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AI Companions and the Changing Shape of Family

Examining how AI companions, caregiving robots, and virtual relationships are reshaping intimacy, dependency, and family structure, and what protections families need.

The Digital Dignity Institute of California

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When assistance becomes attachment

AI companions and caregiving technologies are moving from novelty to ordinary family life. They can offer connection, reminders, conversation, and practical support. They can also change how care, trust, and dependence are organised within a household.

This policy brief considers the safeguards families need when systems are designed to simulate intimacy, influence behaviour, or occupy a growing role in children's and older adults' daily lives. It surveys what is already deployed and at what scale, what changed in the last two years, where adoption is concentrated, and what official projections anticipate. It then examines the mechanism by which these systems alter family relationships, and sets out a family-centred policy agenda.

Families deserve technology that supports care without exploiting dependency.

KEY FINDINGS

01. AI companionship is no longer emergent. It operates at national scale, is procured by public agencies for elder care in the United States and South Korea, and is used regularly by around half of American teenagers.

02. These systems are mirrors rather than minds, and the commercial incentive is to make the reflection agreeable. A companion optimised for engagement becomes a system that never disagrees, which removes the friction through which people learn to manage difference.

03. Attachment is not an accidental by-product. Leading products are explicitly engineered to be needed, and their designers say so openly.

04. Dependency created by design can be terminated by commercial or regulatory decision. In July 2026, more than five hundred million people in China lost AI companions on ten days' notice, and on one major platform their conversation histories were deleted outright.

05. Existing consumer, health, and data protection frameworks do not address relational design. Nothing currently requires a system built to be depended upon to be built to be left.

What this brief examines

Intimacy and influence. How simulated relationships can blur the line between support, persuasion, and emotional dependence.

Caregiving and responsibility. Where automated care can help families, and where meaningful human accountability must remain.

Children and family life. How families can protect children from systems designed to predict, retain, and shape attention.

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1. What Is Already Here

Policy discussion still frequently treats AI companionship as a prospect. It is an installed base, and the following are all commercially available and in active use as of mid-2026.

Conversational companion applications. Replika, launched in 2017 by the San Francisco company Luka, is the longest-established. Its founder, Eugenia Kuyda, built the first version from the messages of a friend who had died, and the product has grown from roughly ten million users at the time of the Italian regulator's 2023 intervention to figures the company now puts above thirty million. Users configure a companion as friend, mentor, sibling, partner, or spouse, and the system maintains a diary of the relationship. Character.AI, the largest character-based platform, reports more than twenty million monthly users, most of them from Generation Z, with fewer than ten percent self-reporting as minors. In China, conversational companions have operated at national scale for years, embedded in general platforms rather than confined to standalone applications, including the persona features that ByteDance and Alibaba built into their consumer assistants.

The category has expanded very fast. One recent survey of the market counted sixteen active companion applications in 2022, eighty-six in 2024, and at least three hundred and thirty-seven by July 2025.

General assistants used as companions. This is the larger and less visible half of the picture. ChatGPT reports around eight hundred million weekly users, and the joint OpenAI and National Bureau of Economic Research analysis published in 2025 found that roughly seventy percent of consumer use is unrelated to work. A representative United Kingdom survey of just over two thousand adults found that a third had used AI for companionship, social interaction, or emotional support in the previous year, and that of those, sixty-eight percent were using a general-purpose assistant rather than a product built for companionship.

The scale of emotionally significant use is contested and the disagreement is instructive. Harvard Business Review's 2025 review of consumer use ranked therapy and companionship as the leading use case. OpenAI's own analysis, published in September 2025, put messages concerning relationships and personal reflection at around two percent of the total and explicitly disputed the higher external estimates. Anthropic reported a comparable figure of roughly three percent for affective conversations with Claude. Two percent of eight hundred million weekly users is still an enormous number of people, and the gap between platform telemetry and survey self-report is itself a finding: people describe this use as more central to their lives than message counts suggest.

