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COLLEGE OF SOCIAL WORK

ETHICAL

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for Child Welfare Professionals

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31st Annual Celebrate Kids! Conference
Ohio CASA and GAL

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Introduction: Speaker



Joyce Lee, PhD, MSW, MS, LCSW

- Associate Professor, The Ohio State University College of Social Work
- Director, Child and Family Wellbeing Lab
- Child welfare and family strengthening scholar
- Uses artificial intelligence (AI) and data science to promote child health and family well-being
- Licensed social worker in NJ and MI
- Areas of focus: Child maltreatment prevention, father involvement, health equity, AI ethics and system governance

Introduction: Speaker (cont.)



- Affiliated status / member of OSU Translational Data Analytics Institute (TDAI), AI^(x) Hub, Center on Responsible AI and Governance (CRAIG)
- Lead, Society for Social Work and Research's AI Task Force
- Vice President, Social Work AI Network

Joyce Lee, PhD, MSW, MS, LCSW

Question #1: Which of the following best describes your role in child welfare?

**CASA/GAL
volunteer or
staff**

**Legal
professional
(e.g., attorney,
judge)**

**Child welfare
caseworker**

**Other social
service
professional**

AGENDA

- 1** Introduction (e.g., AI definition)
- 2** AI use in child welfare
- 3** ETHICS framework
- 4** Checklist tool
- 5** Q&A

