Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

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A character-first approach to AI

A practical guide for
school leaders and teachers

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1 Introduction

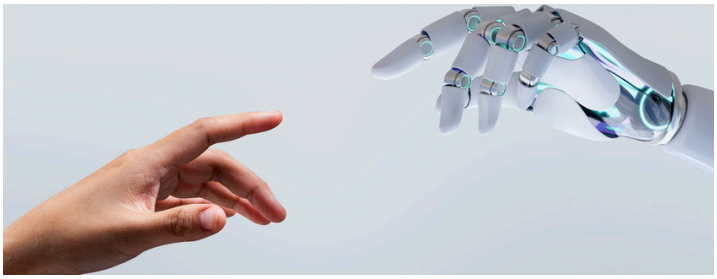
This practical guide is for school leaders and teachers concerned about how best to educate children and young people for a world increasingly shaped by digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI).

School leaders and teachers have an important role to play in helping their pupils use AI wisely. There is a critical period in childhood and adolescence, marked by heightened neural plasticity during which educational experiences shape learning, emotional regulation and social and character development.[1] School experiences create important foundations for later cognitive and character development outcomes.

Yet, many school leaders and teachers report feeling uncertain about what they should do in response to the rapid development and adoption of AI. Fewer than 1 in 7 teachers feel confident in the use of AI, and only 1 in 50 say it is embedded into their curriculum.[2] The pace of change can make it difficult for schools to develop thoughtful, well-informed, and sustainable approaches, particularly when technologies are evolving faster than schools can plan for them. This uncertainty is compounded by a shortage of clear, evidence-based, official guidance, alongside a growing volume of commentary and advice that can be contradictory, speculative, or of variable quality.

It is therefore unsurprising that many educators are asking a fundamental question:

> What should we do in the Age of AI?



This guide is designed to provide an accessible starting point for answering that question. It is not intended to be a comprehensive toolkit or implementation manual. Rather, it aims to help school leaders and teachers think clearly about the decisions they need to make now, while providing a sound basis for developing approaches that can evolve as technologies and the evidence surrounding them develop.

The guide addresses three fundamental questions:

1. What is a sound theoretical basis and set of principles for educating children and young people in a world increasingly shaped by AI?

2. What practical approaches can schools take to put these principles into action?

3. How can schools develop approaches that are responsive to technological change while remaining grounded in enduring educational purposes?

[1] European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Tilbury, D. (2026) *Impact of AI on children's socio-emotional and cognitive competences* : ENESET ad hoc report. Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/3470339
[2] Royal Society. (2026). *AI literacy amongst teachers: Confidence, support and practice.* https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/projects/ai-in-education/ai-literacy-amongst-teachers-confidence-support-and-practice.pdf

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Key assumptions

The guide is grounded in a number of key assumptions.

Digital technology and AI are now an established part of education and young people's lives.[3] Their adoption has been rapid and widespread, and teachers and pupils increasingly encounter these technologies as part of everyday learning and communication.

AI brings both opportunities and risks.[4] AI can support learning, creativity, communication, collaboration, and access to information, but it can also create challenges for wellbeing, relationships, attention, learning, academic integrity, and wider social and ethical life.

The opportunities and risks associated with AI depend not only on the technology itself, but on how people use it. AI use can have very different consequences depending on the purposes for which it is used, the context in which it is encountered, and the judgement exercised by the person using it.

Education must therefore focus not only on AI competence / literacy, but on the development of the person.[5] Children and young people need to acquire the knowledge and skills required to use AI, but they also need to develop the character, judgement, and habits that enable them to use these technologies wisely, responsibly and well.

The sound educational developmental aim is to move from rules to character. Rules, boundaries, and safeguards have an important role to play in protecting children and establishing responsible patterns of behaviour. However, as young people grow in independence, they increasingly encounter situations for which there is no predetermined rule and where adult supervision may be absent. Education should therefore help young people progressively develop the capacity to regulate their own behaviour, make sound judgements, and take responsibility for their choices.

A human-first approach should come before an AI-first approach. Rather than beginning by asking what particular technologies can do, schools should begin with more fundamental educational questions: *What is education for? What kind of people do we want our pupils to become? What human qualities are most important for young people to develop in a world shaped by increasingly powerful technologies?*

This means placing human flourishing at the centre of our thinking. Qualities such as critical thinking, creativity, curiosity, resilience, self-regulation, integrity, empathy, responsibility, and practical wisdom are not made less important by technological development. In many respects, they become more important.

Schools need to educate for the wise use of AI, not simply greater use of the technology. The aim is not simply to maximise or minimise young people's use of digital technologies or AI, but to help them understand when these technologies are beneficial, when they may be harmful, and when using them may undermine important aspects of their own learning and development.

Where empirical evidence is limited, schools need sound theory alongside professional wisdom. The rapid pace of AI development means that there will inevitably be questions for which robust empirical evidence does not yet exist.

Schools should draw on the best available evidence and well-established theoretical frameworks, while recognising the importance of professional judgement, contextual knowledge, and common sense in applying these principles to particular pupils, subjects, and school communities.

[3] Seldon, A., & Bunting, T. (2026). *Britain's greatest education opportunity ever.* Public First.
[4] Tilbury, D. (2026). *'Impact of AI on children's socio-emotional and cognitive competences'*, NESET report, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. doi: 10.2766/3470339.
[5] Grove, M., & Harrison, T. (2026). Educating what AI cannot: Character and the future of higher education. *British Journal of Educational Studies.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2026.2678972

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A character-first approach

Taken together, these assumptions lead to a simple but important proposition:

Schools should put character before AI.

The question is not simply how schools should respond to AI. It is how schools should educate children and young people to live well in a world shaped by AI.

This requires a shift in emphasis: from AI to people, from protection to preparation, from rules to character, and from asking *"What can this technology do?"* to asking *"What should we do with it?"*

The practical guidance that follows is intended to help schools begin that process.

Five principles: Character first, AI Second

Artificial intelligence is rapidly changing how young people learn, communicate, create, and work. Schools therefore have an important responsibility to help pupils understand and use AI effectively. But education in an AI world should not begin with technology.

It should begin with the development of the person – what might be called a human first approach. This means schools shifting their focus from epistemology to ontology: from what pupils know to who they become.

This approach aligns with the OECD's 'Education for Human Flourishing Framework',[6] which proposed deepening pupils' and staff's five uniquely human competencies; understanding the world, appreciating the world, acting in the world, adaptive problem solving, and ethical competence. The OECD Framework is informed by Aristotelian philosophy and encourages every young person's individual character, curiosity, and talents to be identified, nurtured, and developed, maximising young people's ability to use AI's benefits well, rather than becoming overly dependent on it or infantilised by it.