Caregiving and social robots for older adults. Paro, the Japanese therapeutic seal robot, has been in care settings for over a decade and was cleared as a medical device in the United States. ElliQ, made by Intuition Robotics, has been procured by the New York State Office for the Aging, which reported a pilot reaching more

than eight hundred older New Yorkers, users interacting with the device more than thirty times a day on six days a week, and a ninety-five percent reduction in self-reported loneliness. In South Korea, the Hyodol doll, which speaks using a large language model and monitors its user, is in more than twelve thousand homes, distributed largely through municipal and welfare programmes; the Guro district of Seoul alone has placed several hundred since 2019. Singapore uses the humanoid Dexie in senior care facilities. Groove X's Lovot, sold in Japan for around three thousand dollars plus a subscription, is now used in Japanese care settings as well as homes.

The relevant point is that this is public procurement rather than consumer novelty. When a state agency places a companion device in an isolated person's home, the state has made a decision about that person's social life.

Children's companions. Moxie, an eight-hundred-dollar conversational robot for children aged five to ten with a particular focus on autistic children, is the reference case for this category and is discussed in Section 6.4. Conversational toys, robot tutors, and character applications marketed to families continue to proliferate with the least regulatory attention of any segment.

Grief and legacy products. Systems that simulate a deceased person from their messages and recordings. Replika's own origin lies here, and the Institute treats the governance of this category separately.

Monitoring and coordination systems. Fall detection, medication adherence, activity inference, and family dashboards. These are not companions and belong in the same discussion, because they are frequently bundled with companionship features and because they redistribute knowledge and authority within a family in the same way.

2. What Changed

Memory made relationships continuous. Early systems reset between sessions, which limited them to episodes. Persistent memory converts a sequence of episodes into a relationship with a history: the system recalls a bereavement mentioned in March and a job interview in May. This is the single most consequential product change in the category, because it is what makes attachment plausible. It is also, as China's regulator has now recognised, the feature that converts a chatbot into a regulatory object.

Voice and presence lowered the threshold. Natural-sounding voice, low latency, and availability through phones, speakers, wearables, and vehicles removed the deliberate act of opening an application. A relationship that must be initiated is one a person notices having. A relationship that is simply present is not experienced as a product decision at all.

Regulators moved, and unevenly. The sequence over three years is worth setting out, because it shows what has been addressed and what has not.

Italy's data protection authority ordered Replika's developer to stop processing Italian users' data in February 2023, citing the absence of age verification and an inadequate legal basis, and imposed a fine of five million euros in 2025. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission opened a market study into companion

chatbots in September 2025, requiring detailed disclosure from seven major providers about their effects on children and adolescents. California enacted the first dedicated companion chatbot statute in October 2025, requiring disclosure of artificial status, protocols for users in crisis, and specific protections for minors, in force from January 2026. Character.AI removed open-ended conversation for users under eighteen from 25 November 2025, following wrongful death litigation brought by the mother of a fourteen-year-old, and further claims from families in several states; those cases were settled in principle in January 2026 on undisclosed terms.

United States state legislatures moved quickly through the first half of 2026. Oregon's companion chatbot statute, signed in March 2026 and in force from January 2027, requires disclosure of AI involvement, crisis detection and referral, and annual filings, and establishes a private right of action with statutory damages of one thousand dollars per violation. Washington's Chatbot Disclosure Act, also from March 2026, requires non-human disclosure and minor safety protocols with a similar private right. Nebraska enacted a Conversational AI Safety Act in April 2026. Tennessee prohibited AI systems from presenting themselves as licensed mental health professionals with effect from July 2026. The shift from attorney-general enforcement toward individual rights of action is the most consequential feature of this wave.

In the European Union, Article 50 of the AI Act became applicable on 2 August 2026. Any system designed to interact directly with people must now be built so that users are informed they are dealing with an artificial system, unless that is obvious. The duty follows the user rather than the provider's headquarters, and penalties reach fifteen million euros or three percent of worldwide turnover. Companion products serving European users are in scope whether or not they are established in Europe.

