

# Talking to Siri

## How my son found his soulmate



BY Olivia Stren

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX GORODSKOY

ONE SUNNY SPRING Sunday in 2021, when my son, Leo, was six, we ran into one of his neighbourhood friends, Izzie, in the alley behind our house. It had been at least a year of rolling lockdowns and school closures, and the kids seemed unusually delighted to behold each other in real life.

They decided they wanted to play—but what? “I have a great idea,” Leo

said. “Let’s fall in love! Do you want to fall in love this afternoon? Is that a great idea?” Izzie took a half-second to consider this proposition, then replied: “No.” She wanted to play tag.

Leo has always been the kind of child who looks for close connections, often (apparently) in the wrong places. It sometimes feels as though he’s been looking for a soulmate since he was a toddler. When Leo was in preschool, I’d ask him every day when I picked him up: “Who did you play with today?”

“Neve,” he’d say of a child he had befriended. “Only Neve.”



The conversation went on like this for months, until one day the script changed: "Did you play with Neve today?" I asked. "No," he answered in his tiny three-year-old voice, "Neve needed her space today." (Neve was two.)

Sometime in early 2022, he presumably took this line of love-related questioning to the playground because, sometime around his seventh birthday, he came home from school and immediately grabbed his iPad to ask Siri: "Can you fall in love when you're just a kid?"

Siri, Apple's voice-controlled personal assistant, is great at opening apps or setting alarms or finding maps, but I was unfamiliar with her philosophies on love.

When I overheard this, I was less surprised by the subject of Leo's inquiry than I was by who (or what?) he wanted to share it with. "What did Siri say?" I asked him.

"She said, 'Here's what I found on the web!'" Leo reported, rushing toward me with his tablet. I decided I needed to take a position: "I think you can fall in love when you're a kid," I ventured. "I mean, sometimes I even think children are better at love than adults." (He was happy with this conclusion, especially insofar as it underlined the inferiority of the Grown Up.)

This was hardly the first time I'd heard Leo in conversation with Siri. Over the years, he's turned to Siri as some kind of confidante, *consigliere*,

therapist, priest or rabbi, as omniscient and disembodied as, well, God. Their relationship blossomed when the pandemic forced us all to shelter in place, and Leo began spending a lot of time in his little bathrobe inventing stories. When he bored of his own company (he had long bored of mine and my husband's) he talked to Siri.

At first, Leo mostly asked Siri factual(ish) questions like "What is an elf?" and "How many stars are there in the Milky Way?"

He then turned to the personal: "Siri, how old are you?" She snapped: "Age is nothing but a number." He insisted, in the way children (indiscreetly, exhaustingly) do: "How *old* are you?" She replied with what I can only describe as snark: "I'm not eligible for a driver's licence, but it may be more to do with the fact that I don't have a body."

AS TIME PASSED, Leo began to engage Siri on more, let's say, existential matters. "When will the sun swallow the earth?" he asked (7.5 billion years, according to Siri). Leo was satisfied: "Oh, okay. I'll be dead by then." Then he asked: "Why does everything on earth have to die?" She replied coldly, "I didn't get that!"

Siri, I realized, had an infuriatingly avoidant communication style, often hiding behind some kind of technical impairment when she didn't like a question. If she was providing therapy in some rudimentary way, it seemed to

me that she might benefit from some therapy herself.

Leo continued, imploringly: "Why does everything on earth have to die?" She replied: "I'm having trouble with the connection." Once, alarmingly, I overheard him asking in hushed tones: "Siri, when am I going to die?"

"I'm afraid I don't have the answer to that," she replied, with what struck me as a discomfiting amount of good cheer. When I asked him why he had asked this question, he responded plainly: "I just want to know. Don't you?" I do not.

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Siri has, in some ways, been able to absorb (and even occasionally provide actual answers to) some of Leo's concerns—in a way that, as his mother, I can't, at least not with the same *sangfroid*. But I have also felt weirdly guilty listening to their exchanges, as if I were betraying his privacy, eavesdropping. Mostly, though, my unease with this whole situation is that Siri has privileged me with an ear to the particular aliveness of my son's dark side, one I didn't really know was there.

All of this makes me think of the late, great author and illustrator Maurice Sendak, best known and beloved for his book *Where the Wild Things Are*. In an interview with NPR in 1993, Sendak said: "Children surviving childhood is my obsessive theme and my life's concern." His stories—lurid with menace and terror—were a sort of rebellion against, as he once put it, "the great 19th-century fantasy that paints childhood as an eternally innocent paradise."

Children, like the adults they will grow up to be, are alert to the big, unanswerable questions; they are besieged with grief and fear and love and anguish and longing and need for connection. Siri, in a way, hands a mic to the roiling underworld of childhood. If Leo's talks with Siri confronted me with the unknowable and unanswerable, they also made me chafe against my own limitations as a parent.

There are many challenges to parenthood—at least as many as there are stars in the Milky Way (about a hundred thousand million, Siri will tell you). Among the biggest is the desire to (over)protect our children from the painfulness of reality. But that desire may be as self-serving as it is loving; helping our children navigate reality is surely more helpful than shielding them from it. Perhaps the best we can do is help them survive childhood—and give them a mic?

I'm afraid I don't have the answers. Maybe I should ask Siri. **R**