

MEDIA RELEASE

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International Youth Day: Young Kiwis are growing up with AI – now adults need to catch up

First nationwide study reveals AI is becoming part of everyday life for young people, but many don't feel adults are equipped to help them navigate the risks.

Artificial intelligence has become part of everyday life for young New Zealanders – but the adults supporting them are struggling to keep pace.

Released to mark **International Youth Day**, the first large-scale New Zealand study into young people's use of generative AI reveals a generation embracing the technology while calling for better guidance, more open conversations and trusted adults who understand the digital world they're growing up in.

The research, led by the **Artificial Intelligence Safety Forum (AISF)**, **Netsafe** and **The Light Project**, with support from the **Spark Foundation**, surveyed more than 1,200 New Zealanders aged 13–24 and paints the clearest picture yet of how AI is reshaping young people's lives.

The findings show almost **nine in ten** young people have used generative AI in the past six months, while **69 percent have already experienced at least one AI-related harm**.

Netsafe CEO Brent Carey says the research shows AI is no longer an emerging technology for young people – it's already embedded in how they learn, create, solve problems and increasingly seek support.

"The conversation has moved well beyond whether young people should be using AI. They already are. The challenge now is making sure the adults around them understand the technology well enough to help them use it safely, critically and confidently."

"This research tells us young people aren't asking adults to have all the answers. They're asking us to be informed enough to have meaningful conversations without fear, judgement or panic."

One of the report's most significant findings is that **30 percent of respondents had used AI for personal advice or emotional support**, often because it felt easier than talking to another person or because they believed they wouldn't be judged.

At the same time, many young people expressed concern about becoming too reliant on AI and said they wanted trusted adults to better understand the technology and its limitations.

The research also highlights a worrying disconnect between young people and the adults who support them.

Only **31 percent** said they would first turn to a parent or caregiver if something went wrong online, while almost one in four said they wouldn't know who to approach – or wouldn't tell

anyone at all. Fear of getting into trouble, embarrassment and the belief that adults don't understand AI were among the biggest barriers to seeking help.

Shannon Novak, Director of AISF, says the findings reinforce that AI is rapidly becoming a core digital literacy issue for New Zealand.

"AI is evolving faster than many adults, schools and organisations can adapt. The answer isn't to discourage young people from using it – it's to equip them with the skills to question what they're seeing, recognise misinformation, protect their privacy and understand where AI can help and where it can't. AI literacy is becoming as fundamental as digital literacy."

The study also found AI-related harms are becoming increasingly common.

Nearly seven in ten respondents had encountered at least one AI-related harm, including misinformation, AI-generated scams, misleading content, unsafe advice and deepfakes. Around **one in nine** said they had either experienced a deepfake themselves or knew someone who had.

Importantly, respondents weren't calling for less technology – they were calling for better support.

More than half identified better information for young people as the highest priority, alongside stronger privacy protections, improved education about deepfakes and scams, and more guidance for parents and whānau.

Carey says those findings reinforce that AI literacy is rapidly becoming an essential life skill.

"Young people are telling us they want to use AI responsibly. They also want the adults in their lives to understand it well enough to guide them."

"International Youth Day is a reminder that supporting young people in the digital age isn't just about keeping up with technology – it's about giving them trusted people they can turn to when things don't go to plan."

The research will form the backdrop to several discussions during [Netsafety Week 2026](#), where Netsafe and its partners will bring together young people, educators, researchers, technology experts and frontline practitioners to explore how New Zealand can support young people to engage with AI safely and confidently.

Sessions include **Young Changemakers of Aotearoa**, celebrating rangatahi who are using technology to drive positive change in their communities, and **AI and Online Safety in Aotearoa**, which will explore how families, educators and communities can better support young people as AI becomes part of everyday life.

Nikki Denholm, Director of The Light Project, says the findings mirror what youth workers are seeing every day.

"Young people are curious, adaptable and incredibly capable – but many are navigating technologies that adults don't yet fully understand. As their guardians, the most protective thing

adults can do right now, is to build their own knowledge of AI – and create positive, informed, and shame-free conversations where young people feel safe to ask questions, speak openly, and seek support.”

Registration for all [Netsafety Week](#) (17-23 August) sessions is free, online and open now.

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For further information, please contact:

Vicki Griffin | Consultant | Boyd Public Relations Ltd,
m: 027 661 2411 | e: vicki@boydpr.co.nz

About Netsafety Week

Netsafety Week (17-23 August 2026) is Netsafe's annual awareness initiative, bringing together experts from across New Zealand and around the world to share knowledge, practical skills and solutions that help create safer, more inclusive online experiences for everyone.

Contact Netsafe:

Online report: <https://netsafe.org.nz/report/>

Email: help@netsafe.org.nz

Text: 4282

Free phone: 0508 NETSAFE (0508 638 723) Available 9 am–5 pm weekdays