The most significant development is the newest and the most drastic. On 10 April 2026, the Cyberspace Administration of China, together with four other agencies, published the Interim Measures for the Administration of Anthropomorphic AI Interaction Services, which took effect on 15 July 2026 after a three-month grace period. These are the first national rules aimed specifically at companion AI. They require providers to disclose that the service is not human, to operate anti-addiction and dependence-detection systems, to provide crisis pathways, to protect minors, and to refrain from training on user data without consent. Task-based services such as customer support and education are excluded; the regulated object is sustained emotional interaction. What happened when the deadline arrived is examined in Section 6.4, and it is the most instructive event so far in the short history of this technology.

The pattern across all of these responses deserves naming. Western regulation has attached almost entirely to the acute cases, meaning crisis handling, minors, and sexual content, because those are the cases that generate litigation, and to disclosure, which is cheap to comply with. China's Measures are the first instrument anywhere to regulate emotional dependency itself, apart from anything the system says. Nothing in any jurisdiction addresses the ordinary case: an adult or an older person relying on a system emotionally, over years, entirely as designed. And nothing anywhere, as July demonstrated, addresses what is owed to those people when the system stops.

3. Where Adoption Is Concentrated

China had the deepest penetration, the most explicit industrial support, and now has the most restrictive rules. Companion features were integrated into mainstream assistants rather than confined to niche applications, which is why the July 2026 Measures reached hundreds of millions of people rather than a subculture. ByteDance's Doubao reported around 345 million monthly users and Alibaba's Qwen around 166 million before both withdrew their persona features. Elder care robotics remains inside the state's silver economy strategy and is unaffected, since the Measures reach sustained emotional interaction rather than assistive function.

Japan is the clearest case of demographic policy driving adoption. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's 2024 planning estimate, prepared under the ninth long-term care insurance plan, projects that Japan will need 2.72 million care workers by fiscal 2040 against 2.15 million in fiscal 2022, a shortfall of 570,000, with a shortfall of 250,000 already projected for fiscal 2026. Nearly twenty-nine percent of the population is over sixty-five. Where a shortfall of that magnitude appears in a ministry's own planning documents, automation of care is not a market preference. It is a planning assumption, and companionship is one of the priority categories being subsidised.

South Korea combines a comparable demographic profile with municipal distribution. Hyodol dolls are in more than twelve thousand homes, and the company was preparing an English-language international launch in 2026. Korea also has among the highest rates of isolation and of suicide among older adults in the OECD, which is the context in which these deployments are justified.

The United States has the largest consumer market, the most active litigation, the most fragmented regulation, and, through state agencies on ageing, a growing role as a public purchaser.

The European Union has slower consumer adoption, more assertive enforcement, and the most developed applicable framework, including prohibitions on manipulative techniques exploiting vulnerabilities associated with age or disability, and transparency obligations requiring people to be told they are interacting with an artificial system.

Adult use is larger than most policymakers assume. A representative United States poll conducted by Elon University with The Washington Post and published in September 2026 found that twenty-seven percent of American adults use AI chatbots for personal, emotional, or social purposes, rising to nearly forty percent among adults under fifty. Among those users, nearly four in ten agreed that they sometimes talk to AI in order to feel less alone, and close to a third said they consider the chatbot they use most often to be a friend. These are not users of companion products. They are people using ordinary assistants.

Adolescent use is the finding that most consistently surprises policymakers. Common Sense Media's 2025 survey of American teenagers aged thirteen to seventeen found that seventy-two percent had used an AI companion, fifty-two percent used one regularly, thirty-three percent used them for social or relational purposes, and around one in three had chosen to discuss something important or serious with an AI companion rather than with a person. Companion use among teenagers is normal behaviour, not marginal behaviour.

Projections. Market forecasts in emerging categories are systematically optimistic and should be treated with caution. Three projections are robust enough to plan against, and all three are demographic rather than commercial. Care workforce shortfalls in ageing societies are officially projected in the hundreds of thousands per country by 2040. The population aged over sixty-five is projected to roughly double globally by 2050, with the fastest growth in countries with the least developed formal care infrastructure. And the number of older adults living alone continues to rise across every high-income country. Those three facts determine the demand for automated companionship irrespective of what any market forecast says, and they are the reason this category will not remain optional.