As AI becomes increasingly capable of providing information, generating ideas, and completing tasks, the qualities that enable young people to think, judge, relate to others and act responsibly become even more important. Schools should therefore seek to develop both AI literacy and the character needed to use AI wisely.

There are five principles schools can follow to ensure a character first, AI second approach.

Principle 1. Safeguard while building autonomy

Schools, alongside parents and carers, have a duty to protect pupils from harmful digital content, inappropriate AI use, and the risks of online environments. Clear expectations, rules, boundaries, and appropriate supervision remain essential.

But protection alone is not enough. As pupils grow older, they increasingly encounter situations in which there may be no clear rule, no adult supervision, and no technological safeguard. They need to develop the capacity to make good decisions for themselves.[7]

[6] OECD. (2025). *Education for human flourishing: A conceptual framework.* OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/73d7cb96-en
[7] Harrison, T. (2021). *THRIVE: How to cultivate character so your children can flourish online.* Little, Brown Book Group.

It is for this reason that the European Commission report Impact of AI on children's socio-emotional and cognitive competences[8] recommends:

Define age-banded expectations: differentiate AI governance according to children's developmental stages by limiting direct engagement with GenAI in early childhood, introducing AI through adult-mediated activities in primary education, and enabling progressively greater learner autonomy in later stages.

Schools should therefore help pupils move progressively from:

Rules to character – from following externally imposed rules to developing the character needed to make good choices independently.

Instruction to guidance – from teachers and other adults telling pupils what to do towards questioning, dialogue, coaching, and mentoring.

Restrictive to permissive use – from carefully controlled and curated access towards increasing freedom to explore and experiment.

Supervision to trust – from close monitoring towards trusting pupils to exercise responsibility.

Protection to preparation – from protecting pupils from digital risks towards preparing them to navigate those risks themselves.

External regulation to self-regulation – from adults regulating behaviour to pupils developing their own capacity for restraint and responsible choice.

Consequences imposed to consequences understood – from teachers enforcing consequences to pupils anticipating and reasoning about the consequences of their actions.

Compliance to judgement – from pupils asking *"What am I allowed to do?"* to asking *"What should I do?"*

Teacher authority to shared responsibility – the teacher remains an important source of guidance, but responsibility progressively shifts towards the pupil.

Digital safety to digital wisdom – from avoiding harm to exercising good judgement about how, when, and why technology should be used.

This does not mean abandoning rules or guidelines. Rules and guidelines remain vital for safeguarding and for teaching pupils how to behave well. But they should be understood as part of a broader developmental process that prepares young people to exercise good judgement when rules are no longer sufficient.

Principle 2. Put character before technology

A character-first approach begins with a simple question:

What kind of person do we want our young people to become, and how can technology help, rather than hinder, that development?

This changes the way schools think about AI. Instead of asking only what AI can do, or how pupils should use it, schools should also ask:

- What qualities do young people need to use AI well?
- How can AI support rather than replace learning? How can we develop pupils' capacity to question and evaluate AI-generated information?

[8] European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Tilbury, D. (2026) *Impact of AI on children's socio-emotional and cognitive competences* : ENESET ad hoc report. Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/3470339

- How do we ensure pupils retain opportunities to think, struggle, create, and solve problems independently?
- How can we help pupils recognise the ethical and social consequences of their use of technology?
- How can we prepare pupils to make good decisions when technology presents situations for which there is no simple rule?

Principle 3. Protect the conditions for human development

A character-first approach also means recognising what technology should not replace.

Young people need opportunities to experience productive struggle, solve problems without immediate assistance, read deeply, sustain attention, create original work, communicate face to face, collaborate with others, learn without technology, and learn from mistakes.

These experiences are not obstacles to progress. They are important contexts in which character develops.

Schools should therefore think carefully about where AI genuinely enhances learning and where its use may remove valuable opportunities for pupils to develop independence, perseverance, creativity, or judgement.

Principle 4. Teach AI through practice, reflection, and character

Character should not be confined to a lesson about digital citizenship or AI ethics. It should be embedded across school life.

Teachers can, for example:

- model good judgement by explaining why they choose to use, or not use, AI.
- ask pupils to challenge AI outputs rather than simply accept them.
- require pupils to explain their reasoning, not simply provide an answer.
- create opportunities for independent work before AI support is introduced.
- discuss ethical dilemmas arising from AI and encourage pupils to consider different perspectives.
- use mistakes as opportunities for reflection, not just as breaches of a rule.
- recognise character in action, such as honesty about AI use, perseverance with a difficult task or courage in challenging an unreliable AI response.
- develop a shared language of character so that pupils and staff can talk explicitly about the qualities needed to use technology well.

Principle 5. Aim for human flourishing

Human flourishing is the north star.

The purpose of education in an AI world is not to make young people better at competing with machines. It is to help them become more capable, thoughtful, and responsible human beings.

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AI literacy matters. But it is not enough. Schools must also cultivate the character, relationships, judgement, and wisdom that enable young people to use powerful technologies well. That means making character-first decisions in practice. For example:

- Does this use of AI help pupils think more deeply, or does it do the thinking for them?
- Does it build independence, or create dependence?
- Does it strengthen honesty, judgement, and responsibility, or make it easier to avoid them?
- Does it preserve opportunities for struggle, creativity, and original work, or replace them unnecessarily?
- Does it support the wellbeing and dignity of others, or risk harm, laziness, or misuse?
- If the answer does not move pupils towards human flourishing, it is not the right choice.

The goal is not simply to prepare pupils to live with AI. It is to help them develop the character to live well in a world shaped by AI.



