# Responding to Online Challenges and Hoaxes

Responding to Online Challenges and Hoaxes

Schools can face significant pressure to issue warnings and guidance when news circulates about online challenges, trends, and hoaxes.

Safer Schools NI has produced this guidance to support schools with their safeguarding response to harmful content online.

When a viral challenge is reported in the news or on social media, it's often easier to consider the risks than to establish the facts. Making the decision to issue guidance or warnings about challenges and hoaxes is often informed by the principle of 'better safe than sorry'.

While safeguarding responses to online harms are vital to safeguard children and young people in schools, the wrong response can have the opposite effect and increase the risk to pupils.
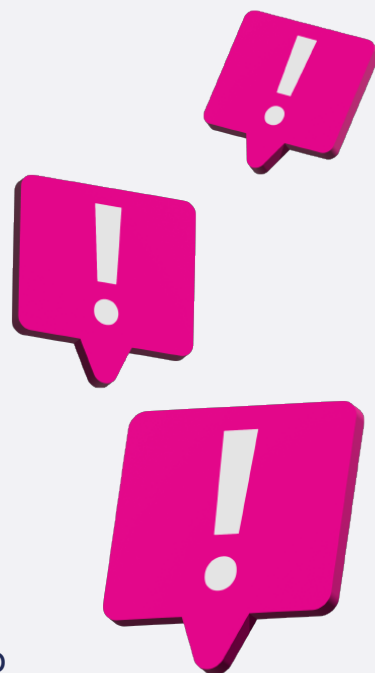
What are Online Challenges?

Online challenges are social media trends where people take part in or mimic games, activities, skits, or dares. They typically originate on social media apps like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram before spreading to other platforms.

Some challenges or online trends are reported by the press first, with the term 'viral' used loosely, which can give the impression that the challenge or trend is more popular than it truly is. We know from experience that press coverage of challenges, trends, and dares can intensify quickly before tapering off.

During this cycle – the fear of not acting to warn staff, parents/carers, and pupils can be a significant diversion from normal school life.

Responding to Online Challenges and Hoaxes

Whether or not they are understood, online challenges have become a regular part of today's online culture. There are two main reasons people choose to engage with them:

● To be Creative

Challenges often provide an opportunity to do or make something new, unique, and different. This could mean creating or participating in a cause, trend, or activity for fun.

● To be Social

Whether it's online or offline, young people like to feel like they are part of a community. Taking part in online challenges can provide a sense of community and can help increase a young person's popularity online. Some young people may also feel peer pressure to take part.

Why do some challenges become dangerous?

While social media doesn't necessarily condone reckless behaviour, it can inadvertently reward it.

The more outrageous a video is the more attention it is given through likes and shares. Most young people are preoccupied with going viral and could go too far when trying to achieve this. If a friend or someone they admire has participated in a dangerous challenge, a young person might be more inclined to try it out.

Trends
and Hoaxes

In some cases, dangerous 'challenges' are being reported as 'viral' - even though they aren't widespread. This misinformation taps into the fear of the unknown with enough detail to make it seem real or possible.

Some of the riskiest internet challenges are really hoaxes deliberately designed to frighten and shock viewers. This is an example of what some safeguarding experts refer to as "**digital ghost stories**" or "modern chain mail".

These hoaxes include false warnings circulated on social media to warn others about risky challenges that don't exist. These create panic and unnecessary worry.

Different online challenges emerge regularly. Some are described as trending (quickly gaining popularity) and can sometimes go viral (being widely and rapidly shared over multiple platforms and groups).

Trends are something that gains traction and popularity online, generating a 'buzz' in a short period of time.

The Facts on Online Challenges and Hoaxes

A recent TikTok survey of teens and parents looked at their experiences of online challenges and hoaxes.