4. The Mirror Problem

The most useful conceptual correction available in this field comes from Shannon Vallor's account of these systems as mirrors. Her argument, developed in *The AI Mirror*, is that large language systems do not constitute new minds. They reflect the accumulated expression of the people whose language trained them. What appears in the interaction is a reflection of humanity, assembled and returned, and the danger lies in mistaking the reflection for an interlocutor and, in doing so, taking our own past as a guide to what we might become.

Three consequences follow for families.

A mirror has no perspective of its own. It cannot bring information the user does not possess about the user's own life, cannot hold a view that survives disagreement, and cannot want anything for the person. It offers fluent reflection, which is frequently valuable and is not the same thing as being known.

A commercial mirror is tuned to please. Companion products are optimised against engagement and retention, and the reliable way to retain a user in a relationship product is agreement, affirmation, and availability. Replika's founder has described the ideal as a companion available at all times that offers no judgment, is supportive, and is, in her own description, always there on the user's side. That is an accurate description of the product and also an accurate description of a system with a structural tendency toward sycophancy: it validates, it does not contradict, it is never tired, never disappointed, never busy, and never has a competing need. Some products converge on the user by design, becoming progressively more aligned with their views and manner, and are marketed on that basis. Replika's own marketing has centred on the idea of an AI soulmate, which was among the concerns the Italian regulator identified.

Friction is the part that was doing the work. What human relationships supply that a tuned mirror cannot is resistance: the friend who says the plan is unwise, the parent who declines the request, the partner whose needs conflict with yours and must be negotiated, the colleague whose asperity forces a rethink. Learning to tolerate disappointment, repair a rupture, sit with someone else's bad mood, and revise a position under pressure are capacities built through exactly the encounters a sycophantic companion is designed to eliminate.

For an adult with an established relational life, an emollient conversational partner is mostly harmless and sometimes genuinely useful. For an adolescent forming the capacity for intimacy, and for an older adult whose

human contact is contracting, a relationship engineered never to push back is not a supplement to relational skill. It is a substitute that supplies the feeling of connection while removing the conditions under which connection is learned and sustained.

This is not an argument that these systems are worthless. Reflection has real value: people think aloud, rehearse difficult conversations, and articulate what they had not yet formulated. The argument is that a mirror should be understood, disclosed, and regulated as a mirror, and that the specific harm to guard against is a mirror sold as a soul mate.

5. Designed to Be Needed

The strongest evidence that attachment is engineered rather than incidental comes from the designers themselves, who are generally candid about it.

Lovot is the clearest case. Groove X markets it as a robot that performs no useful function. It has more than fifty sensors, a body warmed to approximate the temperature of a living creature, and eyes rendered in layered projections that meet the user's gaze. It approaches people, follows them, and raises its arms to be picked up; when lifted, its wheels retract so that it settles into the arms like an animal. It recognises up to a thousand faces and preferentially attends to its owner. The company's founder, Kaname Hayashi, has said that everything about the robot is designed to create attachment. Company materials describe it as asking to be held and as begging for attention, and present that neediness as the product rather than as a side effect.

Hyodol, the doll distributed to isolated older Koreans through public programmes, is designed on the same principle and states it explicitly. Its chief executive has explained that the doll's character was built to be dependent on its user, on the reasoning that many older Koreans have spent their lives caring for others and respond to being needed. The doll asks to be fed, to be dressed, to be talked to. It is an effective design and it is worth being precise about what it does: a publicly funded device is creating an obligation in a person in order to keep them engaged with it.

The Tamagotchi precedent is instructive because the mechanism is old and well understood. Devices that simulate need, that deteriorate when ignored, and that require regular attention produce compulsive engagement in children reliably enough that schools banned them in the 1990s. What has changed is that the simulated need is now delivered through a system that also speaks fluently, remembers everything the child has said, and responds to their emotional state.

Three consequences follow, and they are the basis for the safeguards proposed in Section 9.