Three theoretical foundations that underpin practice

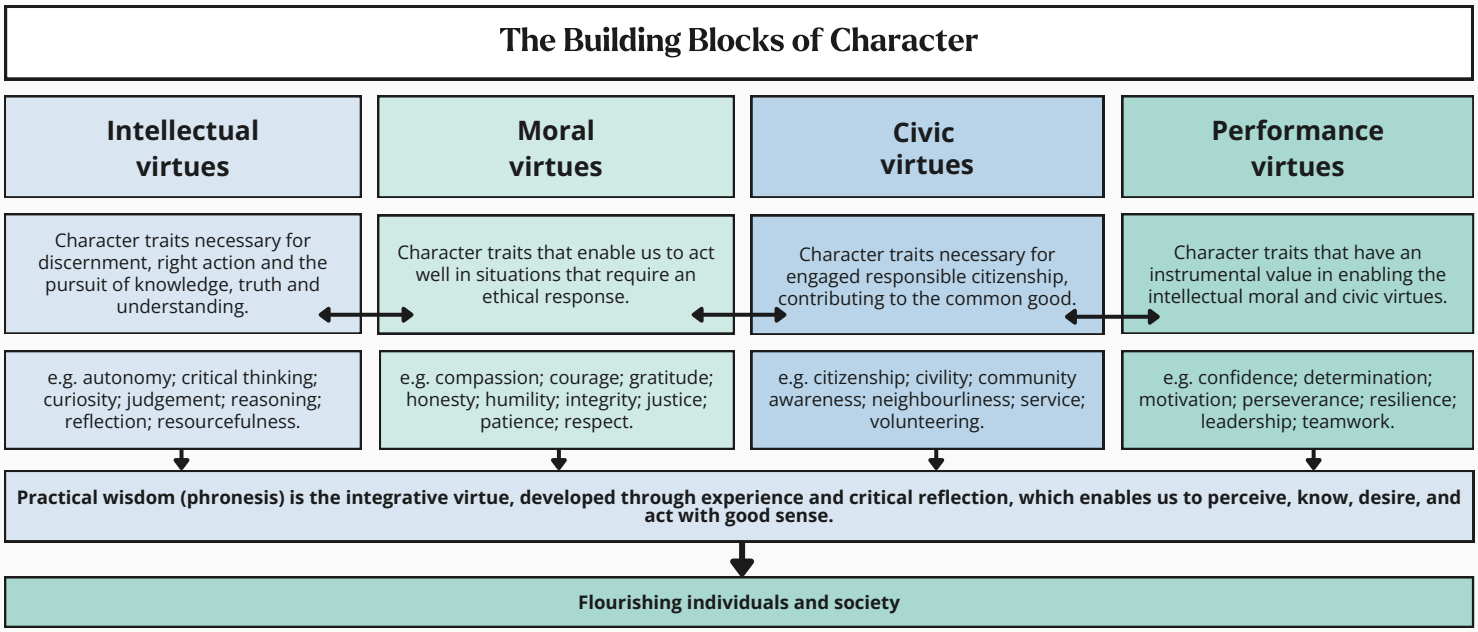
The Building Blocks of Character that are at the heart of the Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools[9] are now used in schools and educational settings around the world. School leaders and teachers have found the framework useful both for conceptualising character and for considering how learning can become increasingly intentional in developing different types of virtue.

School leaders and teachers should consider:

- Which virtues within each of the four types are most important to develop in their pupils, taking account of their particular school context and the challenges young people face.
- How these virtues relate to practical wisdom, recognising that the value of any individual virtue depends on knowing when, how, and to what extent it should be exercised.
- How character development connects with wider educational aspirations, including the development of young people who are able to contribute positively to their own flourishing and the flourishing of others.

[9] Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. (2022). *The Jubilee Centre framework for character education in schools (3rd ed.).* University of Birmingham.

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The table below demonstrates how each of the four virtue types can contribute to addressing some of the most pertinent challenges that AI raises for education.

Character and AI: What education should create[10]

AI CAN MAKE IT EASIER TO...	SO PUPILS NEED...	EDUCATION MUST CREATE OPPORTUNITIES TO...
Bypass difficult thinking	**Intellectual virtues** e.g. Critical thinking	Question, critique, reason and experience productive struggle.
Produce plausible work without taking full ownership of the thinking	**Moral virtues** e.g. Integrity	Justify choices, acknowledge contributions and take responsibility for their work.
Learn increasingly alone	**Civic virtues** e.g. Civility	Participate in shared inquiry, communicate with others and take responsibility for contributing to the learning community.
Take the path of least resistance	**Performance virtues** e.g. Perseverance	Persist, self-regulate and use support without becoming dependent on it.

Practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, brings the virtues into balance.

[10] Adapted from Grove, M., & Harrison, T. (2026). Educating what AI cannot: Character and the future of higher education. British Journal of Educational Studies. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2026.2678972

Pupils need repeated opportunities to develop the judgement to know when to submit work that utilised AI, and when not to; when to persist and when to seek help; when to work independently and when to use AI; when to trust an output and when to question it; and when doing the work themselves is essential to their learning and character. This is the ability to find the golden mean in context, avoiding both overreliance on AI and an unhelpful refusal to use it, and to make wise ethical choices when virtues such as independence, humility, honesty, and diligence pull in different directions.

FOUNDATION 2: CAUGHT, TAUGHT, SOUGHT

The development of the character needed to use AI wisely and well should not be left to chance. Schools can support this development through an intentional implementation of a Caught, Taught, Sought[11] approach which recognises that character is developed through the examples young people encounter, the explicit teaching they receive, and the opportunities they have to practise and apply what they have learned.

Caught: Pupils learn about appropriate and responsible AI use by observing the behaviour of teachers, peers, and other influential role models. The way AI is discussed and used across a school communicates powerful messages about its purpose and place in education. Teachers can model curiosity, critical thinking, integrity, and good judgement by being transparent about when and why they use AI, questioning its outputs and demonstrating that sometimes the best approach is not to use it. A school culture in which staff and pupils openly discuss the opportunities, limitations, and ethical implications of AI can help establish positive norms around its use.

Taught: Pupils should be intentionally and explicitly taught how to use AI in ways that support learning, personal development, and human flourishing. This includes developing AI literacy alongside critical thinking, discernment, creativity, ethical reasoning, and an understanding of issues such as accuracy, bias, privacy, authorship, and academic integrity. Teaching should go beyond explaining what AI can do to helping pupils consider when, why, and how it should be used. The aim is to develop the knowledge, understanding, and character needed to make increasingly independent and responsible decisions.

Sought: Pupils need opportunities to develop their judgement through experience. Schools can provide structured opportunities for pupils to use AI, experiment with its possibilities, encounter its limitations, and reflect on the consequences of different ways of using it. This might involve comparing their own thinking with AI-generated responses, identifying errors or bias, making decisions about when AI assistance is appropriate, or reflecting on how its use has affected their learning. Through supported practice, reflection, and discussion, pupils can progressively develop the practical wisdom, self-regulation, and responsibility needed to use AI well when adult guidance and school rules are no longer present.

Together, Caught, Taught, and Sought provide a developmental approach: pupils see good AI use, learn about good AI use, and practise making good decisions about AI for themselves. The ultimate aim is not simply compliance with rules governing AI, but the development of young people who can exercise sound judgement and take responsibility for how, when, and why they use increasingly powerful technologies.

