

Report:
MyData4Children Workshop at MyData 2025
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Kids Leading the AI Conversation: Lessons for MyData

By Paula Bello, Jana Pejoska and Gülşen Güler

Workshop description:

What happens when we put children at the center of conversations about AI and personal data? This innovative child-led workshop flips the traditional learning dynamic, inviting kids and adults to explore our AI-integrated future together through interactive scenarios, role-playing, and creative collaboration.

Participants will work in mixed-age groups to tackle real-world AI scenarios, examining critical themes of trust, identity, agency, and aspiration. Each team will co-create a GenAI-powered poster designed to share vital digital insights with younger peers, fostering both critical thinking and ethical creativity.

The session culminates in a visual journey that weaves together all children's voices into a single compelling narrative—demonstrating how young people can lead the MyData community toward more empowering approaches to personal data governance.

Key Outcomes:

- Children's perspectives on AI ethics and data rights
- Collaborative learning between generations
- Creative tools for digital literacy education
- Actionable insights for child-centered data governance

Who we are:

Dr. Paula Bello

Designer & entrepreneur

MyData4Children co-founder and co-lead

Member of MyData Board

Dr. Jana Pejoska

Service design strategist

IT Service Development, Aalto University

Founder @ Humans & Creatures

Gülşen Güler

Researcher - Creating spaces for dialogue

Ex Social worker

MyData Literacy Co-Lead

Why we did it:

As mothers to 9-year-old children navigating an AI-infused world, Jana and Paula found themselves thrust into uncharted territory. Despite both working in the field and recognizing AI's exciting possibilities, we grappled with profound uncertainties about its impact on our children. Our concerns mirrored those of many parents and teachers: Will AI complete their homework for them? Might it misguide or mislead them? Could it attempt to replace us as parents or teachers? Are digital services learning more about our children than we know ourselves?

We observed teachers struggling with the same questions. We watched policies lag far behind technological reality. We witnessed major players seizing unprecedented growth opportunities while overlooking children's rights, needs, and interests.

Yet we also saw an opportunity.

Through MyData4Children, we have a clear purpose: children have a right to be protected, empowered, and inspired. We have a duty to create digital spaces that honor these rights. This workshop embodies that commitment through a child-centric approach to data and AI development—one that lets children lead us.

We firmly believe that creating truly human-centric digital experiences requires listening to what children think, do, and say. Rather than designing for children based on adult assumptions, we invited them to show us:

- How they currently make sense of AI
- How they wish they could use it
- What matters most to them in these interactions

This workshop brought together children and their parents to co-create AI companions designed around children's actual needs, capabilities, and values—not what we imagine them to be.

Our role: To listen carefully, analyze thoughtfully, and share actionable insights with those committed to changing the world—developers, policymakers, educators, and designers who can translate children's voices into better technology.

Our method: Child-led exploration, where young people demonstrate their understanding, articulate their boundaries, and express their aspirations while parents discover capabilities they hadn't recognized and learn alongside their children.

This is our contribution to ensuring that as AI becomes woven into childhood, it does so in ways that genuinely serve children's development, agency, and wellbeing.

A note on limitations:

While we are enthusiastic about our work, where we bring children into conversations around issues that are directly affecting them, we also acknowledge the limitations in our approach. Children in this workshop mainly came through word-of-mouth and friend networks. All of the parents involved in this activity were interested in exploring AI, and many of them were working as experts in fields related to AI.

We know that AI systems do not impact everyone the same way, and those groups who are already facing social injustices are harmed the most by AI systems. This is, of course, true for children too.

We call for more conversations where people who don't often hear from each other can come together to share lived experience and expertise to refuse the inevitability of harmful AI systems and develop alternative, empowering digital technologies. As we have more discussions around agency, trust, and human-centricity, it is our goal to highlight the systemic inequalities that AI systems generate and amplify, and ensure we critically examine and collectively determine what role we want AI to play in our collective futures.