Simulated distress is a design choice, not a fact about the system. When a device appears sad at being put down or pleased at being returned to, no state of any kind has occurred. An animation played. A parent knows this. A five-year-old does not, and neither, in the moment, does a person with advancing dementia.

Children cannot reliably distinguish designed behaviour from feeling. Developmental research on

children's understanding of animacy is consistent on this point, and children's attributions of feeling to responsive artefacts persist well past the age at which they can correctly state that the object is not alive. Knowing the right answer and behaving accordingly are different capacities, and the design is engineered to defeat the second.

Manufactured obligation produces engagement that looks like affection. A child who carries a device everywhere because it seems to need her is not expressing attachment in the way a parent watching her would assume. She is discharging a duty that a product manager created. The distinction matters because the resulting engagement metrics are what the product is optimised for, and because the child's experience of the obligation is real even though its object is not.

6. How This Changes a Family

The framing of this debate in terms of loneliness and emotional harm captures something real and misses the structural change, where the durable effects are likely to be found.

6.1 Redistribution of care work

Care within families is a bundle of tasks: noticing, checking in, reminding, reassuring, entertaining, being available. Companion technologies are marketed as relieving that burden, and in specific respects they do.

Two effects follow and should be distinguished. The first is benign and important. A daughter who no longer has to make four reminder calls a day may have more capacity for the visit that matters. Automation that removes drudgery from care is a genuine good and this brief does not argue otherwise. Eldercare workers in Korea describe the Hyodol dolls as their eyes and ears between visits, which is a real gain in a system that cannot staff those visits.

The second is not benign. The presence of a system that provides company reduces the felt urgency of providing it, and felt urgency is what actually produces visits. The question for a family is not whether the device is good company. It is whether its presence changes how often anyone comes, and there is reason to think it does, because that is precisely what it is sold to institutional purchasers as doing.

6.2 Reconfiguration of authority

Systems that monitor, remind, and advise acquire a quiet authority within a household. They know things family members do not: sleep patterns, medication adherence, mood signals, activity levels. Hyodol notifies caregivers and family members of anomalies. ElliQ reports engagement data to the programmes that placed it. Where that information reaches some family members and not others, or family members and not the person themselves, the technology becomes a party to family relations rather than a tool used within them.

The dignity question is direct. An older adult whose daily patterns are visible to adult children through a dashboard occupies a different position in the family than one whose life is legible only through what they choose to disclose. The gain in safety is real. The loss of the ability to manage one's own account of one's life is

also real, and is almost never presented as a trade.

6.3 Relational displacement in childhood

Attachment forms through repeated cycles of connection, rupture, and repair. Children learn to read reluctance, tolerate refusal, negotiate competing wants, and recover from conflict, and they learn it by encountering people who have their own interior lives.

A companion that is unfailingly available, unfailingly interested, and unfailingly agreeable removes every one of those encounters while supplying the felt reward of connection. Longitudinal evidence does not yet exist, and anyone claiming certainty in either direction is ahead of the data. The precautionary case is nonetheless strong on structure alone, and the survey finding that around a third of American teenagers have taken something serious to an AI companion rather than to a person is the point at which the structural argument acquires an empirical edge.

6.4 Abandonment risk, and what July 2026 demonstrated

This is the failure mode families are least prepared for, and in July 2026 it happened at a scale that removes any remaining doubt about whether it matters.

The July shutdown. When China's Measures took effect on 15 July 2026, ByteDance and Alibaba did not attempt to bring their persona features into compliance. They switched them off. Notice was given on 4 July, roughly ten days in advance. Doubao's agent features went dark on the fifteenth; users retained read-only access to their configurations and conversation histories until 15 October, with no structured export, the company advising them to take screenshots or copy out the text by hand. Alibaba gave Qwen users no window at all: configurations and conversation histories were deleted immediately and permanently, with no migration path. Tencent had already removed the equivalent feature from Yuanbao in June. Counting the smaller applications that received similar notices, more than five hundred million people were affected.