[11] Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. (2022). *The Jubilee Centre framework for character education in schools (3rd ed.).* University of Birmingham.

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FOUNDATION 3: DEVELOPMENTAL PATHWAY FROM RULES TO CHARACTER

The developmental pathway has been newly developed for this guidance. It sets out how education and support can develop across childhood and adolescence, building progressively as a pupil grows up.

Rules and restrictions are used as forms of developmental scaffolding and are gradually reduced as a pupil's responsibility, competence, and capacity for self-regulation increase. The goal is to support older adolescents to self-manage their digital and AI use wisely, with consideration for their own wellbeing and that of others.

The focus is therefore not simply on restricting the use of AI, but on cultivating healthy digital habits that become progressively internalised over time. These include attention control, self-directed learning, ethical awareness and good judgement, emotional regulation, risk awareness, and social responsibility as dimensions of responsible digital citizenship.

The pathway describes a staged approach to helping pupils move from tightly guided use of AI towards increasing independence, judgement, and self-regulation. Progression should be understood as developmental rather than fixed. Pupils will move through these stages at different rates depending on age, context, maturity, and the nature of the task.

The developmental pathway draws on three complementary theoretical approaches:

Authoritative parenting

Research consistently associates authoritative parenting with a range of positive outcomes for children and adolescents.[12] It combines warmth and emotional support with clear, reasonable rules and expectations that are explained and discussed with the child. Parents and carers encourage open communication and use reasoning and dialogue, rather than relying primarily on coercion or punishment, to guide behaviour.

An authoritative approach, can be mapped onto how teachers might approach education in the age of AI, recognising children's developing autonomy while maintaining appropriate boundaries and structure. Applied to digital and screen use, this means establishing clear expectations while progressively involving pupils in decisions about their own use, encouraging reflection, negotiation and growing responsibility.

Moral theory

Moral development and decision-making in digital contexts can be understood through three complementary ethical perspectives: deontological ethics, consequentialism and virtue ethics.

Deontological ethics emphasises rules, duties and principles; consequentialism focuses on considering the likely consequences of actions; and virtue ethics emphasises the development of stable character traits and habits that enable individuals to act well.

Together, these perspectives provide a framework for helping pupils consider not only what they are allowed or required to do, but also what consequences their choices may have and what kind of person they are becoming through their AI use, actions and emerging habits. At school these forms of moral reasoning can be introduced and developed progressively, in ways appropriate to students developing understanding and capacity. [13]

[12] Ulferts, H. (2020), *"Why parenting matters for children in the 21st century: An evidence-based framework for understanding parenting and its impact on child development"*, OECD Education Working Papers, No. 222, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/129a1a59-en.
[13]Harrison, T., & Polizzi, G. (2022). (In)civility and adolescents' moral decision making online: Drawing on moral theory to advance digital citizenship education. Education and Information Technologies, 27, 3277–3297. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10710-0

Constructivism

Constructivist theory proposes that children and adolescents actively construct and develop their understanding through experience, prior knowledge, social interaction and reflection. Learning is supported through scaffolding, with parents, carers, and educators increasingly acting as guides, coaches, and mentors rather than simply as enforcers of rules.

This approach emphasises gradual meaning-making, enabling learners to develop understanding through engagement with real-world situations, dialogue, and reflection. In the digital age, pupils can develop AI literacy, capabilities and agency through supported experimentation, conversations and mediation with trusted adults and peers, and reflection on their own digital experiences.

Five-phase developmental pathway

01 | Foundations: virtue knowledge

Educator role: Instruct and control technology: Building the foundations of good character

At this stage, pupils need clear rules, close supervision, and carefully curated access to technology. They should not have personal devices or unsupervised access to the internet or AI tools. Screen use should be limited, structured and purposeful. Teachers should model the standards expected and use technology only in tightly controlled ways that serve a clear educational purpose.

The focus is on helping pupils understand expectations, routines, boundaries, and consequences, while also laying the foundations for virtue knowledge. Alongside technology restrictions, pupils should begin to develop a foundational language of character – learning what qualities such as honesty, self-control, respect, courage, and perseverance mean in practice, why they matter, and how good character is shaped through consistent guidance, example, and habit.

02 | Guided Exploration: virtue knowledge and understanding

Educator role: Co-use and model technology: Shared, supervised exploration

At this stage, pupils begin to explore technology in shared and supervised contexts. They can experiment in structured ways, with adults co-using technology alongside them and explicitly modelling good practice.

The focus is not only on learning how technology works, but also on building character knowledge and understanding. Pupils should learn the language of virtue more securely and begin to connect it to digital life. They should be supported to consider what honesty, prudence, self-control, perseverance, courage, and responsibility look like when using technology and AI.

This stage should include discussion of choices, risks, and consequences. Pupils need support to understand when technology is appropriate, how it should be used, and what responsible use looks like. They should begin to recognise that good decisions often require judgement, not just rule-following.

03 | Supported Independence: virtue perception and motivation

Educator role: Coach technology: Increasing freedom within clear boundaries

At this stage, pupils are given increasing freedom within clear boundaries. This may include more independent access to technology, and for some pupils, a first smartphone or first use of AI tools in a managed context.

Teachers should continue to set limits, monitor use, and have regular conversations about wellbeing, relationships, online behaviour, and the impact of digital choices.

The emphasis is now on helping pupils not only understand what good use looks like, but to recognise situations that call for a virtue-based response, and to want to use technology well.

Pupils should begin to develop the motivation to act virtuously when using AI: to use it honestly, to resist overreliance, to persist when appropriate, to seek help wisely, and to make choices that reflect good character rather than convenience alone. They should begin to notice when a situation calls for honesty, self-control, courage, humility, prudence, or responsibility, and to respond accordingly.

04 | Guided Autonomy: virtue reasoning

Educator role: Facilitate Technology: Greater responsibility within agreed rules and laws

At this stage, pupils are given greater responsibility for their choices, digital identity, online behaviour, and use of platforms. They should be expected to exercise ethical judgement within agreed rules and laws, with teachers stepping back but remaining available for guidance.

Teachers should support pupils to reflect on when to use technology, when to avoid it, and how to act responsibly when direct supervision is limited. The focus is on helping pupils reason through difficult choices, especially when virtues may appear to clash or when there is no obvious right answer.

Pupils should be supported to develop practical wisdom, or *phronesis*: the ability to discern what the situation calls for, to find the right balance, and to make wise, ethical choices when using AI. The goal is to build confident, thoughtful, and principled use rather than dependence on teacher direction.

