

Embracing AI Chatbots in Social Work Education: A Guide for Social Work Practicum Educators

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A new trend sweeping the world is the development of generative AI (artificial intelligence). AI tools like ChatGPT can take the information you provide and predict user intentions, producing new material. Almost like magic, you can ask AI for an article on a topic, and it will create one. AI can edit your work, improve your grammar, or adjust your tone. It can generate lists of ideas or break down steps of complex processes. This impacts social work, bringing up new dilemmas and posing new opportunities. As future social workers get their hands on this tech, it's up to you, their practicum educators, to lead the way with wisdom. However, your agency may not have any policies about using AI, and agency leaders may not have yet had the opportunity to think deeply about whether or not to allow the use of AI or the implications for doing so. This article introduces the topic, concerns about AI, and our recommendation for best practices as you answer the call to [harness technology for social good](#). Below you will find our policy recommendations paired with real-world examples so that we can emphasize human uses of AI, not human supplanting by AI.

A quick note about terminology: Throughout this article, when we mention AI, we are generally talking about generative AI. When people say AI, they typically mean tools that use data to recognize patterns and inform decisions. Generative AI uses data collected from online, books, and other sources to create text or images based on what the program predicts the user wants, given user input. This article also uses terms and phrases customary to the author's geographic region for social work field education. Terms like field placement, field educator, student, and so on can be interchanged with terminology you may use in your region (practicum, internship, etc.).

Setting the Stage for AI Integration: What Would You Say?

You are your agency's social work field educator, and everything seems perfectly normal. You have been in this role for a long time, and while the students change from year to year, the overall process is familiar. Or maybe this is your first time as a field educator, but you had field placements while in graduate school, and you know the drill. One day, you give your student an assignment, perhaps compiling a list of local crisis resources or designing a curriculum for a middle school student lunch group. You think this will be like any other field learning experience, but your student asks a question you are unprepared for: "Can I use ChatGPT for that?"

Given the rapidly evolving landscape of artificial intelligence (AI), it's likely that your agency has yet to establish a comprehensive policy addressing the use of AI or that the technology policies you have in

place do not fully address the constant changes and developments in AI technology. This oversight can leave us grappling with a host of unresolved questions. *Do we have policies against AI use? Does using AI cross ethical boundaries? Does using AI put our agency, staff, or clients at risk?* These uncertainties further complicate our dilemma, intensifying the quandary we face: we want to keep abreast of technological advancements without overstepping regulatory boundaries; we strive for efficiency without compromising on integrity; we encourage our students to engage thoroughly with their tasks without resorting to shortcuts; we aspire for them to become proficient, ethical social workers, and yet we wonder whether the integration of AI helps or hampers these goals.

When it comes to the fast-developing arena of AI, the many unanswered questions can leave us feeling like we are trekking through an ethical minefield. AI is not actually new, and we have grown accustomed to it occupying some (mostly invisible) spaces in our lives: spam filters in our email, movie recommendations on streaming services, spelling and grammar checkers, and the GPS app on our phone giving us the most direct route, to name a few. Delegating these tasks to machines feels acceptable and even smart, partly because it maximizes ease and seems relatively harmless. AI is a useful tool within the familiar scope of modern technology – seamlessly appearing in products we already use and helpful enough to be convenient without upending our understanding of the world.

However, publicly available Generative AI (such as ChatGPT) has moved us into a new technological environment. Unlike its predecessors, the latest AI programs can take a simple prompt and create vast amounts of novel content within mere seconds, almost like it has a mind of its own (it does not). It's exciting and also causes uneasiness. *Where is this technology going, and what does it mean for social work?* Higher education, in particular, struggles with this and has yet to find consensus. A [Best Colleges](#) survey of 1,000 undergraduate and graduate students nationwide found that about a quarter of them said they have used AI to help them with school assignments. Yet, most say their instructors have not talked to them about when they should (or shouldn't) use AI in their work.

Given how quickly AI capabilities have grown and how long it takes to adapt policy guidance in large institutions, it is no wonder that there is little consensus. Some may welcome it and are ready to harness its potential, unlike others who believe it threatens every standard of integrity and precludes learning. Most will land between these extremes, unsure of what to think, what to do, and even how to talk about it. This “wait and see” approach may calm some anxieties, but it risks leaving our profession out of crucial conversations.