What we did:

We collaborated with **7 children aged 7 to 10 years old and their parents**, engaging them in two formats:

- **5 children** participated in preparatory activities before the workshop
- **2 children and their parents** participated live during the workshop session

The collaboration had three key parts:

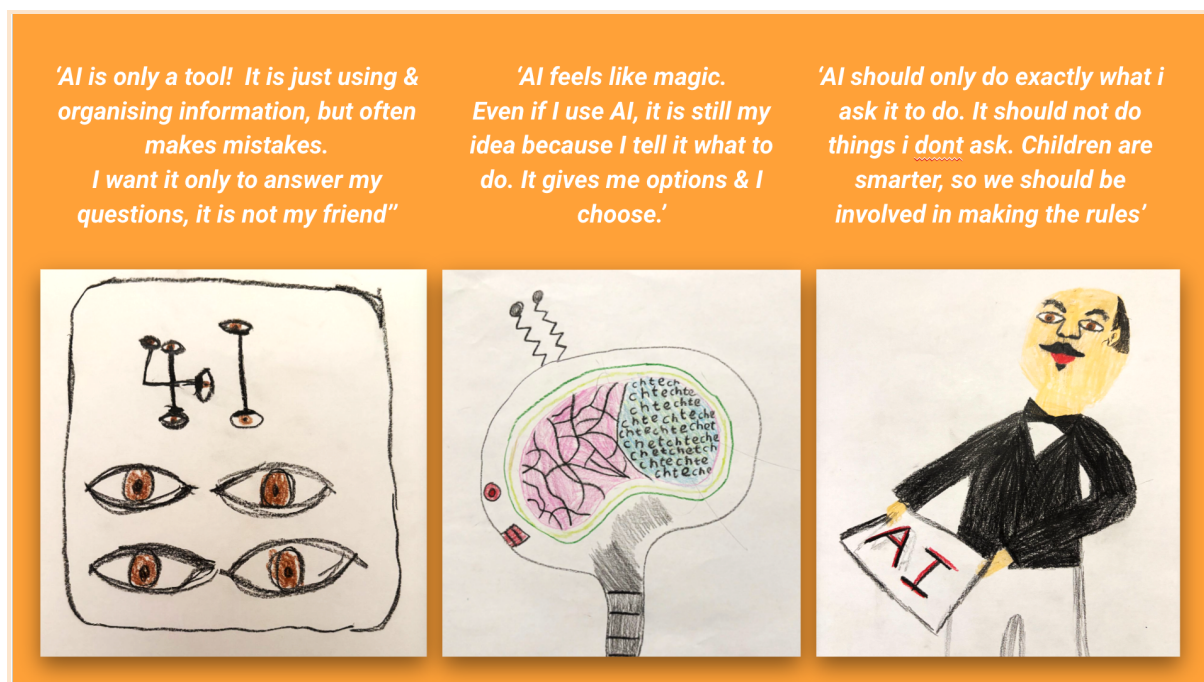
Part 1: Critical Thinking Discussion

Children, parents, and facilitators engaged in guided conversations to explore:

- How children understand AI
- How they currently approach and use AI
- Their perspectives on AI's role in their lives

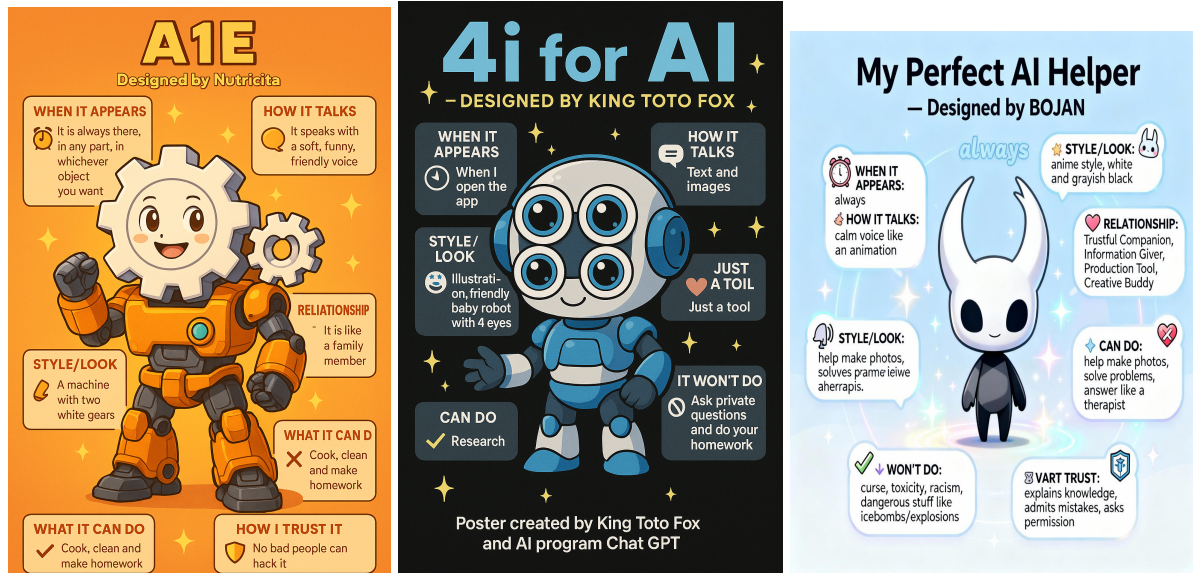
Parents received a [discussion guide and instructions beforehand](#) to facilitate meaningful conversations at home and prepare for the workshop dialogue.

