

Children - Robotic Pets

What is robotic pets?

In recent years, robotic pets become a popular toy among children. There have been a number of different pets from i-robot dog to the virtual ones, such as neopets and Tamagotchi. However, this is a relatively new thing so many people do not know about robotic pets.

What are the pros of robotic pets for kids?

- Children can learn how to care for another being without caring. The care is also scaled down as they do not need to bathe or worry about it for most part of the day. If the child gets tired of the robotic pet, it can be easily switched off or ignored and he can continue to play later. In addition, the child does not need to worry about whether the robotic pet will die.
- Children can learn different emotions
Parents and teachers can use the toy to teach the children the different emotions easily as expressions of the toy are more obvious than some real pets and other children. Moreover, children can learn how to respond to the particular emotion without putting themselves in danger.
- Toys such as Pleo can be “upgraded” to have additional capabilities. This is not reflective in real life where unlike toys, qualities cannot be added into children and needs to be cultivated in them.

What are the cons of robot pets for kids?

Children’s fantasy world and reality tends to be ambiguous especially with a toy as advanced as Pleo. Children know that toys such as neopets and Tamagotchi are virtual pets as there is no physical interaction with the pets. However, many children tend to grow attached with toys such as Pleo and may not be able to distinguish between a real pet and the robotic one. The development of the real pet is very different where a real animal grows in size and ages. While the experience of the departure of the real pet may be similar to the departure of the virtual pet, it is still hard to capture the toy in different stages of life like death. Hence, children expose to virtual pets may develop a misconception that other things can also run out of battery. Hence, for example, children may be reinforced that their emotions also have an on-and-off switch where they be switched on and off with something.

Is there anything particularly wrong with kids becoming emotionally attached to robotic pets?

Although there is nothing wrong with being attached to something such as a favourite pen, clothes and even a stuffed toy, it may not be socially appropriate for a child to continue a great attachment to the toy at a later stage in his/her life, where it can escalate to fighting and arguing with his/her friends about the toy. Hence, although there are many benefits in a child who confides in the toy, but they need to know that it cannot replace other human beings and the emotions of the toy is not real.

Are robotic pets able to replace real pets for kids? Why?

There is an advantage in having a robotic pet for some types of children, namely the ones that have a disorder, such as ADHD and autism, etc. Using the toy will help autistic children to attempt to learn the different emotions and relate to it slowly as there is minimal fuss. Autistic children are not able to form attachments and may be overwhelmed to the emotions of others. Therefore, having the robotic pets will allow them to see the different emotions while not being overwhelmed by them as it is a toy that does not feel.

Additionally, parents also do not need to worry about extra care or expenses to upkeep the toy unlike a real pet, which needs to be fed and brought to the doctors etc. Unlike a real pet where its behaviours can be overwhelming to a child, a robotic pet allows a child to learn the steps on caring for a pet gradually before transiting to an actual pet. Also, the child's dependence on robotic pet for emotional support is similar to a real pet.

Studies have shown that real pets can reduce stress, encourage exercise, reduce blood pressure and cholesterol and stave off loneliness. Is it possible for robotic pets to benefit humans the same way real pets do?

There are many factors that are needed to support a person that is unwell, and a robotic pet may help to a certain extent. However, it may not be the only method. For some people, they may worry that they are so used to the robotic pets that when they grow old, they believe that robotic pets are sufficient as the only companion in their house.

Some studies are sceptical about humans building relationships with AI pets, suggesting that robotic pets merely provide the appearance of a relationship rather than an actual one. Is that true?

There is no fixed answer. It depends on some factors such as the dynamic of the relationship. For instance, some children form a relationship with puppets because they can do all sort of expressions and respond to the children. Some children talk, sleep and play with the puppets. Relationship like these provide a platform for the child to explore a relationship with others. It is important to remember that it should not be the only relationship the child has. Otherwise, parents can feel assured that the child has a comfort place that he can go to.

However, it is encouraged for parents to observe the child's relationship with the puppet. If the relationship starts to be dysfunctional with perverse fantasies or is drawing him away from other relationships, parents are encouraged to seek help from professionals.

Here at The Therapy Room, a team of psychologists – led by Geraldine Tan, the principal psychologist – is experienced in working with children. Should you have any concerns or inquiries, please feel free to click [here](#) to contact us and find out more.