

Children In The Era Of AI (Part One)

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Has there ever been a world like the one today, with its innovative advances in technology such as artificial intelligence (AI)? In our pockets, we have computers with much greater power than those of 50 years ago, which required whole warehouses to contain them.

The media consistently reports on stories about what's new and what's in the future of AI, things like self-driving cars, virtual assistants, and robotic housekeepers. Today's children imagine an even wilder set of scenarios.

Especially when it comes to AI's impact on children, we must ask how these systems could shape the way we interact with one another. The impact on the global economy could contribute as much as 20 trillion dollars by 2030. But at the same time, 30% of jobs today may be eliminated by then as humans become redundant because of AI replacing them or making their jobs obsolete. We are on the cusp of a world that is going to change unlike anything we have seen before.

A far-fetched AI scenario has already been designed to target privacy in the home. A little over a year ago, the toy-giant Mattel announced it had pulled the plug on plans to sell an interactive gadget for children. The device, called Aristotle, looked like a baby monitor with a camera. Critics called it creepy. Powered by artificial intelligence, Aristotle could get to know your child—at least, that was how the device was being pitched. According to a company release issued in January 2017, "Aristotle is designed to comfort, entertain, teach and assist."

Josh Golin, executive director of the advocacy group Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, says it was designed to "displace essential parenting functions, like soothing a crying baby or reading a bedtime story." He adds, ". . . so that the children would form an attachment to it"—that is, to the AI.

But Aristotle went further than that. It wasn't going to just give the child information; it would have been able to collect information from the child in the bedroom, and then upload it to the cloud. Parents, pediatricians and politicians raised concerns, including those about privacy. What would Mattel do with the information they could collect from children?

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About 15,000 people signed petitions asking Mattel to scrap its plans to sell Aristotle. A Mattel spokesperson told NPR in an email that after a review, the company's chief technology officer "decided that it did not fully align with Mattel's new technology strategy."

But the idea of Aristotle is not gone. In fact, AI-powered devices are already in the home, and more are on the way. This type of AI scenario should terrify every parent. Nevertheless, the idea behind Aristotle isn't too far from what many families already have: intelligent personal assistants such as Google's Home, Microsoft's Cortana and Amazon's Echo, which is run by its AI system, Alexa.

Like Aristotle, these devices use artificial intelligence to try to engage family members in conversations. Alexa can already identify who is currently talking. Their abilities are currently somewhat limited. For example, Alexa has a hard time understanding young children's questions. But the devices are designed to improve their skills over time. They can already provide entertainment for children—tell jokes, play "20 Questions," keep track of time, play music and answer question after endless question. Sounds like the perfect babysitter for the parent of the world, doesn't it?

Solace Shen, a psychologist at Cornell University who studies how children interact with robots, says, "In this way, these devices are great for kids." Solace adds, "Kids are so curious, and they can learn a lot of facts and information from the devices, without parents having to bring out their phones or computers."

But some of the concerns with Aristotle apply to Alexa and Google Home as well. In terms of privacy, both Alexa and Google Home are always listening to conversations. Once they hear a trigger word—such as "OK, Google" or "Alexa"—the device starts recording the conversation you're having with it or with your child or spouse. Then it uploads the conversation to the cloud, so it can learn better how to understand you and help you. Both Alexa and Google Home allow you to listen to the conversations, and the companies say you can delete them. Is anyone really naïve enough to believe that?

But what about these devices interacting with our kids? How is AI changing our kids' brains, or how they learn or process information? Are our children becoming less literate? Studies indicate we are losing the ability to do deep reading and we are learning less.

Here's what Dr. Jeremiah J. Johnston described in a September 1st *Fox News* article about his family's meal at Chick-Fil-A:

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We asked our nine-year-old, Lily Faith, to pray for our meal, and that's when it happened: "Dear Alexa, please bless our meal today, and Daddy ..."

Our entire family exploded with laughter (including some nice folks next to us). Lily, on the other hand, didn't think it was funny at all. She began crying and couldn't eat. Embarrassed, she exclaimed, "Daddy, you know what I meant!"

Dr. Johnson is president of *Christian Thinkers Society*, a Resident Institute at Houston Baptist University where he also serves as Associate Professor of Early Christianity. His latest book is "Unimaginable: What Our World would be Like Without Christianity." He continues in his article titled, "My Daughter Prayed to Alexa":

Lily's innocent mistake that day opened our eyes to how a small device that is becoming so prevalent in homes is making a huge impact on the thoughts and communication of our children.

Experts are starting to recognize the pressures on a new generation of children surrounded by artificial intelligence (AI), as well as computational neuroscience (which is, modeling how the brain does or does not work like a machine), machine learning, robotics, and 24/7 connectivity.

By the way, if you use your smart phone or Netflix, you are interacting with machine learning.

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Here are four things to know about the influence of artificial intelligence in the home:

1. AI will answer your kids' questions, even if you won't.
2. As any parent, teacher, or coach knows, children are full of questions, trying to understand how life works. If you are too distracted or closed off to them, someone or something else will answer those questions. Whether they turn to Alexa, Siri, Google Home, or even J.A.R.V.I.S., we need to consider who is behind the curtain programming these "smart" answers.
3. "I don't know, but I am always learning," Alexa responded when I asked a difficult question not long ago. Did you know Amazon Alexa is adding 5,000 skills every 100 days and now has over 30,000 skills?

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4. And guess what? If Amazon Alexa doesn't know the answer today, it may tomorrow with a new "Answer update" feature.

Everyone should be very wary RIGHT NOW, not in the future, about the abuse of this data by those who control it. Children are not experienced or mature enough to discern between fact and fiction from a ghostly voice on a device.

I Corinthians 13:11 When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

How can a child become an adult and put away childish things when an AI voice is filling his head with the latest socially re-engineered, anti-Christ pop-culture? Parents: beware. A child doesn't have the knowledge and experience to know and understand the dangers and evil influences that lurk behind pleasant, friendly AI voices which become his imaginary friend.

We certainly don't want to hear our child say, "Dear Alexa, please bless ... the Socialists."