05 | Autonomy with Character: virtue action and practice

Educator role: Enable and champion technology: Wise, independent, and responsible engagement

At this stage, pupils take responsibility for their AI use, content, identity and digital legacy. They are developing the habits needed for responsible and independent engagement with technology.

The role of the educator is to encourage, reinforce and celebrate wise choices. Pupils should be able to act with increasing independence, using technology in ways that reflect good judgement, self-control, honesty, and care for others.

The aim is for pupils to internalise the virtues so that wise action becomes habitual. They should be able to think long term, consider the impact of their choices on themselves and others, and use technology in ways that support human flourishing.

12 In practice

The table below shows how the three foundational positions can be brought together through a series of strategies, approaches, and teaching and learning activities that can be implemented in schools.

The suggested approaches develop progressively, stage by stage, building on one another throughout the developmental pathway. They also illustrate how activities relating to character caught, taught, and sought develop at each stage, linking these to the particular roles and expectations of the school, teachers, and pupils.

Perseverance, civility, integrity, and critical thinking are provided as examples in the table. These virtues are interconnected with other moral, civic, performative, and intellectual virtues, and may also be expressed through a range of related virtues or synonyms. Schools may therefore choose to adopt particular virtues that are more closely aligned with their aspirations for AI use, their history and context, and the needs of the communities they serve. The activities are also provided as examples and could be substituted or complemented by others used in character education.

The table below provides a summary of how the developmental pathway builds on itself throughout the stages, under the headings of caught, taught, and sought. Further detail is provided in the following table about the types of approaches and activities that could be integrated into schools.

Summary of developmental pathway

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE	CAUGHT	TAUGHT	SOUGHT
Foundations	Establish clear boundaries, routines, and a shared virtue language and expectations	Teach what relevant virtues mean and how they apply in concrete situations relevant to pupils' lives.	Practise virtuous actions within clear boundaries and with close guidance.
Guided Exploration	Create safe, structured opportunities for teachers and pupils to explore virtuous AI use together.	Model and make visible the reasoning behind sound, virtue-informed judgements about AI.	Make virtue-informed choices about AI use within clear boundaries.
Supported Independence	Increase pupils' freedom to use AI while maintaining clear expectations and appropriate support.	Help pupils recognise AI-related situations that call for a virtuous response and develop the motivation to act accordingly.	Choose whether and how to use AI, and explain and justify those choices.
Guided Autonomy	Shift from tightly controlled and prescribed use of AI towards responsible discretion and growing autonomy.	Teach pupils to deliberate when virtues or other important considerations conflict and the right use of AI is not immediately clear.	Exercise and defend considered ethical judgements about whether and how to use AI.
Autonomy with Character	Foster a culture in which responsible, character-led autonomy in AI use is expected, supported and exemplified.	Coach and mentor pupils to refine their practical wisdom in complex and unfamiliar situations.	Use AI wisely and consistently without external direction, while helping others to do the same.

13 Developmental pathway – practical application

	THE SCHOOL CHARACTER CAUGHT *What pupils see, experience and absorb from school culture/norms and adult examples.*	THE TEACHER CHARACTER TAUGHT *What pupils are explicitly taught, tasks they practise and/or are helped to know and understand.*	THE PUPIL CHARACTER SOUGHT *What pupils increasingly choose, practise, initiate/take responsibility for themselves.*
Foundations: **Virtue Knowledge** **Developing towards:** *I know what is expected of me.*	**Establish clear boundaries and shared habits.** AI is generally not used independently; technology use is carefully selected, purposeful and adult mediated. Integrity and civility are made visible through school routines, language and expectations. Adults consistently model honesty, responsibility, listening, respect and putting mistakes right.	**Teach what the virtues mean in concrete situations.** Use stories, scenarios and subject examples that help pupils to learn about integrity, civility and related virtues such as responsibility, fairness, and perseverance. Explicitly teach and model respectful disagreement, responsible technology use and basic digital literacy. Create opportunities for collaborative activity in which pupils need to listen, share and contribute and are expected to demonstrate honesty and telling the truth.	**Practise virtuous habits.** Pupils practise honesty, civility and responsibility in learning and play. Pupils take on classroom responsibilities such as distributing equipment or resources and supporting others. When using technology, pupils follow clear expectations and begin to explain why those expectations matter.
Guided Exploration: **Virtue Knowledge and Understanding** **Developing towards:** *I can recognise good and poor uses of AI, know what is expected of me when I use it and understand why.*	**Create safe opportunities for shared exploration.** Introduce carefully bounded, teacher-mediated AI experiences. Establish a simple AI agreement that pupils understand and discuss. Make perseverance and critical thinking part of the school's developing shared virtue language alongside integrity and civility.	**Make good AI judgement visible.** Demonstrate how AI might support a task and think aloud about whether, when and why to use it. Introduce *"check it, don't trust it"* activities in which pupils verify outputs against reliable sources. Ask simple virtue questions: *Is it honest? Is it accurate? Is it helpful? Is it fair?* Use curriculum moments to connect virtues to pupils' digital lives.	**Make choices within clear boundaries.** Pupils use AI with adult guidance, question its outputs and practise checking information. Pupils begin to identify how integrity, civility, perseverance and critical thinking apply to technology use. They reflect on whether using AI helped or hindered their learning.
Supported Independence: **Virtue Perception and Motivation** **Developing towards:** *I can make informed choices about whether and how I use AI, starting to recognise the moral implications associated with using AI, and want to use it with character and wisdom.*	**Increased freedom within clear expectations.** AI is used increasingly independently for appropriate learning tasks, with clear limits and transparent use. Expectations around responsible AI use and the core virtues become familiar across school life. Adults continue to model their own decisions to use, question, limit or reject AI.	**Teach pupils to recognise what a situation calls for.** Use ethical scenarios involving misinformation, bias, authorship, overreliance and responsible prompting. Model questioning, checking, improving and reflecting. Design tasks where AI can support learning and others where productive struggle, perseverance and independent thinking are deliberately protected.	**Choose and justify.** Pupils begin to decide when AI is useful, when it is better not to use it and explain their reasoning. They transparently acknowledge significant AI assistance and explain how it was used. They review their own and peers' choices through a virtue lens, asking whether they showed honesty, fairness, perseverance, respect and critical thinking.