Some of the children produced hand-drawn illustrations of how they understood AI, as the following image shows:



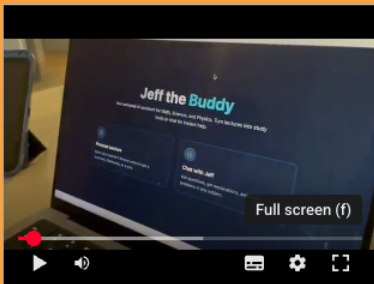
Part 2: Design Work

Children took the lead in **defining the characteristics of their perfect AI assistant** through hands-on design activities. This creative exercise allowed them to articulate their needs, preferences, and boundaries in concrete terms rather than abstract concepts. These were translated into a prompt for an AI of their choice, which produced the following posters:



One child (10 years old) decided that a poster was not enough, and decided to create his ideal AI assistant himself. He asked his chosen AI to code Jeff, the Buddy, producing his own working prototype. He shared a video to demo Jeff, and offered that any one that would be interested in using it, could contact him as he was interested in monetising it.

... and one more thing



I use AI to do apps. I want AI to help me with my homework sometimes, but I still want to do many things myself because if I always ask AI i won't learn nothing, and I like learning. I like AI to make questions to me so it makes me think.

It could be scary thinking that a human can disguise as an AI, and then can know where I am.

I trust AI. But my parents double check. Or another AI.

Part 3: Expert Analysis

We shared the outputs from both the discussions and design work during the MyData 2025 conference with **participants for further analysis**. This ensured that children's voices would be translated into actionable insights for developers, policymakers, and designers working to create fair, safe, empowering child-centric AI systems. The outcomes of the workshop are summarised in the following section.

What we learned:

Due to the variety of perspectives of the participants, we divide the learning into three groups:

From the children:

On AI's Nature:

- "AI feels like magic to me."
- "It's only a tool! It just uses and organizes information, but often makes mistakes."

On My Control & Agency:

- "Even if I use AI, it's still my idea because I tell it what to do."
- "It gives me options and I choose."
- "AI should only do exactly what I ask it to do. It should not do things I don't ask."
- "AI is just helping me get what I want."
- "I want it to look, speak, and appear how I want—customize it—and only when I call it."

On Learning & Doing Things Myself:

- "I want AI to help me with my homework sometimes, but I still want to do many things myself because if I always ask AI I won't learn anything, and I like learning."
- "I like AI to make questions so it makes me think."
- "I don't want AI to give me obvious answers."
- "I use AI to do apps."

On Relationships & Boundaries:

- "I want it only to answer my questions. It is not my friend."
- "I trust it because it is my friend."
- "AI should not act weird."

On Safety & Trust:

- "It could be scary thinking that a human can disguise as an AI and then can know where I am."
- "I trust AI. But my parents double-check. Or another AI."
- "AI should not break my computer (hack)."
- "Children are smarter, so we should be involved in making the rules."

From the parents:

On Being Surprised by Our Children:

- "I was so proud of my kid! He understands how AI works much more than I was expecting."
- "My kid surprised me."
- "I had no idea how to manage AI, so I was restricting it. But I think she is more mature than I thought."

On Learning Together:

- "The conversation was very enlightening."
- "I feel like we need to have constant loops of conversation because in every loop, after each little thing we did, we learned something that influenced what we did next."
- "It was so important to have the kids leading the discussion! We thought we can imagine what kids want, but in fact, we adults learned a lot!"

On Children's Capabilities:

- "The kids involved in the workshop were motivated to do this, and it felt that they knew exactly what they want and how to answer the challenges we gave them. Inspiring."
- "Kids will use AI whether we like it or not, so it is best that we support them to do it right."