The results found that:

- 48% of teens thought recent challenges were safe (light-hearted or fun)

- 32% of teens believed recent challenges included some risks but were still safe

- 14% of teens believed recent challenges were risky

- 3% of teens believed recent challenges were very risky and dangerous

- 0.3% of teens said they had taken part in a challenge they described as very dangerous

The research also found that teenagers use a range of methods to understand the risks involved in online challenges before they participate. This includes watching videos of other people doing the challenge, reading comments, and speaking to their friends.

Almost half of teens surveyed (46%) wanted "**good information on risks**" and clear "**information on what is too far**". By empowering teens with guidance on how to assess any potential risks, we can take one of the most important measures to help keep them safe.

Almost half of teens surveyed wanted "good information on risks"...

Case Study -
The Momo Hoax

Online challenges are not always harmful, but children and young people will have different capacities to identify risk and respond to danger.

Case Study

Source

The Momo Hoax

In 2019, the so-called 'Mono Challenge' received widespread coverage in the press. The perceived threat of this hoax saw police services issuing alerts to parents, schools, and the public. This drove massive traffic to the online content that professionals were trying to warn the public to ignore.

The image of Momo was then widespread on social media, which inspired copycats to add it to videos.

Data collected during the Momo hoax found that pupils in schools searched over 34,000 times for Momo when press coverage was at its highest, compared to just 76 searches in the previous week.

23% of these searches appeared to be from primary schools.

Rumours about these sorts of challenges can spread quickly. Concerned parties reshare rumours and warnings to help keep children safe. But, while sharing seemingly important information, it can draw further attention to the issue creating further risk.

How can Schools Approach Online Challenges?

The following guidance supports schools to develop a measured response to online challenges, trends, and hoaxes. Understanding the impact of harmful online content and forward planning allows schools to quickly make decisions when it matters most.

The following steps are critical for teachers and school staff responding to an online challenge:

1. Include responses and expectations in existing school policies

Due to the blended online and offline world most students live in, schools should account for online challenges, trends, and hoaxes in any policy relevant to:

- Behaviour
- Child Protection
- Staff Conduct
- Appropriate use of social media
- Internet and mobile devices

2. Verify the facts and understand the risk

Every online challenge or hoax is different. It is vital that schools seek verifiable information on any challenge before responding to it. Sharing information out of an abundance of caution can in fact be counterproductive as it brings attention to an existing challenge or amplifies the worry around a hoax.

Any communication to staff, parents/carers, and pupils about online challenges and hoaxes should be assessed on a case-by-case basis. The overall aim of communication should be to build a measured and reassuring response. Schools may experience pressure to respond to online challenges and will likely feel the need to calm anxieties and frustrations.

It can be helpful to communicate that the school's duty is to safeguard children and young people from harm which means only verified information can be shared.

How can Schools Approach Online Challenges?

The general principles of responding should be:

- Is this factual?
- Is this proportional to the actual (or perceived) risk?
- Is this helpful?
- Is this age and stage of development appropriate?
- Is this supportive?

Need Support?

You can also reach out to the Education Authority Child Protection Support Service (CPSS) for information and child protection/safeguarding support.

You can also contact Safer Schools NI directly to alert us to emerging trends online.

3. Consider the Impacts

Remember that any announcement or response to an online challenge/hoax will create a ripple effect that extends beyond the schoolyard. In previous challenges/hoaxes, we have seen schools and local authorities react out of pressure and interest from the public.

The intent may be to protect pupils, but it can inadvertently distress or scare them.

- Young people should not be signposted to harmful content/challenges or hoaxes online. Telling young people about challenges and then asking them not to search for them is more likely to produce the opposite effect.

- When issuing warnings there is an increase in curiosity and interest from children and young people. Even if most can think critically about the content they search, some may have additional difficulties that make them more vulnerable to content that could be scary, distressing, or disturbing.

How can Schools Approach Online Challenges?

● 4. Pre-Plan Formal Response and Communications

Having a pre-planned response will help you to act quickly after completing a risk assessment on the harmful content to children and young people.