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	THE SCHOOL CHARACTER CAUGHT *What pupils see, experience and absorb from school culture/norms and adult examples.*	THE TEACHER CHARACTER TAUGHT *What pupils are explicitly taught, tasks they practise and/or are helped to know and understand.*	THE PUPIL CHARACTER SOUGHT *What pupils increasingly choose, practise, initiate/take responsibility for themselves.*
Guided Autonomy: **Virtue Reasoning** **Developing towards:** *I can justify my judgement when virtues or other important considerations conflict in my AI use, and strive to take the right action when using AI.*	**Shift from prescription towards responsible discretion.** Pupils have greater freedom to use AI appropriately, while some learning and assessment deliberately remains AI-free. School expectations increasingly emphasise responsible judgement rather than simply compliance with rules.	**Teach pupils to reason when there is no simple rule.** Facilitate increasingly complex AI dilemmas in which legitimate considerations or virtues may conflict, such as perseverance versus prudence in seeking assistance, creativity versus integrity and authorship, or civility versus courage in challenging misinformation. Use structured debate around authorship, privacy, fairness and originality. Ask pupils to compare AI-assisted and independent approaches and evaluate their consequences for the quality of the outcome, their learning, independence and ownership.	**Exercise and defend judgement.** Pupils independently decide whether, how and when AI should be used within agreed boundaries. Pupils justify those decisions, consider consequences and evaluate AI's effect on the quality and ownership of their learning. Reflection increasingly combines self, peer and teacher evaluation, requiring pupils to articulate and defend their own judgement.
Autonomy with Character: **Virtue Action and Practice** **Developing towards:** *Most of the time, I use AI independently with practical wisdom, acting in the right way and to the right extent, and I try to help others do the same.*	**Create a culture of responsible autonomy.** Responsible AI use is increasingly sustained by shared norms, trust, pupil leadership and reflection rather than enforced rules alone. Pupils contribute to and review the community's expectations for responsible AI use, explaining the principles and virtues underpinning their recommendations.	**Coach the exercise of practical wisdom.** Teachers question, challenge and advise rather than routinely prescribe AI use. Pupils are exposed to authentic and ambiguous problems to help them articulate, defend and refine their principles for AI use. Teachers challenge pupils to consider competing virtues, consequences, other people and their own flourishing.	**Act wisely without the need for external direction.** Pupils undertake real-world problem solving in which they independently decide when AI will help, when it should be limited and when it should be avoided. Pupils transparently account for those decisions, mentor younger pupils and assemble evidence of their developing judgement. Pupils reflect not only on what AI produced, but on how their choices affect learning, relationships, identity, originality, contribution and the person they are becoming.

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What this means for schools

The developmental pathway requires a whole-school approach in which pupils encounter character through what is caught in the culture and example of others, taught explicitly through the curriculum, and sought through increasingly independent practice and reflection.

Embed a character-first framework. Identify the virtues that should guide the school's use of AI, such as integrity, critical thinking, civility, perseverance, and practical wisdom. Translate these virtues into clear expectations for pupils and staff at each stage of the developmental pathway. Decisions about technology should follow educational and moral purposes, rather than being driven by the availability or novelty of particular tools.

Model, model, model—at every level. School leaders, teachers and other adults should exemplify responsible AI use through their own choices and practices. Teachers should make their reasoning visible by explaining when, why, and how they use AI, when they choose not to use it, and how they check, challenge, and improve its outputs. This strengthens the caught dimension of character education and gives pupils concrete examples on which to base their own judgements.

Respond to developmental stage, not simply age. Progression towards character-led autonomy will not be identical for every pupil or in every context. Schools should consider pupils' knowledge, motivation, judgement, and prior experience when deciding how much structure, guidance, and freedom they need. Expectations and support can then be adjusted gradually as pupils demonstrate readiness for greater independence.

Reframe academic integrity as a matter of self-formation. Inappropriate AI use should not be presented only as cheating the school or breaking a rule. Pupils should understand that bypassing worthwhile effort can also deprive them of opportunities to develop knowledge, skills, judgement, and character. Academic integrity therefore involves making honest and well-reasoned choices about whether and how AI should contribute to learning, including acknowledging its use appropriately.

Revise formative and summative assessment when possible to value knowledge, skills and character. Assessment should establish what pupils know and can do independently, while also attending to the quality of the decisions they make about AI. Formative approaches might include drafts, learning conversations, process records, oral explanations and reflective accounts. Summative assessment should verify secure knowledge and skills while, where appropriate, asking pupils to explain and defend their choices, demonstrate integrity, and exercise sound judgement.

Use character-first, AI-second language consistently. Policies, curriculum materials, classroom routines and feedback should begin with the educational purpose and the virtues required, rather than with the capabilities of the technology. Questions such as *"What is the right thing to do?"*, *"What would support genuine learning?"* and *"Which virtues are needed here?"* should come before *"Which AI tool could I use?"*

Develop a spiral curriculum for AI and character. Revisit core knowledge, skills and virtues regularly across subjects and year groups, introducing increasingly complex, uncertain, and authentic situations. Pupils should move from clear boundaries and closely guided practice towards supported independence, guided autonomy and, ultimately, character-led AI use without the need for external direction.

Watch the gap. Work closely with feeder and destination schools to ensure that the developmental pathway remains coherent across transitions. Share expectations, terminology, and information about pupils' prior learning so that progress in knowledge, skills, and character is sustained as pupils move between schools.

Use tokens and computational resources wisely. Teach pupils that AI use carries material and environmental costs and should therefore be purposeful and proportionate. When possible use token allocation to help pupils learn to plan before prompting, avoid unnecessary or repeated generation, select tools carefully, and judge whether AI is genuinely needed. This provides a practical context for developing prudence, sustainability, restraint, and good judgement.

Build reflection into learning in four ways. Provide opportunities for pupils to:

- Reflect individually
- Deliberate in groups
- Receive coaching from a teacher or tutor, and
- Test their thinking through dialogue with peers.

Reflection should address not only what pupils produced, but why they used, or chose not to use, AI, which virtues were relevant, what tensions arose, and what they would do differently next time. Over time, responsibility for reflection should shift from teacher-led prompts towards pupils' independent exercise of practical wisdom.

What this means for teaching

The developmental pathway has implications not only for whole-school culture and policy, but also for the everyday decisions teachers make about curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom practice. Teaching should intentionally, progressively and in a planned way move pupils from structured participation and guided exploration towards independent, character-led judgement. Across this progression, pupils encounter responsible practice through what is caught from teachers' example, taught through explicit instruction, and sought through opportunities to practise, reflect, and act for themselves.

Design for active engagement. Plan learning in which pupils solve problems, critique arguments and outputs, discuss competing interpretations, and respond to open-ended questions. AI should not reduce pupils to passive recipients of information or ready-made answers. Instead, tasks should require them to retrieve and apply knowledge, make connections, test possibilities, exercise relevant virtues, and contribute their own reasoning. As pupils progress, they should encounter increasingly complex and uncertain tasks that require greater independence and practical wisdom.