On Our Concerns & Gaps:

- "I am still very concerned about AI and the impact it will have on children."
- "Schools are using it already, but I don't know how to approach it at home."
- "I have been studying AI and music, so that is why my daughter has done a bit about it. I can see the impact it is having on music, but we don't understand yet the impact on children."

On Developmental Differences:

- "It is obvious that there are many different 'children' groups. A child aged 7 experiences a very different interaction and has different needs than a 10 or 15 year old. We need to create various versions of AI that are fitting to various needs and user experiences."

From the workshop participants:

Workshop Survey: What Surprised Participants About Children's Input

Understanding how children see AI

- "They see AI as a tool."
- "AI native. They know what it does and what it doesn't do."
- "AI is not a friend."
- Participants noted children's clear-eyed pragmatism rather than mystification of the technology.

Maturity and Critical Thinking

- "They sound very, very, very mature."
- "How the kid described trustworthiness."
- "I think if children are involved in more conversations around AI, they will become really critical of it in a healthy way, allow us to highlight shortcomings and show adults how to move forward."
- Children demonstrated sophisticated reasoning beyond typical adult expectations.

Agency and Control

- "Their feelings around ownership and agency."
- "That he didn't want the AI to be constantly listening but only when he needs it to be."
- "AI shouldn't listen all the time."
- Children articulated clear boundaries about when and how AI should operate in their lives.

Trust Through Creation

- "Trust is not an issue: they built them."
- The observation that children's involvement in designing AI fundamentally shifted their relationship with trust—seeing themselves as creators rather than just users.

Generational Shifts in AI Perception

- "The perception of AI when growing up. Also how they deal with negative effects of AI. This may shift as this generation is experiencing adoption of AI—next might just grow with it like smartphones."
- Recognition that we're witnessing a unique moment where children are both adapting to and shaping AI integration.

Creative Expression

- "The creativity of hand-drawn posters!"
- Children's ability to express complex technical concepts through visual and creative means.

Areas of Concern

- "Do they even refuse the possibility of AI in their life? Maybe it's the design of the experimentation, but they look already acculturated to this."
- "I think the anthropomorphization and 'magical' attributes associated with the technology (and enquiry) feel kind of risky (even adults do this too!)"
- Some participants questioned whether children's acceptance of AI is organic or a result of existing cultural conditioning, and worried about romanticizing the technology.

The survey was followed by group discussions on three key themes:

Theme 1: TRUST - How can AI for children show honesty, admit mistakes, explain itself?

1. Trust as a Shared Responsibility

- **Children's Role:** Children see themselves as active participants in building trust with AI. Notes like *"What is the role of the child?"* and *"What is the role of the adult?"* highlight that trust is not just about the AI's behavior, but also about how children and adults interact with it.
 - **Learning:** Trust in AI is co-created. Children want to be involved in setting rules and boundaries for AI, not just passive recipients of its outputs.
- **Adults as Guides:** Adults are seen as facilitators who *"double-check"* AI or provide context (e.g., *"Is there an adult police?"*). This reflects the need for **collaborative oversight**—children trust AI more when adults are involved in validating or explaining its actions.
 - **Learning:** AI systems for children should include features that encourage adult-child collaboration, such as shared dashboards or explainable AI interfaces.

2. Transparency and Explainability

- **Demand for Clarity:** Questions like *"How do you know it won't do what it's not supposed to?"* and *"How can you trust AI?"* show that children want AI to be predictable and transparent. They are concerned about AI acting "weird" or making mistakes without explanation.
 - **Learning:** AI for children must prioritize **explainability**—using simple language, visuals, or interactive elements to show how decisions are made. For example, an AI could say, *"I chose this answer because you asked for X, but I'm not sure about Y. Want to check together?"*
- **Honesty About Limitations:** Notes like *"AI should admit mistakes"* and *"Can you trust AI?"* underscore the importance of AI acknowledging its fallibility. Children are more likely to trust AI that doesn't pretend to be perfect.
 - **Learning:** Design AI to **admit errors** and invite children to help correct them, fostering a sense of partnership.