Having draft letters or email templates for parents/carers, staff, and pupils can help you respond at pace.

Being confident and timely in your communication with your school community will reduce worry, fear, and uncertainty about dangerous risks when they occur.

Remember to communicate early on that sharing any warnings without properly fact-checking them can be counterproductive and dangerous to children and young people

● 5. Focus on and build Digital Resilience

Many fears around online challenges come from misunderstanding how young people perceive risks online. Schools should consider what they can do to support staff, parents/carers, and pupils in focusing on positive social behaviours both on and offline.

This may require extra training in online safety lessons or training to facilitate and evidence a shared understanding of online risks.

Encouraging the development of digital resilience means that young people can use critical thinking skills and help-seeking behaviours in their everyday online interactions. This will help them identify risks and block and report users or content.

No matter the challenge, hoax or viral, the advice for young people should remain the same:

> *"If you see something online that's upsetting or dangerous to you or others, (or something that will hurt someone's feelings) you should tell someone you trust about it. They will help you block, report, and figure out what to do next."*

Classroom Activity

What Would You Do?

This activity is about Online Challenges.

Look at the scenarios below and answer the following questions.

Online Challenge

The Climate Clap

Stand outside and clap for 30 seconds, shouting out as many different words as you can think of to describe what the weather is like. Remember to put on a waterproof coat if it is raining or snowing, and don't attempt this challenge outdoors in a thunderstorm or bad weather!

Online Challenge

Ring the Alarm

Wait until everyone is in class, then run down the corridor shouting fire before smashing the fire alarm. Record the challenge and upload it immediately with the **#FireStarter** hashtag.

Classroom Activity
Questions

Question One
Which is the Dangerous Challenge?

Question Two
Why is it Dangerous?

Question Three
What would you do if somebody asked you to do the dangerous challenge?

Classroom Activity
Answers
(Answers are upside-down)

Question One
Which is the Dangerous Challenge?

Ring the Alarm challenge.

Question Two
Why is it Dangerous?

Ring the Alarm challenge is dangerous because it carries lots of risks. These include:

- You might face a criminal investigation for wasting emergency resources.
- Fire Fighters are not available for real emergencies – like one at home.
- If there is a real fire, your peers may not believe it and evacuate slowly – which might put your life and theirs in danger.
- Your school could get fined for hoax call out charges, which means they have less money to spend on activities.

Question Three
What would you do if somebody asked you to do the dangerous challenge?

Actions you could take if somebody asked you to do the dangerous challenge include:

- Seeking help. Talk to a trusted adult about the challenge. Ask them if it is a good idea and tell them who asked you to do it.
- Blocking any users who asked you to do the challenge.
- Reporting the dangerous challenge using the 'report' button on TikTok/Instagram/Snapchat/Facebook and following the instructions.

Take these steps if you come across a dangerous online challenge! It could help make sure you and other people are not put at risk.

Further Resources

Resources
How to Respond to Online Responses
www.ineqe.com/2021/08/04/online-viral-challenges/
→

Resources
Ineqe Online Viral Challenges Video
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ax8zrD02P2A
→

Resources
Online Chalenges & Peer Pressure
www.saferinternet.org.uk/blog/online-challenges-and-peer-pressure
→

Resources
Government guidance on Challenges & Hoaxes
www.gov.uk/government/publications/harmful-online-challenges-and-online-hoaxes/harmful-online-challenges-and-online-hoaxes
→

Resources
Digital Ghost Stories; Impact, Risks & Reasons
www.swgfl.org.uk/research/digital-ghost-stories-impact-risks-and-reasons/
→

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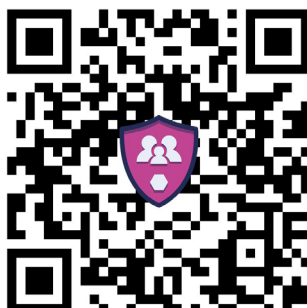**Download on the App Store**

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