HEALTHY DIGITAL CHILDHOOD ALLIANCE

How It Actually Works

Last week, the dinner table conversation starter was: ‘If a robot could do one chore for you, what would it be?’

I want to share a moment from my own dinner table. My younger daughter’s first instinct was immediately: ‘Do my homework.’

But then she paused. She thought about it out loud and said, “but if the robot did that, I wouldn’t actually learn anything.” So she changed her mind: “Clean up the mess after me and make my bed.”

That pause is what AI fluency looks like.
She didn’t just ask “Can the robot do it?” (Capability). She pondered “Should the robot do it?” (Judgment). She realized that outsourcing the result meant sacrificing the learning. That ability to stop and evaluate the trade-off, rather than just pushing the easy button, is exactly the skill we are building.

To help you have more of these conversations, you need the vocabulary. This week, we are clearing up the word soup.

The Glossary: 5 Terms You'll Read in the News :

1. AI (Artificial Intelligence)
The broad umbrella term. It just means computers doing "smart" things. You've used it for years: FaceID unlocking your phone and Amazon Recommendations are both AI.

2. Generative AI
The "Creative" branch. Old AI analyzed existing data (is this transaction fraud?). This new AI creates new data (writing an email, drawing a picture).

3. LLMs (Large Language Models)
The Engine. ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini are LLMs. They are software trained on vast amounts of text to predict the next word. They are the "Word Nerds" of the AI world.

4. AI Agents
The "Hands." An Agent is an LLM connected to tools—like a web browser or your calendar.

The Promise: You say "Book me a flight to London next Tuesday," and the agent handles everything: searching flights, comparing prices, entering your details, and completing the purchase.

The Reality: They're still clumsy interns learning on the job. An agent might successfully find the perfect flight but then book it for the wrong Tuesday, charge the wrong credit card, or misspell your name. Right now, they need constant supervision, like checking their work before they hit "confirm."

5. AGI (Artificial General Intelligence)
The "Sci-Fi Goal." This describes a hypothetical machine that can do any intellectual task a human can do.

Status: As of the date of this note (February, 2026), it doesn't exist. Despite the hype, no computer today has common sense or true consciousness.

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The Key Players: Who is Who?

You'll also see these names in the headlines. Here's your cheat sheet for the companies and their main products:

- **OpenAI (Product: ChatGPT)**

Superpower: The All-Rounder. The celebrity of the group. It is the standard for general reasoning, voice conversation, and coding.

- **Google (Product: Gemini)**

Superpower: Integration. It connects directly to your Google Docs, Gmail, and Drive to organize your personal files.

- **Anthropic (Product: Claude)**

Superpower: Writing. Founded by ex-OpenAI researchers, it sounds the most human and excels at summarizing long documents.

- **Meta (Product: Meta AI)**

Superpower: Convenience. It lives inside WhatsApp, Instagram, and Messenger. You don't need to download a new app to use it.

- **Perplexity (Product: Perplexity)**

Superpower: Research. A "Truth Engine" that reads the web and answers questions with cited footnotes (like a librarian).

- **xAI (Product: Grok)**

Superpower: Real-Time News. Owned by Elon Musk, it has instant access to posts on X (Twitter), making it fast for breaking events.

- **DeepSeek (Product: DeepSeek Chat)**

Superpower: Efficiency. The challenger from China that delivers high-level performance for math and code at a fraction of the cost.

The Mechanism: The “Super-Autocomplete”

We’ve covered the names. Now, let’s look at the engine to understand why these “smart” tools sometimes make mistakes.

Think of your phone’s autocomplete. When you type “Happy”, it suggests “Birthday”.
It does that using statistical models, tracking your personal typing history plus common patterns.

LLMs use that same logic, but before launch they’re trained by crunching trillions of internet examples to learn patterns, frozen at that point in time.

When you ask a question, the base models predict the next word (or in LLM language, a “token”) from trillions of examples. This is different from search engines, which pull pre-stored answers from a database. LLMs just ask: “What word usually follows the one before?”

This is called next-token prediction, the core method powering every LLM today.

- Superpower: Fluid Generation. Poems? Stories? They flow naturally from remixed patterns. Impressive!

- Kryptonite: Hallucinations. Next-token prediction is the root cause of AI hallucinations. Because LLMs are trained solely to predict the likely next token, they prioritize sounding good over being accurate. Since they lack deep reasoning and a true understanding of the world, they'll confidently fill gaps with plausible-sounding nonsense.

You might say: “But my LLM does search the web and shows results with sources.”

Yes, most paid versions use RAG (Retrieval-Augmented Generation). They do exactly what the name suggests:

Search the web and retrieve information.

Feed that information to the LLM as context.

Predict a grounded answer.

Think of it as an “Open Book Test”:

Base LLM (Closed Book): Answers from trained memory.

Paid/Search LLM (Open Book): Grabs fresh facts.

The Catch? Even with the book open, the LLM lacks common sense, it might treat Reddit satire as fact.

Activity: Dinner Table Talk

Instead of a lecture, share these three recent well-known AI blunders at dinner. For each, use the discussion prompt to turn it into a family lesson.

1. The Pizza Glue Suggestion (May 2024)

The Story: Google's AI search told people to put glue on pizza cheese to stop it sliding off. It based this "fact" on a silly old joke from Reddit.

Discuss: "AI can mix up jokes with facts, so always double-check recipes with a trusted cookbook, website, or parent!"

2. Eat Rocks for Health (May 2024)

The Story: The same AI said eating one small rock a day gives minerals like calcium.

Discuss: "Sounds crazy, right? AI sometimes grabs weird internet bits, this is why critical thinking is important: ask 'Does this make sense?'"

3. The Fake Book Lists (May 2025)

The Story: Major newspapers, including the Chicago Sun-Times, printed summer reading lists generated by AI that included made-up books by real authors.

Discuss: "This shows why it's important to always double-check sources, in this case search to see if the book is even real."

I hope you find this note helpful, see you next week.

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