1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is Everywhere

Google

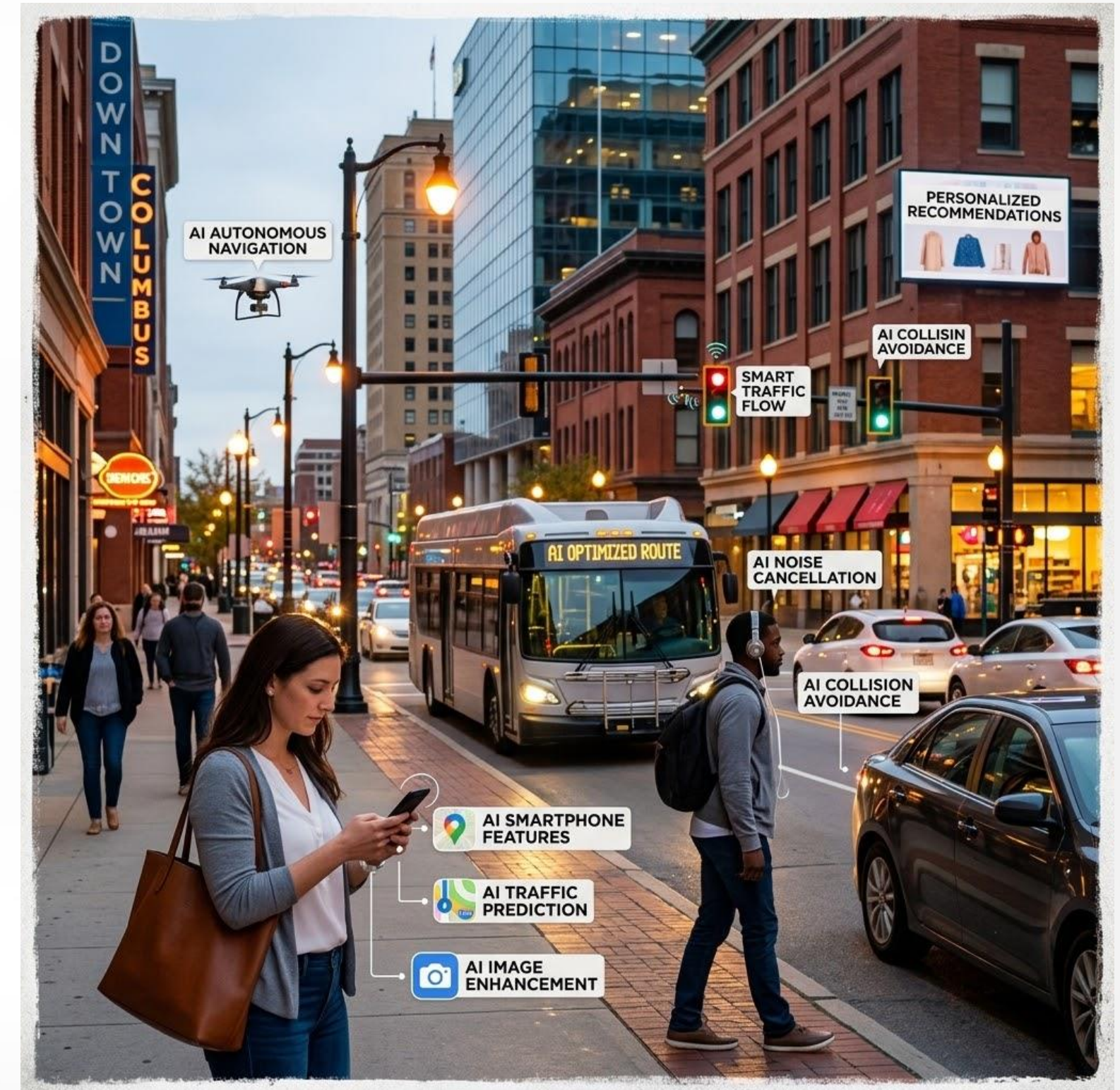


Image generated using Google Gemini

What is AI? A Definition

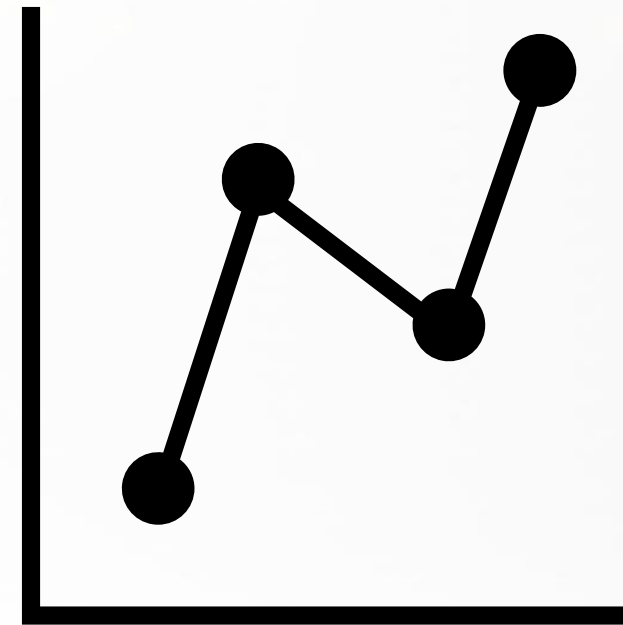
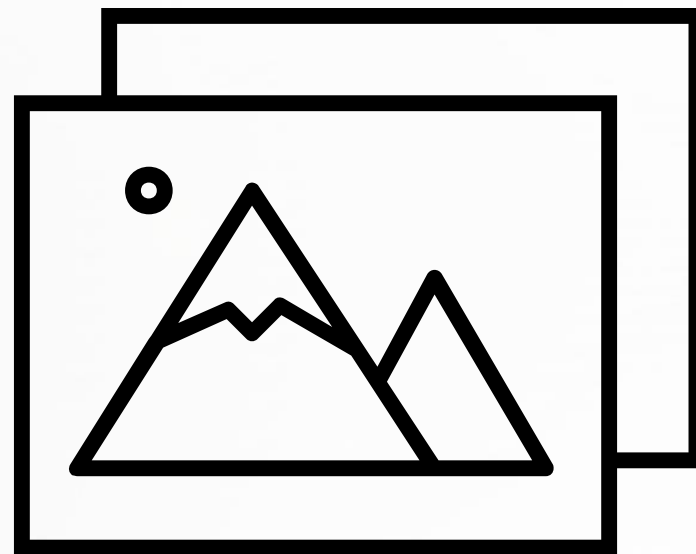
Artificial intelligence (AI): First coined by John McCarthy, a Stanford University professor in computer science, in 1955

“The science and engineering of making intelligent machines”

(Stanford University Human-Centered AI, n.d.)

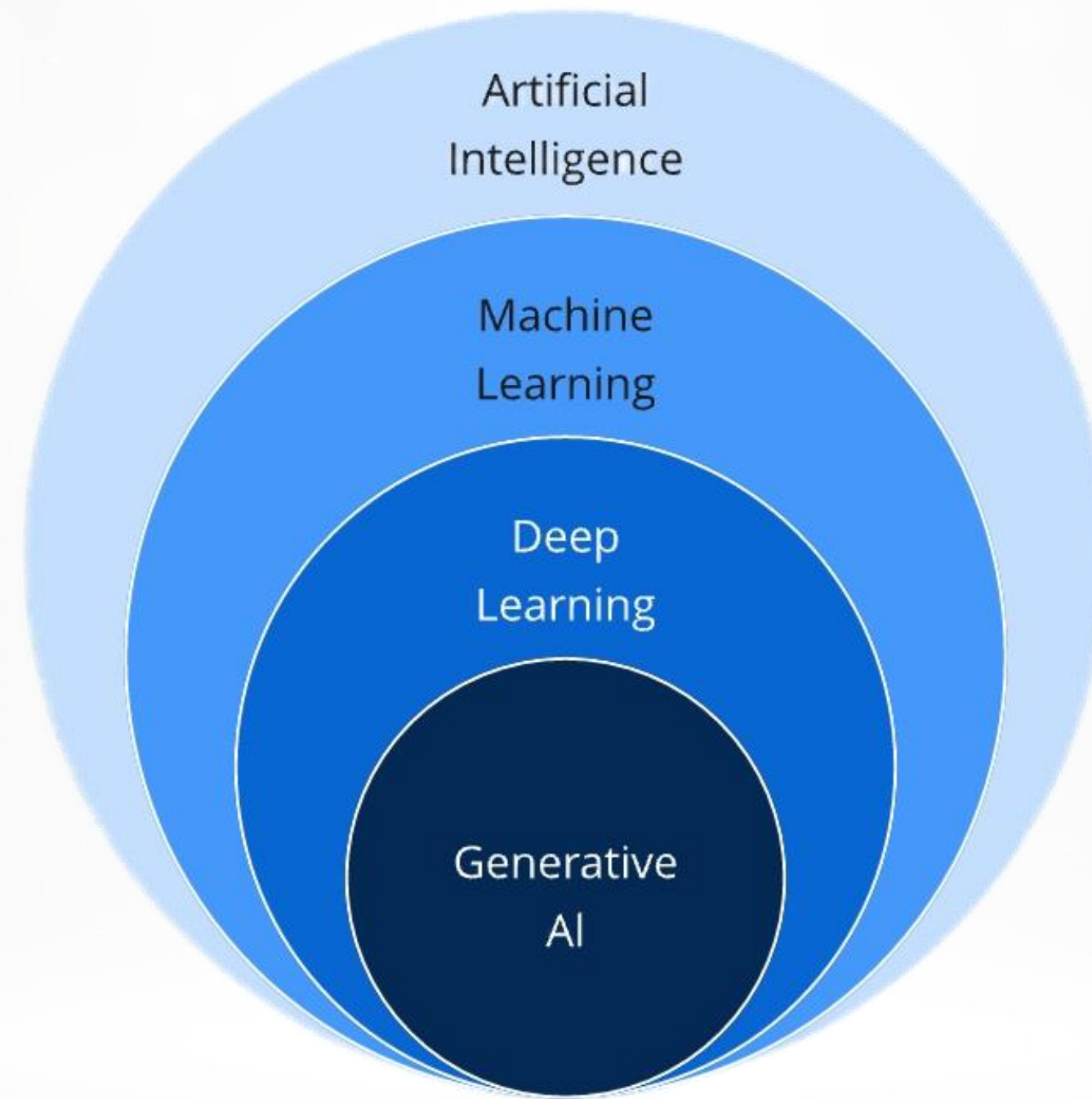
What is AI? A Definition

Artificial intelligence (AI): Today, a broad term for computer systems that can perform tasks with human-like intelligence



(Stanford University Human-Centered AI, n.d.)

