

**DITCH
THE LABEL**

x

TikTok

GOING VIRAL

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS & GUARDIANS

A guide to supporting young people to be safe when engaging with or participating in online challenges

WHAT THIS GUIDE COVERS:

- What online challenges are and some common examples
- What motivates young people to participate in them and who is especially vulnerable
- What hoaxes are and how to help young people identify them
- Advice on how to support your young person with online challenges

WHAT ARE ONLINE CHALLENGES?

Online challenges are videos or posts designed to make the viewer 'do' something, ranging from fun or innocuous requests, to those with damaging, harmful, or even criminal, consequences.

These challenges can take many forms and spread online through platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. The majority of challenges are light-hearted fun, however some can cause permanent harm, therefore we all have a duty to protect the young people who are drawn to these challenges.

Some common categories include:

- Solidarity challenges (e.g. ALS Ice Bucket Challenge)
- Fitness (100 Rep Challenge)
- Food (Cinnamon Challenge)
- Cosmetics (100-layer Challenge, tooth-filing, full facial waxing)
- Physical challenges (Dance challenges, Milk Crate Challenge or Stand Up Challenge)
- Hoax challenges (Blue Whale Challenge or Momo)

WHY DO THEY APPEAL TO YOUNG PEOPLE?

Online challenges may seem like modern phenomena, however, in the context of adolescent brain development we can see that this online behaviour is rooted in the same novelty-seeking, risk taking and desire to interact with peers that teens have always experienced.

The majority of teens see online challenges as light-hearted fun that has a positive impact on their friendships. Therefore, when trying to prevent engagement with harmful challenges, it is important we try to understand and validate the appeal they have to adolescents, and also consider who is particularly vulnerable.

In an attempt to do this we might look at adolescent brain development. The brain is the last of the human organs to fully develop with full maturity being reached around the age of 25. During adolescence (ages 10-19), much like the physical changes our body goes through, the brain undertakes intense development.

Two key parts of the brain are developing during adolescence:

- The limbic system (responsible for emotional response and rewards)
- The prefrontal cortex (responsible for things like decision making and managing long-term goals).

In adolescence the limbic system develops before the prefrontal cortex meaning that teens are more likely to focus on the immediate than thinking about the long-term effects of our actions.

Teens are more likely to seek out new, exciting and intense experiences, become sensitive to and motivated by social validation, take risks, and act on impulse.

Online challenges can be quickly passing trends and therefore there can be a sense of urgency around them and a great fear of missing out. Social validation and peer pressure are key motivating factors. In a recent survey commissioned by TikTok and conducted by The Value Engineers (TVE), 50% of teens ranked obtaining views, comments and likes in their top three reasons they felt teens took part in online challenges. 46% ranked impressing others in their top three reasons (Praesidio safeguarding, 2021).

Teens might be drawn to online challenges because they provide:

- A sense of belonging or community
- A creative outlet to express themselves
- A new, exciting experience
- A way to test their limits and take risks
- A sense of control
- Social validation (by completing a challenge they could impress their peers and gain likes, follows, comments and views).

Your teen might be vulnerable to harmful online challenges because:

- They are impulsive
- They are susceptible to peer pressure
- They have low self-esteem
- They are isolated
- They are neurodivergent
- They are digitally excluded and have less access to social media than their peers

WHAT ARE HOAXES?

A hoax is a lie created and circulated to trick people into believing something that is untrue; often intended to cause confusion, anxiety or fear. Sometimes there can be extreme 'hoax challenges' that are fake but are designed to create panic and therefore have a negative impact on mental health.

The most sinister examples of 'hoax challenges' revolve around distressing themes of suicide or self-harm. You can think of these as digital ghost stories or modern chainmail - where a fake, often scary ghost or character is created and sometimes threatens to do something if people do not complete the challenge or share the information onwards (see the case study about 'Momo' on the next page for further explanation).

However they can also come in the form of miscaptioned videos or images or videos and images edited to make it look like something has happened that didn't

Some will create or onward share hoaxes in order to use the virality to garner attention and promote or sell their own products or content. The anxiety created by hoaxes can also be used by bad actors to manipulate or exploit young people, especially those who are isolated.