Social workers must recognize the emerging impact of AI, whether or not we see ourselves as technical. We are charged with [harnessing it for social good](#), a goal named by the Grand Challenges for Social Work as one of the 14 achievements that could positively impact social work in the next decade. At the same time, we must advocate for AI's fair and ethical use. Even though generative AI is in its infancy, it has the potential to impact how we learn, work, and live. Understanding and properly utilizing AI in social work is responsible, as it will invariably yield benefits for students, instructors, practitioners, and clients to know how and when to use it. However, because of novelty and lack of guardrails at this stage, we must discuss how its use aligns with our other responsibilities to clients and the profession.

As the signature pedagogy of social work, field education has the potential to lay the groundwork for the effective use of AI in professional social work settings, as well as identifying irresponsible or harmful use. This article discusses how AI can be an asset in field education and agency productivity, dispel biases for and against its use, and outlines pragmatic considerations to mitigate risks.

Since practicum educators are at the forefront of ethical direct practice, we encourage you to discuss the real-life implications of using AI with your students. (Even if that means you also need a brush-up!) Here, we'd like to give you practical considerations for using AI in your setting. You might also consider guidance from the [Social Work Tech Standards](#), which asks social workers to “take reasonable steps to ensure the accuracy and validity of the information they disseminate” and says that “social workers who use technology to provide services shall obtain and maintain the knowledge and skills required to do so in a safe, competent, and ethical manner.” Below, we have reprinted standards specific to field educator responsibilities when using technology.

Standard 4.11: Field Instruction from the [Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice](#)

Social workers who provide field instruction to students shall address the use of technology in organizational settings. **Interpretation:** When appropriate, field instructors should discuss with students:

- the ways in which technology is used in organizational settings
- the importance of protocols to ensure access to secure electronic records in the event of a social worker's field placement termination, incapacity, or death
- similarities and differences between the school's and organization's social media policies
- appropriate use of personal and professional social media considering its potential impact on clients, students, colleagues, employers, and the social work profession
- ways to comply with relevant laws, regulations, ethical standards, and organizational policies to ensure protection of confidential information

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The [NASW Code of Ethics](#) also broadly addresses the use of technology, including that “social workers should keep apprised of emerging technological developments that may be used in social work practice and how various ethical standards apply to them.” Neither document specifically addresses the use of AI, but the standards offer support as professional guidance emerges.

How You Can Foster AI Literacy at Your Agency

We have offered many reasons for understanding AI's impact in your setting. Now, let's get to the heart of the matter. Here are some ways to understand and educate others about AI.

Understanding AI's Strengths and Weaknesses. Start by demystifying AI. It's free and easy to try out. When used appropriately, it can augment social work practices by streamlining administrative tasks, aiding in research, and providing new insights. Chatbots require very little technical understanding; it is best to talk to them like you would talk to a person, giving context about what you're trying to get

done. (We offer some prompts you can try below; start by setting up a free account at chat.openai.com).

Developing Agency Guidelines: Agencies need to establish ethical guidelines for AI use. These should cover when and how AI tools can be employed, prioritizing client confidentiality and preserving the social worker–client relationship. Depending on your agency’s mission, values, population, and comfort, you may choose a liberal, moderate, or restrictive policy or some combination that depends on the task. The breakout below offers some potential examples of each. You can use these as a starting point and customize them for your setting.

Policies on AI Use: A Range of Approaches

Agencies can take varying approaches to develop AI use policies suitable for students in their setting. Below are examples ranging from highly restrictive to more permissive stances:

Conservative Policy:

- AI use is prohibited for any student tasks or assignments without explicit supervisor approval. students must disclose any AI use related to field education.
- AI may only be used for basic administrative tasks like compiling resource lists. Critical thinking tasks must be completed independently.
- students must submit AI-generated content to supervisors for review before sharing it with clients. The supervisor will screen for accuracy, relevance, and plagiarism and document inappropriate use.

Moderate Policy:

- students can use AI tools to gather ideas and content for materials like program curricula or to polish original writing. However, the output should contain original analysis and synthesis.
- students may use AI to summarize meetings (with non-confidential content) and materials to augment productivity.
- students cannot use AI to complete assigned tasks in field placement without permission.
- students must disclose any use of AI related to their work or content development.