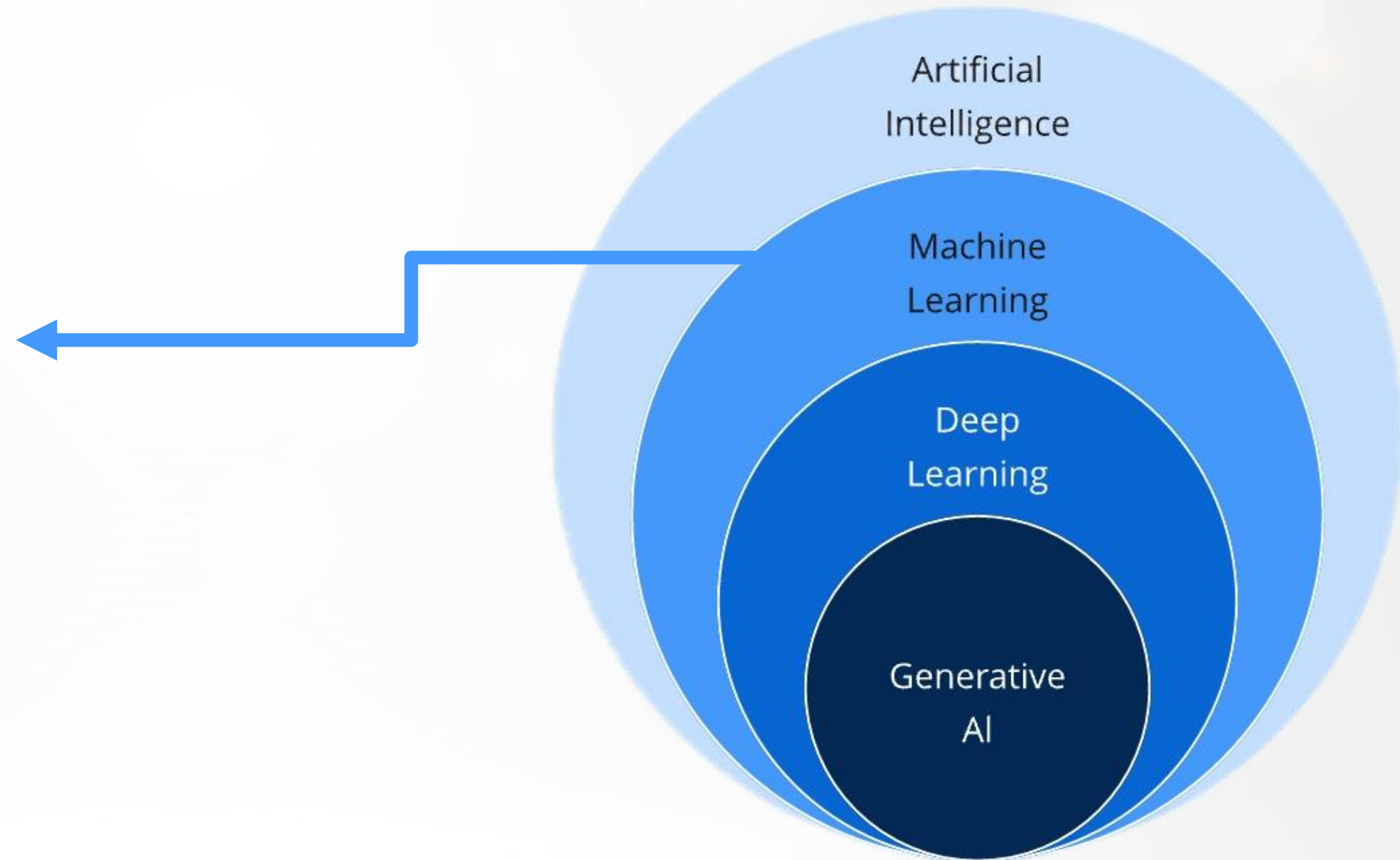
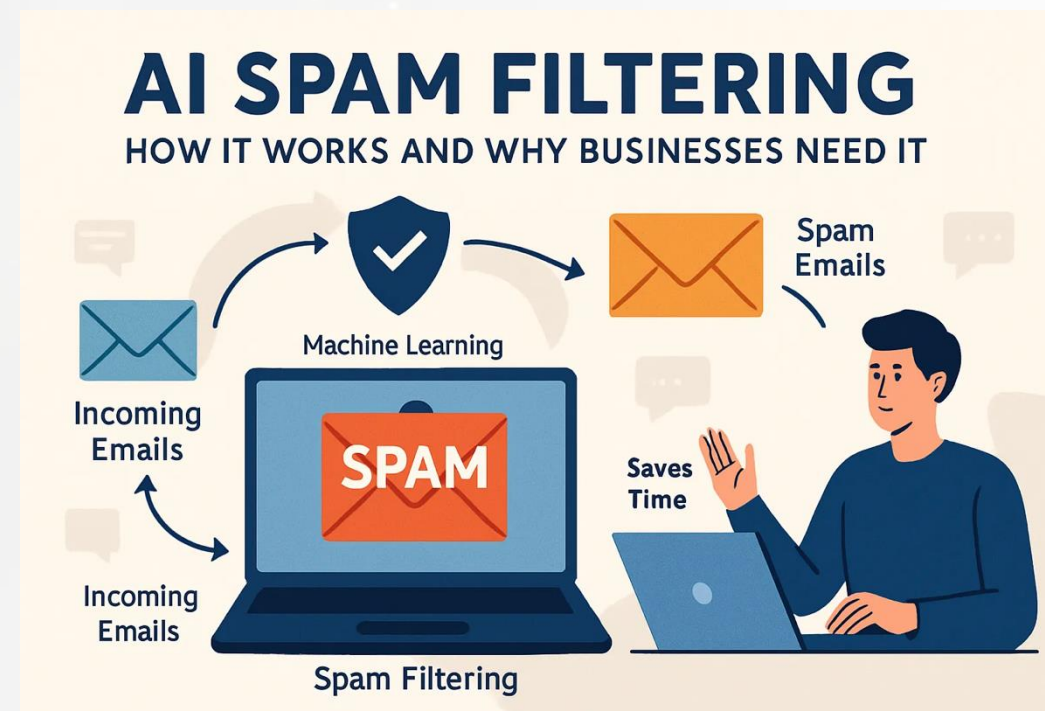
What is AI? A Definition