Hoaxes can be difficult to spot and less than half of teens exposed to online hoaxes have sought support and advice. We recommend teaching young people to:

- Look out for dramatic or exaggerated language (hoaxes usually involved some kind of threat or warning)
- Consider: Am I being manipulated? If the post is trying to trigger an emotional response such as fear or anger
- Ask: Is this a credible source or hearsay? Research by checking the news or fact checking sites such as snopes.com or fullfact.org

37% of young people rank 'to protect others' in their top three reasons why people share or repost hoaxes (Praesidio safeguarding, 2021). Therefore, it is essential to encourage young people not to share or repost hoaxes as it will only fuel it further. By ignoring these hoaxes we can help 'break the chain' and prevent others from falling for them. Alternatively, if the hoax is harmful, they should be reported to the appropriate platform.

CASE STUDY:

'Momo', which gained traction in 2018, was a hoax challenge based around the deliberate miscaptioning and editing of a Japanese sculpture of a girl (made by a horror film prop artist). This image was shared in posts and videos warning that 'Momo' **allegedly** asked users to contact a number on WhatsApp which then provided challenges. These would start small and innocuous, then grow to self-harm and suicide. Threats to 'encourage' participation supposedly included putting a curse on you, sharing your personal information and violence against you.

This understandably caused alarm for young people and their parents but misguided attempts to 'warn others' including by mainstream media, celebrities, police and schools helped this hoax - which didn't actually exist - to spread further. Data shows a correlation between the period of "awareness raising" and search interest in 'Momo' in schools. This clearly demonstrates that sharing awareness of hoaxes does more damage than good.

<https://swgfl.org.uk/assets/documents/digital-ghost-stories-impact-risks-and-reasons-1.pdf>

HOW DO I SUPPORT MY YOUNG PERSON?

DO:

- Let them teach you. Those who have not grown up in the age of social media can experience feelings of inadequacy surrounding supporting young people online. The most important thing is that your young person knows that you care and that they can come to you without fear of judgement.
- Familiarise yourself with the social media apps they are using. Ask to 'Friend' or 'Follow' your young person on social media so you can keep in the loop of what they are doing online, but respect their privacy if they decline.
- Talk regularly about social media use and trends. If you make it part of your normal everyday conversation, your young person is more likely to come to you if they have any questions or concerns.
- Read and guide your children to community guidelines of the social media apps they are using (see useful links on following page).
- Use open-ended questions and encourage your child to consider the risks and long-term effects of online challenges
- Refrain from judgement and Facilitate conversation about why the online challenge appeals to them and help them consider positive alternatives to meet those needs
- Guide them to use TikTok's four step 'Stop, Think, Decide, Act' approach to online challenges: <https://www.tiktok.com/safety/en/online-challenges/>
- Consider establishing an agreement with your child where, if they come to you with concerns about something they've seen or done online, you will not take their device away from them. Those who are digitally excluded are more likely to engage in dangerous challenges when they are online.

DON'T:

- Approach the conversation with the mindset that all online challenges are dangerous. This won't ring true for most young people and may make them less likely to trust your advice on the topic.
- Express feelings of anger or fear if they come to you with a concern. This will discourage them from coming to you for help in the future. Speak to a friend, family member, school staff or support service to help you through these emotions.
- Respond with blanket statements such as "don't take part in dangerous online challenges"
- Warn about dangerous online challenges by name. If your teen hasn't heard of it already, this only makes them more likely to search for it and possibly replicate it.
- Share social media posts about them to 'raise awareness' this will only increase their reach and contribute to the validity of hoax challenges that are not actually taking place.

DITCH THE LABEL

COMMUNITY

If your young person needs additional support,
direct them to www.ditchthelabel.org/safespace

Here they can find a community of like-minded
young people and experts who can provide
advice, support and direction.

All of these resources are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

This means that you can share the resources, and you can edit them for your own use, but you have to attribute the work to Ditch the Label, you can't charge money for it, and you can't distribute your edited versions to anyone