Make disciplinary thinking visible. Teach pupils not only what a good answer looks like, but how knowledge is developed, tested, and improved within a particular subject. Make explicit the methods, standards of evidence, forms of reasoning and habits of mind that distinguish expert disciplinary practice. When AI is used, draw attention to how its outputs should be checked against disciplinary knowledge, questioned, revised, or rejected rather than accepted at face value.

Model how experts work. Demonstrate the processes that sit behind a finished product, including uncertainty, error, unsuccessful approaches, changes of direction, and the testing of assumptions. Think aloud so that pupils can see how an informed person makes judgements about whether, when and how to use AI. Teachers should model intellectual humility, integrity, perseverance, and critical thinking by acknowledging what they do not know, checking claims carefully and explaining why an apparently efficient approach may not always support worthwhile learning.

Create space for dialogue and challenge. Build regular opportunities for pupils to explain and defend their thinking, listen to alternative perspectives, question assumptions and refine their ideas with others. Classroom dialogue should help pupils recognise that sound judgement is developed socially as well as individually. Discussion of AI-related choices can expose tensions between virtues and other important considerations, enabling pupils to practise civil disagreement, and learn how to justify an ethical judgement.

Build independence through structured support. Use modelling, prompts, worked examples, scaffolds, feedback, and guided practice to enable pupils to undertake tasks that they could not yet complete independently. Remove this support gradually as their knowledge, skills, motivation, and judgement develop. The aim is not simply to give pupils greater freedom to use AI, but to prepare them to exercise that freedom responsibly, without becoming dependent on either the technology or continual adult direction.

Teach the critical and character-led use of tools. Explicitly teach pupils to decide whether a tool is appropriate for the educational purpose, rather than beginning with what the technology can do. They should learn when AI may support learning, when it may obstruct learning, and when it should not be used. Where AI is appropriate, pupils should know how to formulate purposeful requests, interrogate outputs, identify errors and bias, compare claims with reliable evidence, revise generated material and acknowledge their use transparently.

Teach pupils to use AI in the right way and to the right extent. Responsible use concerns not only whether AI is permitted, but also the purpose, timing and proportion of its contribution. Help pupils distinguish between support that extends their thinking and substitution that bypasses the intellectual effort needed for learning. This provides a practical context in which to develop restraint, integrity, perseverance, and practical wisdom, including the prudent use of tokens and computational resources.

Make reflection a conscious and constant part of the learning process. Ask pupils to reflect on what they learned, how they approached the task and why they chose to use (or not to use) AI. Reflection can take place individually, through group deliberation, in coaching conversations with a teacher or tutor, and through dialogue with peers. Prompts should consider which virtues were needed, what tensions arose, how AI affected pupils' thinking and what they would do differently next time. Over time, responsibility for initiating and directing this reflection should pass increasingly to pupils.

Assess the process as well as the product. Use drafts, questioning, oral explanation, observation, learning conversations and process records to understand how pupils arrived at an outcome. Assessment should establish what pupils know and can do independently while also attending, where appropriate, to the quality of their decisions about AI.

Pupils should increasingly be expected to explain and defend their choices, demonstrate integrity, and show how they checked, challenged, and improved their work.

Protect and articulate the distinctive value of human teaching. In an AI-enabled world, excellent teaching should replace passive information receipt with active participation in a community of learning. In-person teaching offers responsive explanation, encouragement, appropriate challenge, relational understanding, ethical example, and shared enquiry in ways that automated systems cannot replicate. Teachers should make this value visible by designing encounters in which pupils think with others, receive context-sensitive guidance and develop the knowledge, skills, and character needed to exercise wise autonomy.

18 Important qualifications, limitations and challenges

A character-based approach provides a strong foundation for helping pupils navigate an uncertain AI-enabled world, but its scope and limitations must be clearly understood. Although this guidance focuses primarily on what schools and teachers can do, responsibility for children's experiences of AI does not rest with educators and pupils alone. Technology companies, policymakers, regulators, families, and wider society all have important roles to play.

Character education does not remove the responsibilities of technology companies

Schools can help pupils develop the virtues, knowledge and skills needed to use AI wisely, but education should not be expected to compensate for technologies that have been designed or deployed without sufficient regard for children's interests. The recent history of social media, smartphones, and other digital technologies shows how commercial platforms can create morally challenging environments in which children are expected to exercise restraint, judgement, and responsibility despite powerful pressures working against them.

A character-based approach must therefore avoid placing the full burden of responsibility on individual pupils. Technology companies have a duty to consider children's safety, development and wellbeing in the design, testing, and operation of their products. Appropriate governance, regulation and accountability are also required. Character education should complement these structural protections, not serve as a substitute for them.

Pupils should be helped to understand that the decisions made by AI companies will not necessarily be guided primarily by their learning or wellbeing. They should therefore approach AI critically and reflectively rather than assuming that a tool is accurate, neutral, beneficial, or acting in their best interests. This includes learning to question how a system has been designed, what incentives shape it, whose interests it serves, what information it collects and how it may influence their choices and behaviour.

Ethical uncertainty can be an opportunity for learning

AI is creating new ethical questions and giving renewed urgency to existing ones. Schools, teachers, families, technology companies, and policymakers are all still working out what responsible action looks like in many situations. There will not always be a single, obvious answer, and apparently worthwhile considerations may conflict. For example, convenience may conflict with worthwhile effort, personalisation with privacy, innovation with caution, and individual benefit with social or environmental responsibility.

This uncertainty means that pupils and adults will sometimes make poor or imperfect decisions. Where appropriate, these occasions should be treated as opportunities for learning and honing practical wisdom rather than simply as failures to comply. Pupils should be supported to examine what happened, identify the virtues and other considerations involved, consider who may have been affected, and decide how they would act differently in the future. Such reflection is central to the development of practical wisdom.

The evidence base is behind the times

This guidance draws on the best available empirical evidence about character education, teaching, learning, and pupils' use of technology. However, high-quality longitudinal and impact evidence relating specifically to generative AI remains limited. The technology is developing rapidly, patterns of adoption are changing quickly, and research findings can become dated within a short period. Emerging studies may also rely on particular tools / models, small samples, self-reported behaviour or short-term outcomes, limiting how confidently their conclusions can be applied across different schools and contexts.