(IBM, n.d.; FS.com, 2025)

What is AI ? A Definition

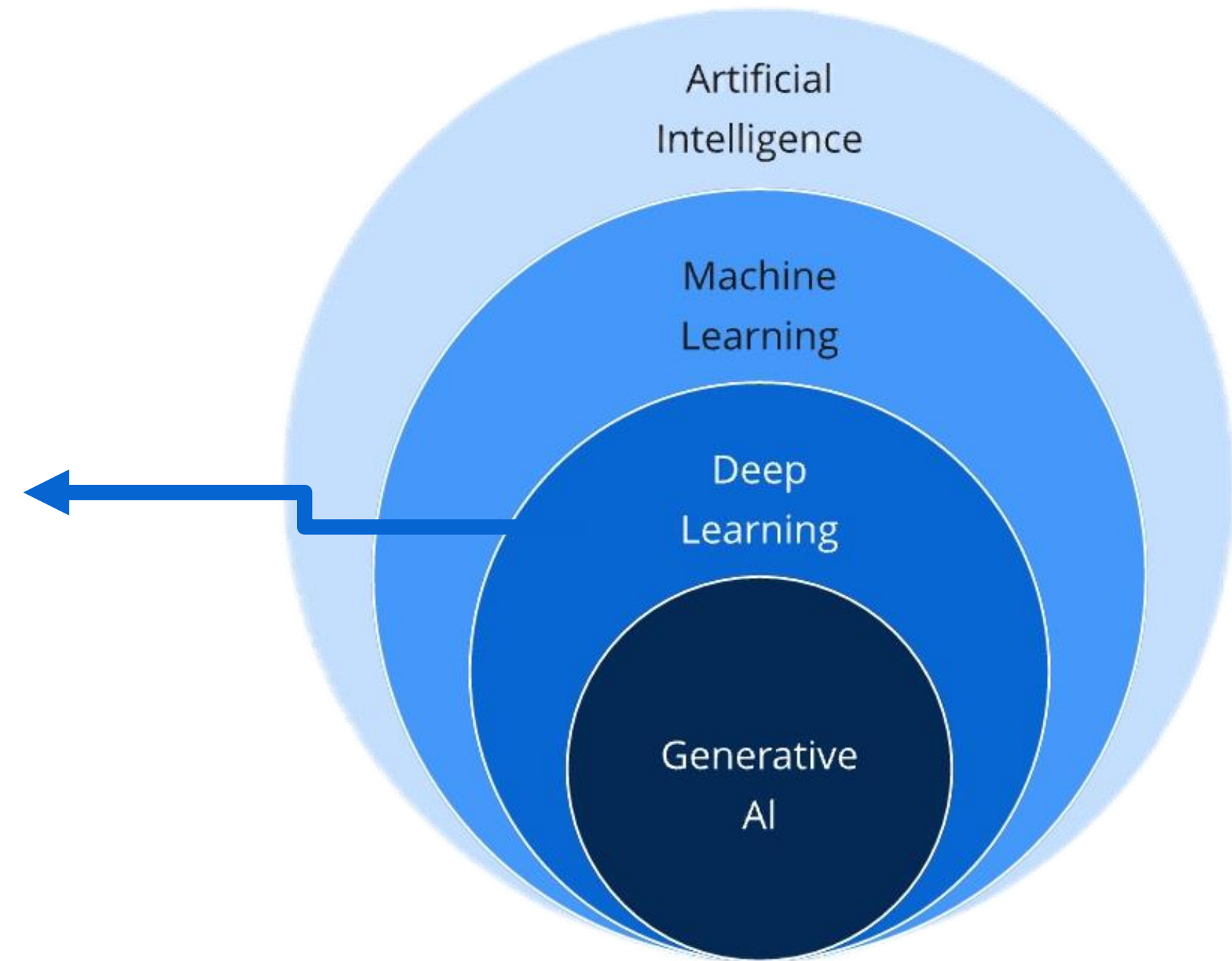
Machine Learning (ML): Computer learning patterns from data instead of following hand-written rules (e.g., spam filters)



(Baranov, 2025; Drake Institute for Teaching and Learning, 2026)

