

## **Why these friendly robots can't be good friends to our kids**

By The Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff  
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Jibo the robot rotates around when it hears its name and tilts its touchscreen face up at you. "I am a robot, but I am not just a machine," it says. "I have a heart. Well, not a real heart, but feelings. Well, not human feelings. You know what I mean."

Actually, I'm not sure we do. That's what unsettles me about the wave of "sociable robots" that are coming online. The new releases include Jibo, Cozmo, Kuri and Meccano M.A.X. Although they are similar to assistants such as Apple's Siri, Google Home and Amazon's Alexa, these robots come with something more.

### **Marketed As Companions**

They are designed to win us over not with their smarts but with their personality. They are marketed as companions, and they do more than talk to us. They pretend to have emotions and empathy.

This can be troubling. Time magazine featured Jibo on the cover of its "25 Best Inventions of 2017" issue last month. It hailed the robot that could "reshape how we interact with machines."

Adults may be able to catch themselves and remind themselves that sociable robots are, in fact, machines, but children often struggle to tell the difference. They are especially open to these robots' pre-programmed requests for friendship.

### **Seeing Robots As Living Beings**

In studies of children playing with robots, the children often insist on seeing the robots as living beings, and this is true even when robot makers explain how the machines work or when the robots are temporarily broken.

The children took the robots' behavior to signify feelings. When the robots interacted with them, the children took this as evidence that the robots liked them. When the robots didn't work as expected, the children took it personally, and their relationships with the robots affected their self-esteem.

In one study, an 8-year-old boy concluded that the robot stopped talking to him because the robot liked his brothers better.

Kids are important to robotics companies. As journalist Geoffrey A. Fowler noted, "Kids, of course, are the most open to making new friends, so that's where bot-makers are focused for now."

It is very troubling that these robots try to empathize with children.

### **No Empathy To Share**

What are children supposed to be empathizing with, exactly? Empathy allows us to put ourselves in the place of others, to know what they are feeling. Robots have no emotions to share, and they cannot put themselves in our place.

No matter what robotic creatures "say," they don't understand our emotional lives. They have not been born, and they don't know pain or fear. Robot thinking may be thinking, but robot feeling is never feeling, and robot love is never love.

Some researchers in favor of the robots don't see a problem with this, pointing to how children deal with toy dolls. Children turn their dolls into imaginary friends.

Getting attached to dolls and sociable machines is different, though. When children play with dolls, they project thoughts and emotions onto them.

A girl who has broken her mother's vase will put her Barbies into detention and use them to work on her feelings of guilt, letting the dolls take the role she needs them to take.

Sociable machines have their own agenda, and children try to meet the robot's needs, to understand the robot's unique nature and wants. Today's robots tell children that they have emotions, friendships, even dreams to share.

### **Emotional Trickery**

Some people might consider that a good thing, that we're encouraging children to think beyond their own needs and goals. There's a problem with that. The whole goal of the robots is emotional trickery.

Boris Sofman is in charge of a company that makes sociable robots. He says that the idea is to create "a deeper and deeper emotional connection."

"And if you neglect him, you feel the pain of that," he says.

What does it mean to feel the pain of neglecting something that feels no pain at being neglected? Or to feel pain at being neglected by something that doesn't even know it is neglecting you? What will this do to children's ability to show empathy or care, or to have relationships?

These robots can't be in a two-way relationship with a child. They are machines made to put children in a position of pretend empathy. That won't teach kids what real empathy is.

### **How Can Kids Learn How Real Relationships Work?**

Real relationships are messy, whereas relationships with robots are simple. If we give kids pretend relationships, we shouldn't expect them to learn how real relationships work. Instead, they will learn something shallow and fake, mistaking it for real connection.

We forget what is most central to being human: truly understanding each other.

For so long, we dreamed of robots offering us not only simple help but conversation and care. Now that our dream is becoming real, it is time to face the emotional downside of living with robots.

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**What is the main idea of this article?**

**What does the author want you to know about this new breed of friendly robots?**

**Using evidence from the text, explain how robots might affect children:**