



Internet hoaxes: How should you respond?

A recent internet phenomenon called the Momo challenge caused enormous concern amongst parents, the media, schools — even police forces got caught up in it. It was claimed that the challenge was ‘played’ over WhatsApp and that the Momo character asked would-be participants to contact ‘her’ and do a series of challenges — the final challenge being suicide. Thankfully there is no verified evidence that this ‘challenge’ was real or that it caused harm to children. On the contrary, it is now widely accepted to have been a hoax.

The problem with this sort of hoax is that they quickly spread. In the early days, it can be difficult to know whether the ‘challenge’ is real or hoax — even for the police and internet safety experts. The media and well-intentioned people tend to share messages about them before an accurate picture is available and by doing so give oxygen to the hype and fuel concern. It’s important to remember that it can be the coverage of these things that leads children to investigate for themselves — even if they haven’t had direct contact.

So how should we respond when a sudden, frightening new phenomenon hits the press and the playground?

Of course, the first and best advice is to take a breath and try to find out more. The next step is to tackle the conversation with your child. Here are some tips to help:

- Ask a general question about whether your child has seen anything upsetting online. Explain that there are often things that happen online that can be misleading or frightening and that some things are designed to get a lot of attention. See if they mention the hoax you’ve heard about first.
- Let them lead the conversation — if they’re not familiar with the hoax, it might lead them to become more curious and investigate for themselves.
- Use it as an opportunity to make sure they know that they should never do anything at all that they are asked to do online or off that makes them feel scared, worried or uncomfortable.
- Remember that curiosity is a natural part of growing up so don’t blame them for being drawn to this sort of digital drama. Try to help them to learn that however tempting these things may be to explore, it’s never sensible to be drawn in.
- Make sure your child knows that it’s important for them to share any unpleasant experiences they have online with you so that you can help them to figure them out and recover.