What is AI ? A Definition

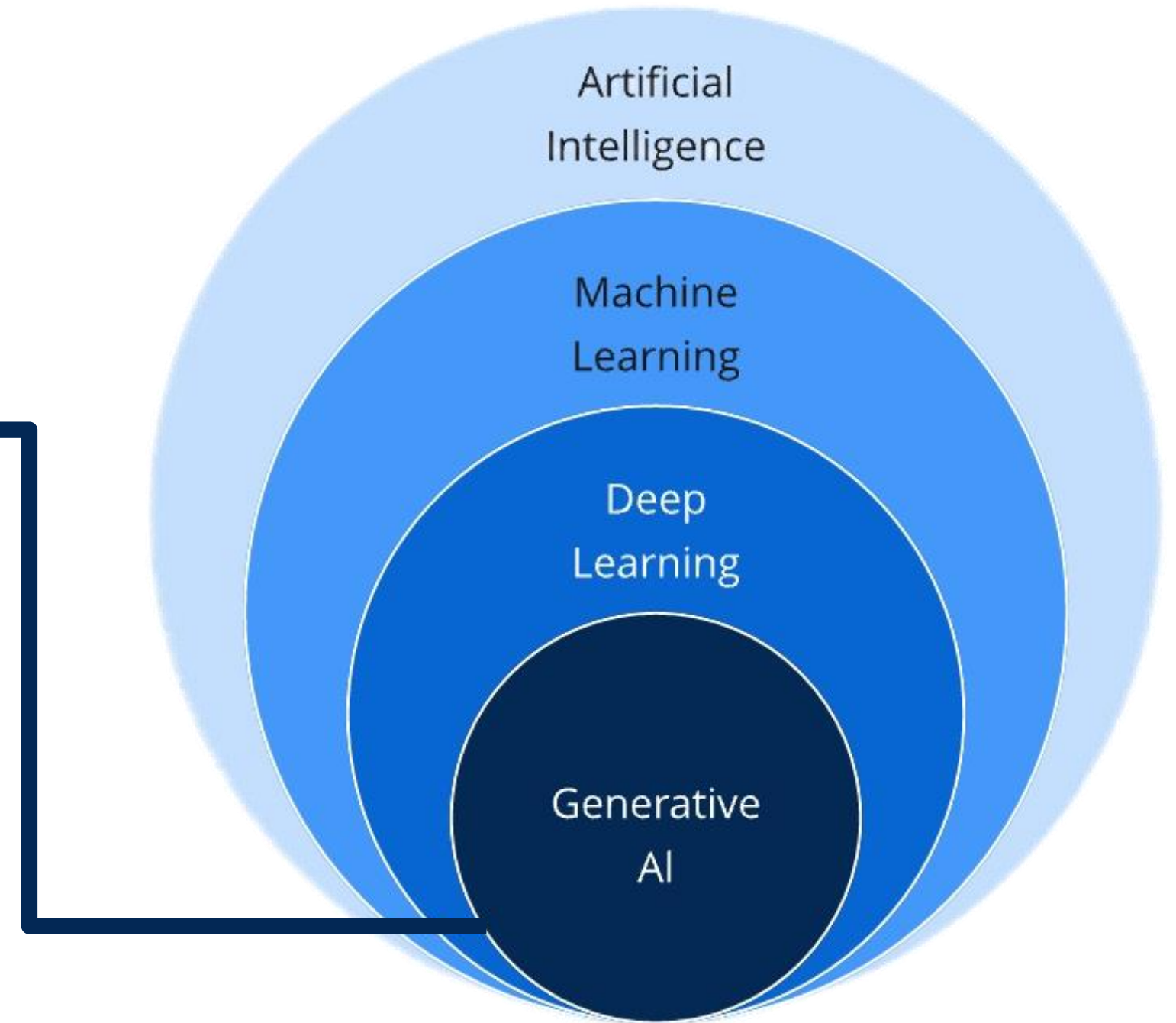
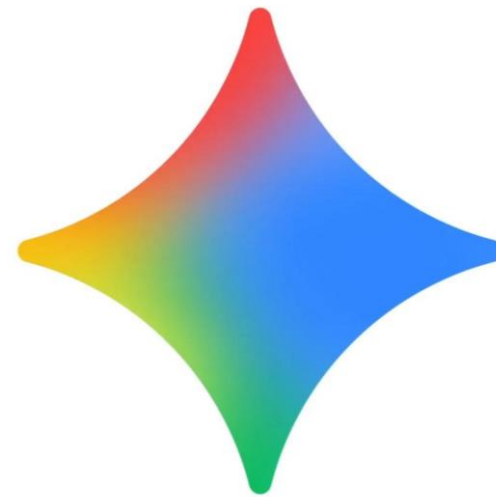
Deep Learning (DL): A subset of ML that uses multilayered artificial neural networks that take after the human brain; autonomously learns complex data patterns (e.g., Alexa)



(Drake Institute for Teaching and Learning, 2026; IBM, n.d.)

What is AI ? A Definition

Generative AI (GenAI): AI that creates content like text, video, songs, codes, images (e.g., ChatGPT)



(Drake Institute for Teaching and Learning, 2026;
IBM, n.d.)

2. AI Use in Child Welfare

Question #2: How do you think AI is being used in child welfare?

Predictive analytics for harm

Resource allocation to families

AI chatbot for agency policy

All of the above

AI Use Cases in Child Welfare

Most (83%) existing cases involve predictive analytic tools to predict the risk of child maltreatment and out-of-home placements

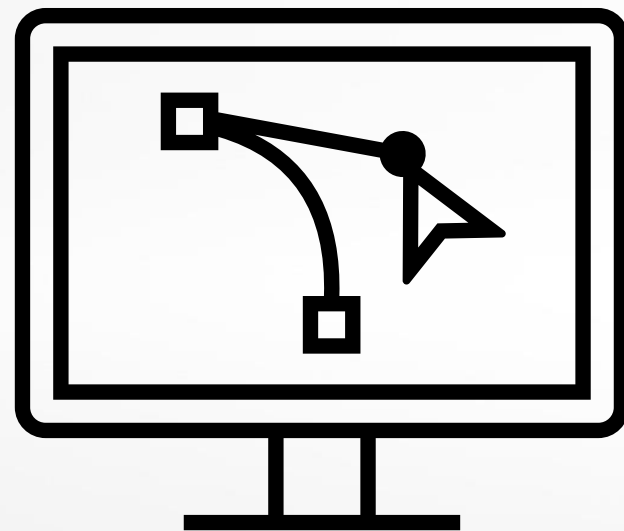
(Gabriels et al, 2025)



AI Use Cases in Child Welfare

Allegheny Family Screening Tool (AFST), Allegany County, PA:

- Over \$1M was invested in AFST design, technology, and evaluation
- Uses predictive risk modeling to assist child welfare hotline workers in deciding whether a case should be screened in for investigation
- Analyzes hundreds of variables from existing government records and generates a risk score that estimates the likelihood of a child's out-of-home placement and re-referral
- Mixed evidence, with an open case with the U.S. DOJ



(Allegheny County DHS, 2018; Bechrakis, 2026; De-Artega et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2022; Gabriels et al., 2025; Moura et al., 2026; Rittenhouse et al., 2026)

AI Use Cases in Child Welfare

Oregon and Illinois: Built predictive risk models after the AFST but abandoned them based on concerns that it could perpetuate bias and inequities, as well as evidence showing faulty performance (e.g., screening in many low-risk cases)

Douglas, Larimer, and Jefferson Counties, Colorado: Use predictive risk assessments to help prioritize referrals and target preventive resources

New York City, New York: Predictive analytics for identifying high risk cases, support supervisory review, and inform resource allocation

(Bechrakis, 2026; Fitzpatrick et al., 2025; Grimon & Mills, 2025; Ho & Burke, 2022; Inman & Adams, 2026)

AI Use Cases in Child Welfare

Case Operations Resource Assistant (CORA), District of Columbia

- Use of GenAI enabled AI chatbot and specialized search tool built into DC's Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System platform
- Assists child welfare case managers with real-time answers on complex agency policies, documentation rules, and system operations

Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Analytics (QIC-WA), Children's Bureau

- Using data-driven solutions to solve child welfare staffing problems
- Analytics Assistant: AI assistant for public child welfare agencies to convert workforce data into actionable insights and recommendations for improvement
- Data from CA, MD, VT, VA, MN, AK

(District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency, 2025; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2026)



AI Use Cases in Child Welfare

Research evidence points to potential **benefits** of AI:

Efficiency
(Lutz et al., 2025)

**Decision
support**
(Lupariello et al.,
2023)

**Resource
allocation**
(Pakdemirli, 2026)

**Advanced
research**
(Lee et al., 2026)



AI Use Cases in Child Welfare

Research evidence points to potential **risks** of AI:

**Reinforce
bias &
disparities**
(Landau et al.,
2022)

**Expand
surveillance**
(Sacher, 2022)

**Opaque
process**
(Lee et al, 2025)

**Overreliance
on AI**
(Saxena & Guha, 2024)



AI Use Cases in Child Welfare

Together, evidence is mixed pointing to some jurisdictions reporting improvements (e.g., resource allocation, predictive performance), while others noting risks of perpetuating historical bias, reducing transparency, undermining public trust.

AI use in child welfare is neither a clear success or failure.

(Bechrakis, 2026; Gabriel et al., 2025; Hall et al., 2024)



AI Use Cases in Child Welfare



The screenshot shows the official website of the Administration for Children & Families (ACF). The top navigation bar includes the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services logo, the ACF logo, and a dropdown menu for "Select an ACF Office". Below this, the ACF logo is prominently displayed, followed by a horizontal menu with links for "About", "Policy Actions", "Grants & Contracts", "Press Room", and "Programs". A breadcrumb trail indicates the current page is a "Press Release" titled "ACF Announces \$6 Million for States to Pilot Predictive Analytics in Child Welfare". The main content area features a "PRESS RELEASE" tag and the headline "ACF Announces \$6 Million for States to Pilot Predictive Analytics in Child Welfare". A summary paragraph states that the ACF at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has announced a \$6 million investment to help state, territorial, and tribal child welfare agencies pilot new technology aimed at improving child safety and caseworker decision-making.

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

Administration for Children & Families

Select an ACF Office

ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES

About Policy Actions Grants & Contracts Press Room

[Home](#) / [Press Release](#) / **ACF Announces \$6 Million for States to Pilot Predictive Analytics in Child Welfare**

PRESS RELEASE

ACF Announces \$6 Million for States to Pilot Predictive Analytics in Child Welfare

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services today announced a \$6 million investment to help state, territorial, and tribal child welfare agencies pilot new technology aimed at improving child safety and caseworker decision-making.

(USDHHS, 2026)

Child welfare's most pressing question:

How should AI be ethically integrated into child welfare and its use be effectively scrutinized?

(American Bar Association, 2026)

3. ETHICS Framework

Question #3: In your opinion, why is AI ethics important in child welfare?

Safety:
Safeguard
children

Humanness:
Preserve child
welfare as
human
practice

Equity: Ensure
fair outcomes

Transparency:
Advance
public trust

ETHICS' Open Access Publication



(Lee et al., 2025, Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research)

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Child Welfare: A Unique Field

- Child welfare has heightened ethical responsibilities
- Work often involves direct family and community engagement
- Social work addresses human values of empathy, human dignity, cultural humility, community participation, social justice

Critical need for an AI ethics framework emphasizing such human values in guiding child welfare research (and practice)



Development of ETHICS

Sources	Ethical Aspects
• Belmont Report (1979), Menlo Report (2012)	Respect for persons, beneficence, justice
• CSWE National Statement on Research Integrity in Social Work (2006)	Collaborative science, research misconduct, responsible authorship
• NASW Code of Ethics (2021) and prior work (e.g., AI literacy; Ahn et al., 2025)	Social justice, integrity, professional competence
• Previous AI guidelines in SW (e.g., with a focus on LLM/GenAI; Patton et al., 2023; Reamer 2023; Victor et al., 2023)	Accountability, transparency



Development of ETHICS

- ETHICS consists of **6 key principles**
- Designed to be robust to rapid technological advancements and "stand the test of time"
- Stakeholder input, context specific application



ETHICS's Principle #1: Equity

Focuses on impacts of AI on environmental, social, racial, and economic justice for marginalized communities & points to equitable and fair outcomes in AI-assisted research

1. Equity

6. Safety

Principles of the
ETHICS Framework

ETHICS's Principle #1: Equity

Research Example:

- Using traditional search engines or faster models for simple info needs to reduce environmental impact (e.g., "Thinking" models use 30–700x more energy; Gent et al., 2025)