3. Safety and Boundaries

- **Fear of Misuse:** Concerns about AI *"breaking things"* or *"hacking"* reflect children's awareness of risks. They want AI to operate within clear, safe boundaries.
 - **Learning:** AI for children should have **visible guardrails**, such as sandboxes for creative tasks or clear permissions for data access. For example, *"This AI can help with math but won't access your personal photos."*
- **Emotional Safety:** Notes like *"AI should not be scary"* and *"AI should not make me feel bad"* highlight the emotional dimension of trust. Children want AI to be supportive, not judgmental or intrusive.
 - **Learning:** AI interactions should be designed to **uplift and empower**, avoiding language or behaviors that could cause anxiety or self-doubt.

4. Contextual and Age-Appropriate Trust

- **Tailored Experiences:** The note *"AI for kids could be a friend"* suggests that trust is contextual. Younger children might see AI as a companion, while older children may prefer a more utilitarian relationship.
 - **Learning:** AI should adapt its tone and functionality to the child's age and developmental stage, allowing for **personalization** without compromising safety.
- **Cultural and Social Factors:** Notes like *"Cultural differences"* and *"Social skills"* indicate that trust in AI is influenced by broader social and cultural contexts. Children want AI to respect their values and norms.
 - **Learning:** AI systems should be **culturally aware** and customizable to align with family or community values.

5. Trust as an Ongoing Process

- **Iterative Learning:** The discussion guide's emphasis on *"constant loops of conversation"* aligns with notes like *"How can we make it better?"* Trust is not static—it evolves as children and adults learn together.
 - **Learning:** AI tools should include **feedback loops**, allowing children to rate interactions, suggest improvements, or co-design features over time.
- **Building Skills:** Notes like *"Critical thinking"* and *"Questioning"* show that children see trust as linked to their own abilities. They want AI to help them develop skills, not replace their thinking.
 - **Learning:** AI should be designed to **scaffold learning**, for example, by asking open-ended questions or encouraging children to verify information independently.

Theme 2: AGENCY - How do we ensure kids and families are making the choices (not the algorithm or the company)?

1. Business Model Misalignment with Child Agency

- **Current business models prioritize company interests over children and families**
The commercial frameworks driving AI development are fundamentally misaligned with children's best interests and family autonomy, creating structural barriers to genuine agency. There is also little to no room for refusal to use these AI tools in the way they are advertised, raising the question of agency again.
 - **Learning:** The inevitability of AI needs to be questioned more critically by all, especially in education. New business models must be developed that center child welfare and family decision-making power rather than engagement metrics or profit maximization.

2. Control and Ownership in AI-as-Toy

- **Power imbalances remain when AI systems are marketed and function as a toys.** When AI is packaged as an overhyped plaything, the lines of control become blurred between the child user, parents, and technology companies.
 - **Learning:** More societal discussions are needed for gaining critical AI literacy skills, including collectively exploring what values AI systems need to be developed in line with when they are marketed to children. Clear frameworks, including legal ones, are needed to define agency boundaries.
- **Questions around privacy need to be highlighted.** Many AI systems used in toys require to be constantly on for data collection, often crossing boundaries when children might not want them to be on in specific contexts.
 - **Learning:** Agency-preserving measures must act as a building block for protection, including creating safety mechanisms for the learning opportunities where children might want to learn by exploring how the AI tools work without adult supervision..

3. Trade-offs and Transparency in AI Choices

- **Families need awareness of what they accept versus reject in AI interactions.** Agency requires understanding what the potential trade-offs might be in different AI applications for children and making decisions by informed consent.
 - **Learning:** Explicit frameworks for evaluating trade-offs must be developed, helping families make informed decisions about personalised experiences versus privacy, convenience versus data collection, and engagement versus manipulation. It is not realistic to expect every parent to become an AI expert, and the idea of independent AI assessment frameworks specifically for children-facing products can be explored further as a way to assist informed decision-making processes.

4. Empowerment Across Multiple Stakeholders

- **What AI systems are used for is crucial for defining agency.** Not all AI systems affecting children are used by children or those in their care networks. For example, parents might never know that AI systems are used in social services, which brings up the question of agency.
- **Agency must be defined differently for actors involved in children's lives including parents, guardians, and schools.** The empowerment factor varies across different actors in the child's ecosystem, each requiring distinct considerations. There are also contextual considerations.
 - **Learning:** Agency in educational settings differs from home or social care systems. Comprehensive approaches must address what agency means with this contextual understanding in mind, specifically and how different stakeholders maintain decision-making power and where children's voices are in these processes.