Liberal Policy:

- the agency provides training for students on the risks of overreliance on AI and the continued necessity of human judgment in social work practice.
- students are encouraged to leverage AI to enhance efficiency for administrative tasks, content creation, polishing original ideas, and reviewing/summarizing sources.
- students must attribute any AI-generated content used in client-facing resources.
- students should consult about their use of AI in supervision on a regular basis.
- Supervisors will provide transparency about if/when they use AI to review student work products or assist with supervisory tasks.

All policies above should also note the following to align with the NASW Code of Ethics:

- protected client information, such as names, dob's, or addresses, should never be entered into AI sites.
- you are responsible for all content you produce using AI; all information you create should be read, fact-checked, and edited.
- students should always follow the instructor's policy guidance regarding school assignments completed at the field site or about their field experience.
- When you share AI-generated resources with clients, you should explain their source and explain generally how you verified and adapted the content.

These examples demonstrate the broad spectrum of approaches agencies can adopt.

Organizations can establish AI guidelines aligned with their mission and values through open discussion and policy refinement.

Educational Workshops: Implement workshops or training sessions focused on ethical AI use. Highlight both the potential and limitations of AI in social work settings and demonstrate effective prompts and online generative tools, such as ChatGPT, Claude.ai, and Perplexity.ai. Explain whether or not AI can be used according to your agency policy. This protects you from finding out later that staff use the tools without guidance.



The images in this paper are generated by AI (Dall-e 3). Although AI is good for creating a quick, free image, it often adds extra fingers or distorts text and other important parts of the image and can also amplify cultural or gender stereotypes. People worry about AI taking artists' jobs and the origin of source material. A US District Court has [ruled](#) that AI images are non-copyrightable.

Critical Engagement: Encourage students and staff to engage with AI critically, questioning how an AI tool can be used, whether it should be used for a given context, and how it aligns with social work ethics. NASW directs social workers to become familiar with technology and other emerging tools that can benefit clients. AI lacks human judgment, and AI tools can potentially generate biased, incorrect, or harmful content, so critical analysis must always be used to assess AI output.

Consider ways, as a team, that clients may also benefit from using a tool like ChatGPT. For instance, it can help clients with meal prep, budgeting advice, and breaking down complex ideas. What other

ideas does your team have?

One way to ensure that students or staff work with AI instead of over-relying on its output is to treat it as an automated consultant. Instead of asking ChatGPT to generate content from scratch (e.g., “make me a list of resources”), encourage them to use ChatGPT as a sidekick; first, they put in all their ideas, and then they ask ChatGPT to generate five improved ideas based on what they’ve shared. This means they still need to evaluate the best ideas. Make sure they are clear that they are always responsible for any content they use and should be critical about how it fits with their needs.

Practical Applications and Limitations

In the changing landscape of social work practice, MSW students can leverage AI tools like ChatGPT to effectively improve interventions at both micro and macro levels during their field placements. At the micro level, students can harness ChatGPT’s capabilities to craft tailored curricula, training guides, and psychoeducational materials for clients, ensuring interventions align with individual needs and goals. This empowers students to provide personalized support, whether developing coping skills or navigating life transitions. On the macro level, ChatGPT is a valuable tool for identifying and understanding complex policies, crafting project outlines, and designing community organizing plans. By using AI to help analyze vast datasets and synthesize information, students can advocate for systemic change and drive initiatives that address broader social issues, fostering lasting impact beyond the individual level.

Where AI Fits: Highlight practical applications of AI, such as administrative support (e.g., breaking down to-do lists into smaller pieces, creating meeting agendas, building presentation outlines); providing supplementary information to clients (e.g., lists of local food banks, bus routes, mindfulness techniques, or building a meal plan and grocery list for the week); generating ideas and understanding new topics (e.g., best practices for interviewing an adolescent with autism, learning about the history of school IEPs, to generate practice interview questions); or editing (e.g., polishing a short bio, improving the flow of a conference abstract, improving the wording of agency website or flyer content).