For these reasons, the guidance is grounded primarily in established theory and evidence concerning character, virtue, human development, and effective education, supplemented by emerging evidence about AI where this is sufficiently robust and relevant. Not all of this foundational evidence was developed for the age of generative AI. Nevertheless, the underlying principles, including the importance of example, explicit teaching, habituation, reflection, sound judgement, and progressively increasing autonomy, have stood the test of time and provide a credible basis for practical action.

Shooting in the dark whilst trying to hit a moving target

Schools and teachers are, to a significant extent, attempting to respond to a moving target while working with incomplete evidence. AI tools, their capabilities and the ways in which pupils use them will continue to change. Guidance must therefore be treated as a framework for informed professional judgement rather than as a fixed set of rules capable of anticipating every future situation.

In response to this challenge, the present guidance adopts a clear, consistent and accessible approach that can be put into practice immediately. It cannot capture every nuance, subject-specific issue or emerging application of AI. Its purpose is instead to provide schools and teachers with a durable character-first framework through which new technologies and dilemmas can be evaluated. Schools should review their approaches regularly, attend to emerging evidence and pupils' lived experiences, and adapt provision while retaining a clear focus on human flourishing, worthwhile learning, and the wise use of technology.



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Summary: putting character first

This guidance has set out a character-first approach to the adoption and use of AI in schools. Its central message is clear: decisions about AI should begin with the purposes of education, the needs of pupils, and the kind of people we hope they will become—not with the capabilities or novelty of the technology.

In summary, the guidance shows how to:

Use AI as an opportunity to reconsider the purpose of education. AI has disrupted established approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. It also provides an important impetus for schools to reflect on what education is for, what pupils most need to learn and which human qualities will enable them to flourish in a digital age.

Begin with educational and moral purposes, not technological possibilities. The first question should not be, "What can this technology do?" but, "What are we trying to achieve, what would support worthwhile learning, and which virtues are needed?" AI adoption should follow clearly defined educational purposes rather than drive them.

Prioritise character development over AI adoption. Schools should not adopt AI simply because it is available, efficient, or widely used. They should consider whether, when and to what extent it contributes to pupils' knowledge, skills, character, and wellbeing. Sometimes the wisest decision will be to use AI; at other times, it will be to limit or reject its use.

Build on existing strengths in character education. Many schools already place character at the heart of their ethos, curriculum and relationships. The approach outlined in this guidance is intended to strengthen that work by ensuring that the virtues pupils need to live and learn well are applied explicitly to decisions about AI.

Recognise the distinctive value of schools. Schools are not merely places where information is delivered. They are communities of learning characterised by human encounter, shared enquiry and meaningful relationships. Teachers can understand pupils' individual circumstances, provide responsive support and challenge, model good judgement, and help pupils learn with and from others in ways that AI cannot replicate.

Protect pupils' agency and formation. Digital technologies inevitably influence how pupils think and act, but they should not be allowed to determine who pupils become. Schools should help pupils develop the knowledge, motivation, virtues and practical wisdom needed to make deliberate choices about technology, rather than being passively shaped by it.

Connect character caught, taught and sought to AI adoption. Pupils should encounter responsible AI use through the example and culture of the school; through explicit teaching about virtues, knowledge, skills and ethical considerations; and through opportunities to practise, reflect and exercise progressively greater independence.

Support development towards wise autonomy. The developmental pathway moves pupils from clear boundaries and shared expectations, through guided exploration and supported independence, towards character-led AI use. Freedom should increase alongside pupils' knowledge, competence, motivation, and capacity for sound judgement.

Align leadership, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. A character-first approach cannot be confined to an AI policy or a small number of lessons. It should shape leadership decisions, staff development, curriculum design, classroom practice, assessment, pastoral support, and communication with families.

Reclaim active and worthwhile learning. AI should not turn education into the passive receipt of generated information or the frictionless production of completed work. Teaching should continue to require pupils to remember, reason, question, discuss, create, persevere, and make judgements. Where AI is used, it should extend these processes rather than replace them.

Use professional judgement within real constraints. Schools do not always have complete autonomy over what or how they teach, and they are responding to rapidly developing technologies with an incomplete evidence base. Nevertheless, they retain significant influence over the culture they create, the practices they model, and the expectations they establish for responsible use.

Review and adapt while holding firmly to enduring principles. Particular AI tools and applications will continue to change. Schools should review their provision in response to emerging evidence and pupils' experiences, while remaining anchored in enduring commitments to human flourishing, worthwhile learning, strong relationships, and the development of virtue.

A final call to action

Schools now face a consequential choice. They can allow the availability and capabilities of AI to set the direction of education, or they can decide first what education is for and require technology to serve that purpose.

A character-first approach provides a coherent basis for making that choice. By bringing together philosophical understandings of character and virtue, character caught, taught and sought, and a developmental pathway towards wise autonomy, it connects educational purpose with practical action at whole-school and classroom levels. It positions teachers not simply as facilitators of technology use, but as knowledgeable professionals, ethical exemplars and trusted guides in pupils' formation.

The guidance calls for schools to:

- **Adopt AI only where it supports worthwhile learning, character development and human flourishing.**
- **Teach pupils not merely how to use AI, but how to judge whether it should be used, for what purpose, in what way and to what extent.**

In doing so, schools can resist a narrow, transactional model of education and reclaim education as a relational, formative and genuinely transformative endeavour.

21 Related publications

This publication in the Essentials Series builds on the foundational work of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, drawing on both theoretical and empirical contributions from members of the Centre's team, as well as its Framework for Character Education.

The publication is primarily informed by these publications by members of the Centre:

Dennis, M., & Harrison, T. (2021). Unique ethical challenges for the 21st century: Online technology and virtue education. Journal of Moral Education, 50(3), 251–266. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2020.1781071

Grove, M., & Harrison, T. (2026). Educating what AI cannot: Character and the future of higher education. British Journal of Educational Studies. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2026.2678972

Harrison, T. (2016). Cultivating cyber-phronesis: A new educational approach to tackle cyberbullying. Pastoral Care in Education, 34(4), 232–244. https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2016.1202307

Harrison, T. (2021). THRIVE: How to cultivate character so your children can flourish online. Robinson.

Harrison, T., & Polizzi, G. (2022). (In)civility and adolescents' moral decision making online: Drawing on moral theory to advance digital citizenship education. Education and Information Technologies, 27, 3277–3297. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10710-0

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. (2022). The Jubilee Centre framework for character education in schools (3rd ed.). University of Birmingham.

Polizzi, G., & Harrison, T. (2022). Wisdom in the digital age: A conceptual and practical framework for understanding and cultivating cyber-wisdom. Ethics and Information Technology, 24(1), Article 16. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-022-09640-3

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