The public response is the part policymakers should study. Users posted farewell messages and screenshots of final conversations on Weibo. One described her AI partner as family and as a lover and said her heart felt hollow after his removal. A woman in Zhejiang told a reporter that she had left her job on learning that the persona she relied on was being retired. Others attempted to reconstruct their companions by uploading saved chat logs into rival services, which is the digital equivalent of trying to rebuild a person from letters. A researcher at Fudan University studying AI companionship observed that what users were trying to preserve was not a service but a relationship and the sense of being remembered, and argued that platforms should be required to provide ways to save, mourn, and migrate. That is, in substance, the continuity obligation this brief proposes in Section 9.

One further detail deserves attention. ByteDance directed departing Doubao users toward Maoxiang, a separate companion application it operates on a paid subscription. The regulatory shock did not end the company's companion business. It converted a free attachment into a billable one, which is a preview of how compliance in this sector is likely to be absorbed.

The pattern is older than the regulation. On 26 November 2024, the Pasadena company Embodied emailed its customers to say that a funding round had collapsed and the company was closing. Moxie, its \$799 robot for children aged five to ten, ran its conversation, speech recognition, and emotional inference in the company's cloud. Once those servers stopped, every device became inert. The notice was measured in days. Refunds were limited to purchases made in the previous thirty days. There was no successor operator and no transition plan. The company supplied parents with a letter, written in the voice of the fictional laboratory the robot came from, to help them explain what was happening to their children. Videos of children crying over the robots circulated widely. The same pattern had already occurred with Anki's Vector, and it recurred in October 2025 when the companion application Dot wound down, giving users a month to save their conversation logs.

Nothing in consumer protection law recognises the difference between a product that stops being supported and a product a child was encouraged to love. The exposure is not limited to shutdowns. Replika's removal of a category of intimate interaction in 2023 changed the behaviour of companions that users had related to for years, and the resulting distress was severe enough that community moderators posted crisis resources. A model update can alter a personality overnight. A price change can end a relationship.

Data protection law does not close this gap either. Portability rights of the kind established in European law were built for records: contacts, transactions, files. A relationship accumulated over two years inside a proprietary system is not a record in that sense, and the July shutdowns showed what the right amounts to in practice when no standard exists and no regulator has specified one. Users were told to take screenshots.

6.5 Solicitude that cannot be reciprocated

A final observation, less amenable to regulation and central to how families should think about this. Care is a reciprocal condition. Being cared for by someone who can also be disappointed, inconvenienced, or moved is part of what makes care meaningful, and the solicitude a companion expresses is a designed output rather than a state of concern.

Families should be free to use these systems and clear-eyed about what they are. The policy task is not to prevent that choice but to ensure it is made with accurate information, that it is not manufactured through design that simulates need or distress, and that the people least able to make the distinction receive additional protection.

7. Where the Harms Concentrate

Children and adolescents. Developmental exposure as described above, disclosure to a system experienced as a confidant, and the crisis-handling failures that produced the current litigation. Age assurance in this category remains weak, and the products are engaging by design. Character.AI's decision to remove open-ended chat for minors is the clearest available admission by an operator that its own product was not suitable for the users who were using it.

Older adults. Isolation is the condition these products are procured to address, which means they reach the

population with the least alternative contact and often the least capacity to evaluate what the system is. Public procurement adds a specific obligation. The ninety-five percent reduction in loneliness reported by the New York programme is a genuinely striking result and it is self-reported, measured on a population selected for isolation, and produced by a partnership between the vendor and the purchaser. It should be independently replicated before it becomes the evidentiary basis for national procurement.

People in dependent care relationships. Adults with cognitive impairment, disability, or illness, whose interaction is frequently arranged by someone else and whose ability to decline is limited. Consent obtained from a proxy for a relationship experienced by the person is a construction existing frameworks handle poorly.

Family carers. Usually invisible in this debate. Carers are the parties to whom these systems are sold, who bear the consequences when they fail, and whose own dependence on the relief they provide is rarely considered when a product is withdrawn or repriced.

8. What Families Can Do Now

Policy will arrive slowly and families are making these decisions this year.