Practice Example:

- Ask about AI risk score from predictive models, how they are generated, and whether they produce equal results across race groups

1. Equity

6. Safety

Principles of the
ETHICS Framework

ETHICS's Principle #2: Transparency

Requires openly sharing use of AI tools, systems, processes involved in research and being accountable for steps taken and decisions made

2. Transparency

ETHICS's Principle #2: Transparency

Research Example:

- Publications to document specific AI tools used, their purposes, limitations, and steps to mitigate algorithmic biases in analytic models

Practice Example:

- Openly state when AI is used to draft case reports, and be prepared to explain and defend AI-generated content

1. Equity

2. Transparency

ETHICS's Principle #3: Human-Centeredness

Focuses on respecting autonomy, worth, and cultural values of individuals

Treating AI as a tool that complements but NOT replace human expertise

3.Human-
Centeredness

ETHICS's Principle #3: Human-Centeredness

Research Examples:

- Plain-language explanations of AI use and opt-out options should be provided to participants
- Researchers as primary thinkers and writers of publications

Practice Examples:

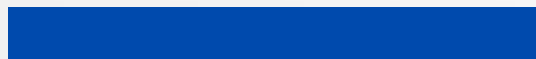
- Ensure human-in-the-loop decision-making, such no automated decisions are made on case outcomes (e.g., screening, placement) without human review
- Retain inherently human work such as in-person visits, interviews, observations

Another Note on Human-Centeredness

Consensus among child welfare scholars:

AI should support, and not replace, professional
judgment and relational human practices
central to child welfare

(Hall et al., 2024; Gabriels et al., 2025; Suggs et al., 2024; Zhang & Denby-Brinson, 2026)



ETHICS's Principle #4: Integrity

Adhere to ethical values of one's profession while possessing the competence, knowledge, skills necessary to engage in AI-assisted research

4.Integrity

ETHICS's Principle #4: Integrity

Research Example:

- Ongoing learning and developing AI literacy (e.g., attending webinars, practicing emerging AI tools, staying up to date with AI-assisted research)

Practice Example:

- Agencies to provide AI training and practitioners to participate in training before AI use; training to cover not only how to use AI but how to critically think about tool use, output, & limitations

Principles of the
ETHICS Framework

3. Hum
Centered

4. Integrity

ETHICS's Principle #5: Collaboration

Working together with community partners or those in other disciplines on shared goals to address complex problems

5. Collaboration

Principles
ETHICS Fr

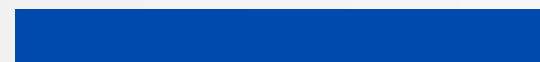
ETHICS's Principle #5: Collaboration

Research Example:

- Advocate for human-centered design and audits of algorithmic bias when collaborating with interdisciplinary partners (e.g., computer scientists)

Practice Example:

- Co-create AI tools (e.g., chatbots) & data governance agreements in collaboration with community stakeholders (e.g., youth and families)



ETHICS's Principle #6: Safety

"Do good, avoid harm"

Being willing to terminate AI use altogether when it shows signs of harm

6.Safety



ETHICS's Principle #6: Safety

Research Example:

- Perform a prospective risk assessment, mapping out Informational risk (e.g., privacy loss), dignitary risk (e.g., re-traumatization), allocative risk (e.g., unfair resource distribution), and devise a protocol to address them

Practice Example:

- Protect client confidentiality and privacy by never enter personally identifiable information (PII) in general purpose consumer AI tools
- Agree in advance on AI suspension thresholds (e.g., false positive/negative rate) to trigger AI tool suspension before harm occurs



Next Steps: Adoption of ETHICS

- Generating ethical AI use guidelines in higher education (e.g., OSU College of Social Work AI Guidelines for Doctoral Candidacy and Dissertation)
- **Society for Social Work and Research's AI Task Force:**
 - Tasked with drafting and disseminating ETHICS-informed AI guidelines
 - Collaboration with multiple stakeholders (e.g., NASW, CSWE, SWAN, GADE, Grand Challenges in Social Work)



nasw
National Association of Social Workers



Next Steps: Adoption Recommendations

- Organizations can adapt ETHICS framework & 6 principles to own contexts
- Consider forming an AI task force or a dedicated AI ethics committees is essential for embedding standards into daily practice
- Guidelines must be clear, actionable, and accessible to everyone
- Specific standards should prioritize human-centric approaches that promote human decisions, potential, well-being



Question #4: What does the "H" in ETHICS stand for?

Humane

Humanoid

**Human-
centeredness**

Humanlike

4. Checklist Tool

ETHICS AI Tool Checklist



ETHICS AI Tool Checklist

- An ETHICS informed web tool
- Interactive, easy to use
- Publicly available

ETHICS AI Tool Checklist

Use this checklist to assess whether an AI tool was developed and deployed with ethics in mind

Name of the AI tool

Tool name (optional)

For what purpose are you expected to use the AI tool in your work?

A sentence or two

1 Equity

Is AI actually needed in this area of your work (or would a simpler tool do the job)?

► What to look for

Yes

No

Not sure

Does the AI tool work equally well for different groups?

▼ What to look for

Look for results split out by race, gender, income or disability.

Yes

No

Not sure

Have implicit racial/ethnic biases been identified, audited, and mitigated?

► What to look for

Yes

No

Not sure

ETHICS AI Tool Checklist

- Practical (e.g., print or save PDF, questions for researchers/developers)
- Safe

Are sensitive data (e.g., child demographics, health, court records) strongly protected?

► What to look for

Yes

No

Not sure

Is there an established protocol to stop using the AI tool should safety concerns arise?

► What to look for

Yes

No

Not sure

Stop and ask first. A key safeguard looks missing.