Where AI Doesn’t Fit: Stress the importance of human judgment, especially in areas requiring nuanced understanding and empathy, such as direct client interactions, ethical decision-making, and complex case management. Be clear with students that client information should never be entered into public-facing websites. And, no matter what your agency policy, most classroom instructors require clear attribution with any use if they permit the use of AI at all; using AI for academic writing is generally seen as academically dishonest, and students should always follow their instructor’s policy (or ask for their policy if the instructor does not have one).

When talking to students, emphasize the importance of learning in the agency as part of their social work education. Will using AI in a given situation subvert critical thinking they might gain if they did not use AI? Here, you might also consider the field plan competencies. Is the task listed on their plan a way to meet a competency? For instance, if part of their plan is to consider how they would address a specific ethical dilemma in the agency, they should not use AI to ask how to resolve that type of dilemma. However, if you both are having difficulty thinking of specific dilemmas, you can use AI to

generate a list of ethical dilemmas and choose one or two to offer that seem particularly relevant to your agency's practice.

What Not To Do: Some common user errors can make work look less professional and affect credibility. A common one is not reviewing the content and missing inaccurate information produced by the AI; AI-generated content should only be shared or used after thorough reading and editing. Another is not paying attention to context or tone. If AI is not provided context, it may sound robotic, overly technical, or out-of-touch. AI is great at rewording information when context and audience are provided. You can ask it to reword a formal agency policy on school suspension, for instance, for a 5th-grade reading level and a student who is being suspended for fighting. Finally, most AI tools do not offer a clear copy-and-paste option; when moving information from an AI tool like ChatGPT, the user should always be sure to clear the formatting and tidy up fonts, boxes, margins, and spacing.

Ethical Considerations and Transparency

To understand ethical considerations and transparency, let's take a slight detour from social work and [reshare](#) an example about self-driving cars and their inherent limitations. These vehicles use AI to map their surroundings, crunch numbers, and make decisions to operate safely. Imagine you are cruising through your neighborhood, and the car obeys the 25mph speed limit, but you know that it's Sunday, a church is coming up ahead at the next intersection, and there may be more pedestrians on the road. Drawing on your contextual knowledge, you slow down to 15mph just to be extra cautious. A "smart" car would not necessarily know to do this. The point of this example is that AI has the potential to offer us unprecedented efficiency in our work. Still, it cannot supplant human wisdom, intuition, or nuanced environmental sensitivity that comes from lived experience. The same is true when creating content for individuals, whether it's mid-term feedback for a field student, a letter of recommendation for a colleague, or a therapeutic homework assignment for a client. Using AI in these circumstances risks sacrificing human connection and affecting relationships. To ensure we are keeping people at the heart of it all, we need to be thoughtful when we use AI, consider all perspectives, and keep ethics at the forefront. Below is some guidance.

Transparency: A clear agency policy about when your students or staff might use AI and when they do not can help promote transparency about the practices. People may feel comfortable using AI if you are clear about how you use it. For instance, if you are using AI to improve the language of a student evaluation and make it sound more professional to highlight strengths, students might appreciate you seeking help. If you use AI to break down information into simpler language or steps for clients, they might also appreciate that. You can advocate for transparency about using AI in your agency, ensuring that those affected by its use are informed participants. Lastly, any agency policy on AI should include explicit instructions on what to do and who to seek guidance from when you doubt how or if to use it. Since we have much to learn, guesswork is inadvisable – seek clarification first.

Attribution and Acknowledgment: Discuss the importance of attributing AI's role in any content creation or decision-making processes, maintaining honesty and integrity in professional practices. It may be more important to cite the use of AI in certain places. For instance, AI attribution is probably unnecessary if you are using AI to professionalize the language of a website text or a newsletter.

However, if you or your student is using AI to generate content for material you plan to publish professionally or for output where AI helped generate new ideas, it is good practice to note that AI was used to help with content. If AI is used to generate resources, tips, recipes, or other content for clients, tell them where the information came from and that you did your best to check for errors but that you might have missed something. This is an opportunity to teach clients how to access these tools and their potential for mistakes.