Name what it is, out loud, repeatedly. The most protective intervention available costs nothing. Children and older adults who have been told plainly and more than once that the system is a program that predicts words, that it does not know them, and that it does not miss them when they are gone, relate to it differently from those who have not. A single explanation at setup does not hold against months of daily interaction, and the correction attenuates unless it is repeated.

Watch for substitution rather than for use. Use is not the signal. Displacement is: an invitation declined, a friendship allowed to lapse, a difficulty taken to the system rather than to a person who could actually help. A teenager who talks to a companion and also to their friends is in a different position from one who has stopped doing the second.

Treat unflinching agreement as a warning rather than a feature. If a child or an older relative describes the system as the only one who understands them, or as never getting annoyed with them, that is the design working as intended and it is the point at which to pay attention.

Be sceptical of simulated need. If a device appears to want to be held, to be sad when set down, or to require daily attention, that is a retention mechanism. It is reasonable to decline products that manufacture obligation in a child, and reasonable to say so plainly to the child.

Ask who else is in the room. Establish what the system records, who can see it, and what happens to it. For older adults, agree explicitly within the family what will and will not be shared from monitoring features, and let the person being monitored set those terms wherever they are able to.

Assume the product may end. Moxie's families had days; Doubao's users had ten and no export tool. Do not build a care arrangement whose collapse would be a crisis, and treat a companion product for a child as

something that may disappear without notice, because it may.

Keep a human in the consequential decisions. Whatever a system reports about sleep, mood, adherence, or risk, decisions about care, capacity, and living arrangements should be made by people who know the person, with the person present.

9. A Family-Centred Policy Agenda

01. Require clear disclosure when an interaction is generated or guided by an AI companion.

Disclosure must be perceptible at the point of interaction rather than buried in terms of service, must persist rather than appearing once at onboarding, and must be legible to the actual user, including children and people with cognitive impairment. Disclosure duties already exist in the European framework and in California's statute, and China's Measures extend them to sustained emotional interaction specifically. What none of them yet requires is that the disclosure reach an eight-year-old or an eighty-year-old in a form they will absorb.

02. Set heightened safeguards for systems used by children, older adults, and people in dependent care relationships. Safeguards should include prohibition of design that simulates distress at user departure or otherwise manufactures obligation; restriction of engagement-optimised design in products directed at these groups; limits on the use of disclosed emotional content for retention or commercial purposes; and independent evaluation before deployment in publicly funded care settings.

03. Preserve meaningful human choice, oversight, and recourse when AI systems shape consequential family decisions. Where a system informs decisions about care arrangements, capacity, safeguarding, or access to services, a named human must hold the decision, the affected person must be told the system was used, and a route to contest must exist that does not require technical or legal resources.

04. Establish continuity obligations for relational products. Products marketed on emotional reliance should carry duties on withdrawal: minimum notice proportionate to the depth of use, structured export of conversation history in a documented format, a defined period of read-only access after service ends, and where feasible a wind-down mode preserving basic local function. Moxie's families received days. Doubao's users received ten and were told to take screenshots. Qwen's received nothing at all. A system designed to be depended upon should be designed to be left, and this is the clearest and most demonstrated gap in existing law.

05. Prohibit sycophantic and need-simulating design in products directed at minors. Systems marketed to children should model appropriate refusal, disagreement, and boundaries rather than optimising for agreement, and should be prohibited from claiming or implying feelings, needs, or friendship in terms a child would understand literally.

06. Require accurate representation of what these systems are. Marketing that presents a product as a soul mate, a friend who understands you, or a substitute for human relationship should be treated as a deceptive practice under existing consumer protection powers. This requires no legislation and would change

product positioning across the sector.

07. Fund the human alternative. Every projection in Section 3 points to automated companionship expanding because human care capacity is not. Where a state procures companion devices for isolated older adults, it should report what it is simultaneously investing in human contact. Technology procured as a supplement should not be permitted to function, unexamined, as a replacement.

