A speaker from one side speaks; the other side must summarize what was said before responding. Anyone may switch

seats at any time, and switching is praised, never mocked.

GROUND RULES – POST THESE

1. Attack ideas, never people. "That claim has a hole" – not "you're wrong."
2. One voice at a time. The listener's job is to be able to repeat what was said.
3. Evidence beats volume. A quiet fact outranks a loud opinion.
4. Changing your mind is winning. Say so out loud when it happens.
5. Nobody has to share anything personal. 'Someone I know' is always allowed.

The two positions

Starter arguments are scaffolds, not scripts. Strong teams find their own. Assign sides where the format calls for it; students record their real view on the exit ticket.

Yes – it can be a friend

It listens, it's nice, and it's always there when I'm lonely.

- Friends make you feel better, and it does that.
- Some kids don't have many friends, and this helps.
- You can talk to it about things you're scared to tell people.

No – it's a program

A friend has to actually care, and the program only copies caring words.

- It says the same nice things to everyone.
- It never needs you back. Friends go both ways.
- A company can read everything you say to it.

Discussion questions

OPENING

1. What is the difference between being nice and caring?

CORE

1. If the chatbot forgot you tomorrow, would it be sad? How do you know?
2. Can something be a friend if it never disagrees with you?
3. What should you never tell a chatbot? Why?

CLOSING

1. Is there a way a chatbot could be useful without being a friend?

Roles

Role	Job
Echo	Before speaking, repeats the last point in your own words.
Switch counter	Keeps a tally of seat switches and reports the total at the end.

Role	Job
Undecided voice	Asks one question of each side before choosing.

Assessment rubric

Share this before the debate. Judges and self-assessors use the same sheet. 'Meets' is the target; note above or below in the margin.

Criterion	Meets
Takes a position	I said what I think and gave one reason.
Listens	I can repeat what a classmate said before I answer.
Uses an example	I gave a real example from my life or the story.
Stays kind	I disagreed with the idea, not the person.

Exit ticket prompts

1. Three things a friend can do that a chatbot can't: ____, ____, ____.
2. One thing a chatbot is good for: ____.
3. My privacy rule: I will never tell a chatbot ____.

Extension

Write a short story where a kid's robot friend does something a real friend never would. What gives it away?

SEND HOME

Ask your grown-up: 'Have you ever felt like a machine was being nice to you? What did it want?'

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS ELA SL.3.1 / SL.4.1 / SL.5.1
- CCSS ELA SL.4.3 / SL.5.3 (identify a speaker's reasons)
- ISTE Students 2.d (personal data awareness)

More lessons by grade band, and the full AI concepts field guide, at hibot.space/learn/debates. Tell us how it went: hello@hibot.space.

Can a computer be your friend?

"A chatbot that talks to you every day can be a real friend."

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Companion chatbots are marketed to kids and teens, and many children have already talked to one through a game, a toy, or a phone app. They are fluent and warm because they were trained on a great deal of human conversation – not because there is anyone home. Nobody can prove a machine feels nothing, but nothing in how these systems are built suggests they do.

This lesson does not need to settle the consciousness question – philosophers have not. It needs kids to separate 'says caring things' from 'cares,' and to notice that a friend who never disagrees, never needs anything, and is available at 3 a.m. is missing something friends have.

The privacy piece matters at this age: chatbots usually store what you tell them, and a company can read it. 'Don't tell it anything you wouldn't put on a poster in the hallway' is a rule kids can hold.

WORDS WE'LL USE

Large language model (LLM) – The kind of model behind most chatbots – a very advanced next-word guesser.

Consciousness (in machines) – Whether a system can "experience" anything – mostly unsettled and contentious.

Privacy (when using AI) – What you paste into a model may be stored, logged, or used to improve products.

Artificial intelligence (AI) – Software that performs tasks we used to assume required human judgment.

MARK IT UP

Underline one sentence you agree with. Circle one you doubt. Write one question in the margin. Bring all three to the discussion.

Position organizer

Proposition: "A chatbot that talks to you every day can be a real friend."

Name: _____ Side (assigned or chosen): _____

OUR CLAIM, IN ONE SENTENCE

THREE REASONS – AND THE EVIDENCE FOR EACH

Reason 1:

Evidence (a fact, a definition, or a specific example):

Reason 2:

Evidence (a fact, a definition, or a specific example):

Reason 3:

Evidence (a fact, a definition, or a specific example):

WHAT THE OTHER SIDE WILL SAY – AND OUR REPLY

Their best argument:

Our reply:

VOCABULARY I WILL USE CORRECTLY

[] Large language model (LLM) [] Consciousness (in machines) [] Privacy (when using AI) [] Artificial intelligence (AI)

Sentence starters

Use these until you don't need them. The goal is to respond to what was actually said.

- I heard you say _____. I think _____.
- A real friend would _____, but a chatbot _____.
- I'm switching seats because _____.
- What would happen if _____?

GROUND RULES

1. Attack ideas, never people. "That claim has a hole" – not "you're wrong."
2. One voice at a time. The listener's job is to be able to repeat what was said.
3. Evidence beats volume. A quiet fact outranks a loud opinion.
4. Changing your mind is winning. Say so out loud when it happens.
5. Nobody has to share anything personal. 'Someone I know' is always allowed.

HOW PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS WORKS

Chairs face each other in two lines – Agree and Disagree – with a short Undecided row at the end. A speaker from one side speaks; the other side must summarize what was said before responding. Anyone may switch seats at any time, and switching is praised, never mocked.

YOUR ROLE TODAY

Role: _____

Role	Job
Echo	Before speaking, repeats the last point in your own words.
Switch counter	Keeps a tally of seat switches and reports the total at the end.
Undecided voice	Asks one question of each side before choosing.

LISTENING TALLY

Keep count while others speak. Claims: _____ Evidence: _____ Questions: _____ Vocabulary used: _____
Minds changed: _____

Exit ticket

"A chatbot that talks to you every day can be a real friend."

Name: _____ Date: _____

Three things a friend can do that a chatbot can't: ____, ____, ____.

One thing a chatbot is good for: ____.

My privacy rule: I will never tell a chatbot ____.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Criterion	Meets looks like	Me today (above / meets / below)
Takes a position	I said what I think and gave one reason.	
Listens	I can repeat what a classmate said before I answer.	
Uses an example	I gave a real example from my life or the story.	
Stays kind	I disagreed with the idea, not the person.	

TAKE IT HOME

Ask your grown-up: 'Have you ever felt like a machine was being nice to you? What did it want?'