



# The big debate

## Are robotic pets better than real ones?

Some people think technology can provide pets that are just as lovable.

### What you need to know

- Robot pets have developed a lot in the past few decades. Now technology companies such as Sony and AIST are developing robot pets using artificial intelligence (AI).
- AI machines mimic human intelligence. They can “learn” from their environment and make their own decisions.
- Some of these robot pets are equipped with cameras so that owners can use them to keep watch at home.
- Kiki is one recent robot pet, made by the company Zoetic AI, that is proving to be popular. It looks like a cat with pointy ears and big eyes. It is designed to “understand how you’re feeling.”



A robot puppy.

### DID YOU KNOW?

A Buddhist temple in Japan has held funeral ceremonies for around 800 broken Aibo robot dogs in the past five years.

Last week, a US technology company called Boston Dynamics started selling its dog-like robot “Spot” online for just under £59,000 each. There are other, more affordable robotic animals on the market, such as Aibo, a robotic dog made by Sony that can perform tricks and recognise its owner. Other robot pets, such as Paro the baby seal, are used in care homes and hospitals to reduce the patients’ stress. These robots are created with artificial intelligence (AI). They can make decisions for themselves, which they learn from their environment and the people around them. Some people think that robot pets will one day replace real pets. Others say that a robot pet will never be able to love a human like a real animal. So what do you think? Is a robotic pet better than a real one?

### Yes – They’re much easier to look after

Robot pets are just like real ones but you don’t have to clean up after them or take them for long walks. Imagine if your pet could fetch you a glass of water, rather than a ball, or answer any question. These are some of the things robot pets of the future might be able to do. Many people would love a dog but they don’t have the time to walk it, or the space for it at home, or they can’t afford it. The pet charity PDSA says it can cost up to £13,000 to look after a dog for its lifetime. A robot pet like Aibo costs around £2,200 but the owner won’t need to buy food or pay any vet bills. Besides, when real pets die, it is very sad. With a robot pet, you don’t have to say goodbye in the same way because nothing has actually died.

### No – It’s not the same thing

A robot might seem similar to a real pet, but it’s no replacement for a living, breathing animal. Humans have kept pets for thousands of years – it’s a bond that can’t be replaced by anything else. Animal behaviour, backed up by several scientific studies, shows that pets really do love their owners. For example, Hachiko, a Japanese Akita dog, used to wait for his owner every day outside the train station in Tokyo, Japan, where he lived. After his owner died, Hachiko still waited for him every day at the station for the next nine years. Robots can’t provide this level of affection or emotion. Besides, it’s much better to have a real pet because there are many homeless or neglected animals in the UK who need loving owners.

### YES Three reasons why robot pets are better than real ones.

- 1 A robot pet can do things real ones can’t, such as take photographs.
- 2 Robot pets don’t need as much space, time or money to be looked after. They are great options for people who can’t have a real pet.
- 3 Some people miss their real pets for many years after they die. It is not quite so sad when a robot pet shuts down for the last time.

### NO Three reasons why robot pets are not better than real ones.

- 1 There are many rescue animals in the UK alone in need of loving owners.
- 2 Humans have kept pets for thousands of years. The bond between them is strong and deep. A robotic pet can’t replace this.
- 3 Pets have been proven to really love their owners. Robot pets are not able to feel true, deep love; it’s just programming.

### LAST WEEK’S POLL

Technical problems meant that our poll did not appear online, but most of the comments on PopJam were in favour of athletes being allowed to protest at sports events.