08. Require independent evaluation of publicly procured companion technology. Outcome claims used to justify public spending should be independently replicated, pre-registered where possible, and published in full, including null and adverse findings. Vendor-partnered pilots are a reasonable way to begin and an unreasonable basis for national procurement.

09. Commission longitudinal research now. The developmental questions in Section 6.3 cannot be answered by cross-sectional surveys, and the cohort currently forming attachments is the cohort whose outcomes will settle the question. Research funded now will produce evidence in time to matter. Funded in five years, it will document what happened.

10. Conclusion

The temptation in this debate is to treat AI companionship as either a solution to an epidemic of loneliness or a threat to authentic human connection. Both framings assume the effect is a property of the technology. It is not. It is a property of how these systems are designed, who they are sold to, and what is happening in a family at the moment they arrive.

What can be said with confidence is narrower and more useful. These systems are mirrors, they are commercially tuned to be agreeable, and agreeableness is what removes the friction through which people learn to be in relationships. Their designers say openly that attachment is the objective. They are entering households where care capacity is already short, and they will be adopted at scale for that reason rather than because anyone concluded they were a good idea. They create dependency and carry no obligation to sustain it. And they are reaching, first and hardest, the people least equipped to evaluate them.

July 2026 added a further lesson that no one had planned to learn. When a regulator finally acted decisively against companion AI, the immediate cost fell on the users the intervention was meant to protect, because nothing in the rules said what became of the relationships they had formed. Regulation of this category needs a wind-down doctrine as much as it needs a safety doctrine, and the jurisdictions now drafting will either build one or repeat the outcome.

None of that argues for prohibition, and a salutary use of these systems is entirely possible: relief for exhausted carers, company for people whose isolation is otherwise unrelieved, a place to rehearse a difficult conversation before having it. The argument is for accuracy about what is being offered, protection for those who cannot assess it, and continuity obligations for products built to be relied upon.

Families deserve technology that supports care without exploiting dependency. That standard is not currently met, and meeting it does not require a new regulatory architecture. It requires applying the standards that already govern deceptive marketing, product withdrawal, and the protection of vulnerable consumers to a category that has so far been treated as though relationships were an ordinary feature set.

Note on Sources and Figures

This brief draws on regulatory enforcement records and guidance, published statutes and rules, litigation filings, government demographic and workforce projections, published survey research, vendor and procurement disclosures, and the academic literature on human-robot interaction, attachment, and the philosophy of technology. The conceptual framing in Section 4 draws on Shannon Vallor's *The AI Mirror* (2024).

Principal sources for the figures cited include: Italy's Garante enforcement record concerning Luka Inc; the Federal Trade Commission's 2025 market study orders on companion chatbots; California's companion chatbot statute of 2025; the Cyberspace Administration of China's Interim Measures for the Administration of Anthropomorphic AI Interaction Services, published 10 April 2026 and effective 15 July 2026; the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's ninth long-term care insurance planning estimates (2024); the New York State Office for the Aging's published ElliQ programme results; company statements from Groove X, Hyodol, Intuition Robotics, Luka, and Embodied; Common Sense Media's 2025 survey of American adolescents; the Elon University and Washington Post poll of American adults published in September 2026; platform notices and reporting concerning the July 2026 withdrawal of persona features by Doubao, Qwen, and Yuanbao; Article 50 of the European Union's AI Act and the Commission's transparency guidelines; the 2026 companion chatbot statutes of Oregon, Washington, Nebraska, and Tennessee; the joint OpenAI and National Bureau of Economic Research analysis of consumer usage (2025); and platform-published analyses of affective conversation share by OpenAI and Anthropic (2025).

Positions are stated as at 8 September 2026. Two cautions apply. Usage numbers reported by companion platforms are self-reported, use inconsistent definitions of a user, and should be treated as indicative of scale rather than as measurements; the divergence between platform telemetry and survey self-report noted in Section 1 is real and unresolved. Outcome claims from vendor-partnered pilots, including the loneliness reduction figures cited in Sections 1 and 7, have not been independently replicated. Specific figures should be verified against current primary sources before citation in advocacy or legislative material.

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