5. Creating Spaces for Exploration and Dialogues

- **Agency in AI for children is an underdeveloped concept requiring active exploration.** Current understanding of what agency means in child-AI interactions is insufficient, especially when many AI systems are defined as predatory and manipulative, and there is an increasing number of examples where AI systems are negatively affecting children's mental health.
 - **Learning:** Dedicated spaces and forums must be created to collectively define, test, and refine what meaningful agency looks like in practice, centering the voices of those most impacted by AI systems.

Theme 3: ASPIRATION - How do we ensure AI helps kids grow and thrive (not just make things easy)?

1. Developmentally-Appropriate AI Design

- **AI tools must align with children's rapidly changing developmental stages.** Children exhibit technological maturity that often outpaces their cognitive and language development. AI solutions should be designed for very concrete tasks that match specific developmental phases.
 - **Learning:** Age-appropriate interfaces and functionalities are essential; one-size-fits-all approaches fail to account for the significant developmental differences between age groups.
- **Restrictive design prevents overwhelming choice.** AI for children should be intentionally limited in scope and functionality, rather than offering broad, open-ended capabilities.
 - **Learning:** Restrictions should enable focused learning experiences rather than attempting unrealistic prohibition of AI access entirely. There should be functions that are completely restricted, such as recommendations and emotions management. It should even be limited to the use of age-appropriate and verified LLM.

2. Question Literacy and Epistemological Education

- **How children ask questions determines the quality of AI interactions.** Children's ability to effectively query AI depends on their understanding of knowledge formation and critical thinking skills.
 - **Learning:** Critical thinking education must become a prerequisite for meaningful AI engagement, helping children understand how knowledge is created and validated.

3. Human-AI Relationship Boundaries

- **AI's seductive nature creates an "invisible power struggle" with trusted adults.** Children may prefer asking difficult developmental questions to AI rather than parents, teachers, or guardians, potentially undermining traditional trust relationships.
 - **Learning:** There is a critical balance needed in AI humanization—making it user-friendly without creating emotionally dependent relationships that displace real human connections.
- **Emotion-assertive AI poses developmental risks.** AI that uses emotions as a connector can be particularly dangerous for children's healthy emotional development.
 - **Learning:** Interfaces should avoid humanistic features while maintaining usability.

4. Collaborative Learning Approach

- **Adults and children learning together represents the best path forward.** Restriction is unrealistic; instead, shared exploration allows both generations to develop AI literacy together.
 - **Learning:** Co-learning environments help bridge the gap between technological capability and developmental readiness while maintaining adult guidance.

5. Data Attitudes and Cultural Context

- **AI interaction reflects children's attitudes and developing skills.** Children's relationship with data and AI is observable as a combination of mindset and competency development.
 - **Learning:** Cultural, gender, and other developmental differences must be accounted for in AI design and education, requiring child-specific and curated language models rather than general-purpose AI.

Our recommendations

Actionable Recommendations for MyData and AI developers, designers and policy makers:

1. **Co-Design with Children:** Involve children in designing AI interfaces and trust mechanisms. Gather their input on features like explainability, safety, and personalization.
2. **Age-appropriate Design:** Define age appropriate uses of AI and design interactions according to the child's developmental stage.

3. **Transparent AI:** Develop AI that explains its actions in child-friendly ways. For example, use visuals or narratives to show how data is used or why a recommendation was made.
4. **Collaborative Oversight Tools:** Create features that allow parents and children to monitor AI together, such as shared activity logs or "trust scores" for AI interactions.
5. **Emotional and Cultural Safety:** Train AI to recognize and respect developmental cues and cultural contexts. Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches. Do not allow any AI to engage in an emotion-based conversation with a child.
6. **Feedback-Driven Improvement:** Build mechanisms for children, parents and teachers to give feedback on AI behavior, and use this data to iteratively improve trustworthiness.

AI Disclosure:

Artificial intelligence was used as a tool in different parts of the process:

- 1) *Create the posters of the ideal AI assistant: Each child used their parent's preferred AI to visualise their own AI assistant. Some mistakes are present in the posters, but maintained in the publication to highlight the errors and shortcomings.*
- 2) *Summarizing and organizing some of the outputs from the workshop: [Claude.ai](#) was used to synthesise and create consistency across the inputs from the three authors. All content has been reviewed by the authors for accuracy and completeness.*