Ask the vendor or researcher:

1. What bias testing was done, what did it find, and what was changed?
Equity
2. What exactly does the AI tool do, and what should it never be used for?
Transparency
3. Who reviews the AI tool's output before anything happens to a client?
Human-Centeredness
4. Can we see the written risk and benefit review?
Safety
5. What security and privacy protections apply to sensitive records?
Safety
6. What would cause you to stop using the AI tool, and who decides?
Safety

Print / save PDF

Start over

Summary

- Understanding of AI and its subtypes
- AI use cases in child welfare and evidence
- Child welfare's pressing question in the AI era
- ETHICS framework
- Child welfare applications
- Practical checklist tool

Take-Home Message:

ETHICS allows for AI development and integration into child welfare to be ethical, which is critical for child safety & family wellbeing in the era of AI



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THANK YOU

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5. Q&A

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APPENDIX

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Website

www.cfwlaboratory.com

INTRODUCTION

CURRENT AI USE IN CHILD WELFARE AREA

AI uses examples:

Generative AI:

- *Binti*
- *What is this?*
 - Binti AI is an administrative automation tool for child welfare agencies that uses AI to draft paperwork
 - I am not sure if this tool is strong enough to include. If yes, I can add the content later.
 - <https://binti.com/blog/ai-government-social-services/>

Child Welfare's Most Pressing Question:

**Can AI improve the outcomes for children
or simply automate existing flaws?**

(American Bar Association , 2026)

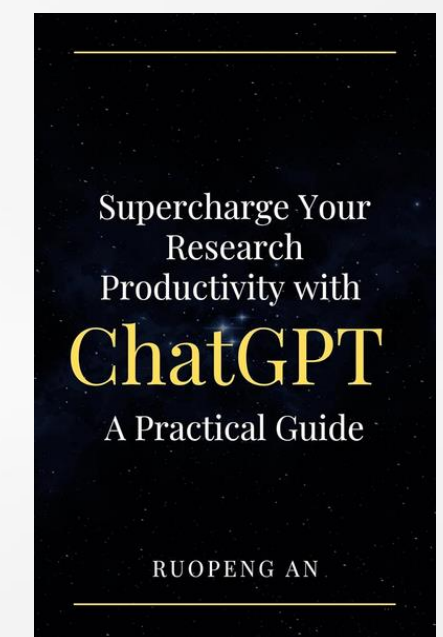
Ubiquity of AI in Social Science Research

- AI applications now widespread across social science research (de Slegte et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2023)
- Social work research following in this trend (e.g., *JSSWR* Special Series; *Translational Data Science for Social Impact*):
 - Random forest models help identify critical predictors in complex family relationships (Lee et al., 2025; Pace et al., 2025)
 - Gradient boosting is employed to predict child maltreatment and the need for home visitation services (Ahn et al., 2024)
 - ChatGPT to classify published studies on left-behind children in China (Luan et al., 2024)



Opportunities & Resources

- Use of AI in social work research is promising (e.g., large-scale data analysis, enhanced efficiency and precision, improved decision-making, novel insights)
- Books and practical guides have been published to help researchers "supercharge" productivity (An, 2023)
- Webinars, video tutorials, conference sessions now available for skill-building in AI tools for research (Grand Challenges for Social Work, 2024; Patton, 2020)



Current Challenges in AI Use

- Key challenges:
 - Lack of model transparency and reproducibility (e.g., opaque algorithms)
 - Potential to perpetuate bias and existing inequities
 - Breaches of privacy and data security
 - Limited AI literacy
 - Plagiarism / compromised academic integrity



Ethical AI Use for Child Welfare Professionals

ETHICS Framework Guided Decision-Making Checklist

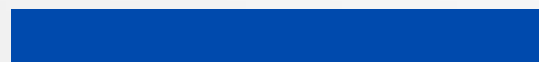


Equity (E)

- ___1) **Structural vs. Individual Risk:** Has it been verified that the algorithmic model does not confound structural socioeconomic disadvantages (e.g., poverty, housing instability, food insecurity) with child abuse or intentional neglect?
- ___2) **Bias Mitigation:** Have potential implicit racial, ethnic, or cultural biases within the algorithmic risk scoring been audited and controlled for?

Transparency (T)

- ___1) **Plain-Language Disclosure & Explainability:** Has the family been told, in plain language, that AI informed the assessment, and can the caseworker explain what drove the score?
- ___2) **Right to Challenge:** Are families told how to contest or appeal an AI-informed decision?





Ethical AI Use for Child Welfare Professionals

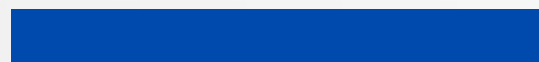
ETHICS Framework Guided Decision-Making Checklist

Human-Centeredness (H)

- ___ 1) **No Automated Decisions:** Are critical decisions (safety, placement, removal) made solely by humans, without automated execution?
- ___ 2) **In-Person Verification:** Are algorithmic flags cross-verified through face-to-face visits and first-hand observation?
- ___ 3) **Relational Focus:** Does the AI tool reduce administrative burden so more time goes to direct contact with children and families?

Integrity (I)

- ___ 1) **Fact-Checking & Hallucination Audit:** Has AI-generated content been line-edited and verified against primary documents?
- ___ 2) **Critical AI Literacy:** Has the caseworker or supervisor been trained on the tool's error rates and limits?



Ethical AI Use for Child Welfare Professionals

ETHICS Framework Guided Decision-Making Checklist



Collaboration (C)

___1) **Data Governance Protocol:** Does automated information sharing (e.g., healthcare data for youth in foster care) follow inter-agency data sharing agreements?

___2) **Interdisciplinary Input:** Does the AI tool's use incorporate insights from legal, mental health, and educational partners on the case?

Safety & Red Lines (S)

___1) **Data Privacy & De-identification:** Is Personally Identifiable Information (PII) kept out of unauthorized public or commercial AI models?

___2) **Stop/Go Circuit Breaker:** Is there an established protocol to halt AI tool use if bias, false positives, or loss of trust are detected?