Supervising Students Who Use AI

Let's make discussions about AI in supervision fun and interactive! During supervision sessions, why not try out some AI together? Try hands-on examples of how AI can create interesting supports for social work tasks. Consider it a creative challenge: develop some AI prompts and see what the AI offers. Encourage your student to bring their AI experiments to supervision for discussion. Then, get reflective - chat about the ethics, ask them how they would fact-check the information, and dissect the AI responses together. How's the language? Is it hitting the right note for your audience? Discuss how adjusting the prompts or giving the AI more context could sharpen its outputs. It's all about learning, experimenting, and having rich conversations. Below are some prompts that you might try out together.

AI Prompts for Practice

- For administrative tasks: "Generate a summary of key themes from these meeting notes." (paste notes in, with confidential information redacted)
- For client education: "Provide up-to-date information on local income-based housing resources in the Buffalo, NY area."
- For professional development: "Identify recent studies on the effectiveness of online therapy for depression."
- For supporting student discussion during supervision:
 - "Develop four case scenarios about clients aged 18-55 who are seeking care from a counseling agency in Buffalo, NY, that specializes in DBT for those with chronic suicidal ideation."
 - "I am a field education supervisor at a hospital, and my student is a second-year MSW student. Generate 5 questions I can ask in supervision that focus on skills she is using to engage with patients who are getting care in the substance use unit."
 - "My MSW student is seeing a client for the first time. The client is food insecure and is involved with child welfare. Provide a list of 5 things I can discuss with my student before they visit the client."

After trying prompts, ask yourself or talk through these questions with your student:

- What did the output get right? What did it miss?
- What does my professional experience contribute beyond the output?
- Is there a way I could improve the output by improving the prompt?

Conclusion: Navigating AI with Care

Integrating AI into social work requires a thoughtful approach that balances innovation with the profession's core values. By establishing clear guidelines, fostering an environment of critical engagement, and prioritizing ethical considerations, practicum educators can help shape a future

where AI tools are used responsibly and effectively to enhance the social work field by [harnessing technology for social good](#).

Case Studies: A Supplemental Resource

The case studies below offer some situations in which students might use AI. They include some real-life examples of prompts and ChatGPT output. We entered the prompts shown in these examples in ChatGPT 3.5. No editing has been done to the output. Consider the knowledge and supervision needs in each of the case studies below. You might review them with your field students and discuss how the situation applies to your setting.

Case 1. AI for Student Success

Robin is a foundation-year MSW student who has ADHD. Her field placement is with an organization focusing on community organizing and advocacy. Robin attends community meetings and takes notes on the content, goals, and next steps. Robin sometimes feels lost and confused by the many community stakeholders with different goals and opinions. Robin inputs her meeting notes into ChatGPT with the prompt: *Please organize and synthesize these notes by stakeholder and goal*. The output is an organized summary of her notes that she understands better. Robin also uses tools like GolbinTools (<https://goblin.tools>), a (currently) free AI tool that helps break down complex projects into more manageable tasks. These AI tools help her with focus and in organizing her work.

Case 2. AI for Ideation

Beth is an advanced-year MSW student who is placed at a high school. Her field educator asked her to start a group for 9th-grade girls who have expressed self-esteem issues due to social media. Beth puts the following into ChatGPT: *“What are best practices to help 9th-grade American girls who are struggling with self-esteem issues as a result of social media exposure,”* which offers the following automated response in just seconds. Beth prints and brings it to her next supervision for discussion and as a starting point for developing her group curriculum.

- **Promote Media Literacy:** Teach girls critical thinking skills to analyze media messages critically. Help them understand how images on social media can be manipulated and how unrealistic beauty standards are perpetuated. Encourage them to question the authenticity and motives behind the content they consume.
- **Encourage Positive Self-Image:** Foster a supportive environment where girls feel comfortable expressing themselves authentically. Celebrate diversity and individuality, emphasizing that beauty comes in various forms beyond what is portrayed on social media.
- **Build Self-Esteem:** Implement programs and activities that build self-esteem and confidence. Offer workshops on assertiveness, positive self-talk, and setting healthy boundaries. Encourage girls to identify and celebrate their strengths and accomplishments.
- **Provide Emotional Support:** Create safe spaces where girls can openly discuss their feelings and experiences without fear of judgment. Offer counseling services or support groups where they can share their struggles and receive guidance from peers and trusted adults.
- **Promote Healthy Habits:** Emphasize the importance of self-care, including regular exercise, healthy eating, and sufficient sleep. Encourage girls to engage in activities that promote mental and emotional well-being, such as mindfulness, journaling, or creative arts.

- **Limit Social Media Exposure:** Educate girls about the potential negative impacts of excessive social media use on self-esteem and mental health. Encourage them to take breaks from social media and set boundaries around screen time. Provide alternative activities that promote real-world social connections and offline hobbies.
 - **Empower Critical Thinking:** Encourage girls to develop a healthy skepticism towards social media content. Teach them to discern between genuine connections and superficial validation, emphasizing the importance of real-life relationships and genuine interactions.
 - **Foster Peer Support Networks:** Facilitate peer support networks where girls can connect with others who share similar experiences. Encourage positive peer influences and provide opportunities for girls to uplift and support each other in navigating social media challenges.
 - **Involve Parents and Guardians:** Educate parents and guardians about the impact of social media on adolescent self-esteem and mental health. Provide resources and guidance on supporting their daughters in developing a healthy relationship with social media and fostering positive self-esteem.
 - **Collaborate with Schools and Communities:** Work with schools and community organizations to implement comprehensive programs that address self-esteem issues and promote positive youth development. Advocate for policies that prioritize mental health and well-being in educational settings.
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Case 3. AI for Client Empowerment

Hugo is a foundation year student placed at a foster care organization. He works closely with a foster parent who has been struggling to navigate the various benefits programs available to her as a foster parent. Hugo teaches the parent how to download ChatGPT to her phone and use the app to find community resources, create budgets, and better understand the foster care benefits programs. They practice the following prompt and then discuss the accuracy of the output. He shows her how to fact-check the output using Google by looking at government sites now that they have a starting place, and he explains how AI works and how it may be wrong. He encourages her to talk to the foster parent support group, her benefits worker, her county worker, and her tax person about her eligibility for these benefits.

Prompt: I'm a new foster parent in Buffalo, New York. What state and federal benefits are available to me, and how do I access them?

ChatGPT Output:

As a new foster parent in Buffalo, New York, you may be eligible for various state and federal benefits to support you in caring for foster children. Here are some common benefits and how to access them:

Foster Care Payments: Foster parents typically receive monthly payments to cover the cost of caring for foster children. These payments may vary depending on factors such as the child's age, needs, and level of care required. To access foster care payments, you will need to contact the foster care agency or organization responsible for placing the child in your care. They will provide you with information on how to apply for and receive payments.

Medical Coverage: Foster children are usually eligible for Medicaid, which provides coverage for medical, dental, and mental health services. As a foster parent, you may also be eligible for Medicaid coverage to ensure you can access healthcare services for yourself and the foster children in your care. Contact your local Department of Social Services (DSS) or foster care agency for assistance with applying for Medicaid coverage.

Training and Support Services: Foster parents often have access to training and support services to help them navigate the challenges of foster care. These services may include pre-service training, ongoing education, support groups, respite care, and case management assistance. Your foster care agency or organization can provide you with information on available training and support services in your area.

Tax Benefits: Foster parents may be eligible for certain tax benefits, such as the federal Child Tax Credit or the Adoption Tax Credit if they adopt a foster child. Additionally, some states offer tax credits or deductions for foster

parents. Consult with a tax professional or accountant to learn more about tax benefits available to foster parents in New York.

Legal Representation: Foster parents have the right to legal representation and support in matters related to the foster care system, including court hearings, placement decisions, and permanency planning. Your foster care agency or organization can connect you with legal resources and assistance if needed.

Additional Support Services: Depending on the needs of the foster child, you may have access to additional support services such as counseling, educational assistance, transportation assistance, and specialized therapies. Work closely with the child's caseworker and other professionals involved in their care to identify and access appropriate support services.

To access these benefits and services, it is essential to maintain open communication with your foster care agency or organization, as they will serve as your primary point of contact for assistance and support. Additionally, familiarize yourself with the policies and procedures of the foster care system in New York to ensure you understand your rights and responsibilities as a foster parent.

**We used ChatGPT to reword some of our original content, generate output examples for our case scenarios, and create images for this article. We used Grammarly to improve grammar, and Canva, including AI design elements, for formatting.*



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**It's not faith
in technology.
It's faith
in people.**

STEVE JOBS

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Got follow-up questions? Feel free to reach out!

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