

Responding to Online Challenges and Hoaxes

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When viral challenges gain attention through news or social media, responses often prioritise perceived risks over verified facts. While precautionary guidance is typically grounded in the principle of 'better safe than sorry', poorly informed interventions can inadvertently escalate the very risks they seek to minimise.

What Are Online Challenges?

Online challenges are social media trends where individuals participate in games, skits, dares, or activities - often originating on platforms like TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram.

Some trends are first reported by the press, which may label them as 'viral' even when they have limited reach. Media coverage can escalate rapidly, often exaggerating popularity before interest fades.

Why Are Online Challenges Popular?

Online challenges are a regular part of today's digital culture. Young people engage with them primarily for two reasons:

- ▶ **To express creativity** by participating in fun or unique trends.
- ▶ **To connect socially** whether to build a sense of community, gain online recognition, or respond to peer pressure.

Why Do Some Challenges Become Dangerous?

Social media may not promote risky behaviour, but it can unintentionally reward it. Outrageous content often gains more attention, and in the pursuit of going viral, some young people may push boundaries. Seeing peers or influencers take part can further encourage risky participation.

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Trends and Hoaxes

Some of the riskiest internet challenges are really hoaxes deliberately designed to frighten and shock viewers.

Hoaxes can involve false warnings about dangerous challenges that don't exist, causing unnecessary panic. While new online challenges emerge regularly, not all are genuinely viral. In some cases, rarely seen or exaggerated trends are reported as widespread, contributing to scaremongering that can unintentionally increase interest or risk.

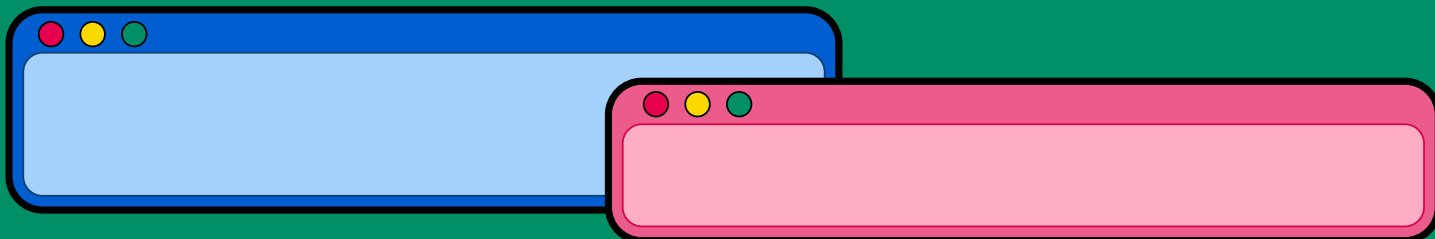
Digital Resilience

Many concerns about online challenges stem from misunderstandings about how young people perceive risk. Parents, carers, educators, and young people should focus on promoting positive online and offline behaviours.

Building digital resilience helps children recognise online risks, seek help, and practice safe behaviours - such as speaking to a trusted adult. These skills should be central to all safeguarding messages.

Encouraging critical thinking and help-seeking equips young people to navigate risks and confidently block or report harmful content. Regardless of the trend - whether real or a hoax - the core advice should remain consistent.

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Advice for Parents

Having open, honest conversations about your child's online habits is the best way to clear up confusion and build trust. If your child doesn't bring it up, you may need to start the conversation.

Tips for a positive conversation:

- ▶ Choose a relaxed time and place, like during a walk or car ride.
- ▶ Avoid talking when your child is tired or upset.
- ▶ Speak with other parents for ideas on how to approach the topic.
- ▶ Listen carefully and let your child share without pressure.
- ▶ Avoid showing harmful or upsetting content - they may not have seen it, and it could spark curiosity.

Helpful questions to ask:

- ▶ What do you know about online challenges?
- ▶ Why do you think people take part in them?
- ▶ Do you think any challenges are dangerous? Why?
- ▶ Could someone get hurt?
- ▶ Could taking part get you into trouble?

Remind your child that it's okay to say "no" if they feel uncomfortable, even if others are pressuring them.

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Advice for Children and Young People

It can feel hard to talk about things that upset you online, but having an honest conversation with a trusted adult can help clear up confusion and make you feel more supported.

If you're feeling pressured to join an online challenge, remember:

- ▶ **Stop** – Pause and don't rush into anything.
- ▶ **Assess** – Think about the risks.
- ▶ **Flag** – Talk to a trusted adult or friend about your concerns.
- ▶ **Exhale** – Take a deep breath - you're not alone.

Tips for starting the conversation:

- ▶ **Let your trusted adult know you'd like to talk** about something that's been bothering you.
- ▶ **Explain** what you saw, how it made you feel, and where you found it (social media, a message, etc.).
- ▶ **Be honest** if someone is pressuring you to join in and say you're unsure how to respond.

Remember: Just because others seem to be taking part doesn't mean you have to. It's okay to say "no," especially if you feel unsafe or uncomfortable. If a challenge seems dangerous, it's always best to report it and talk to someone you trust.

A graphic featuring a semi-circular arc with the text "Challenge Danger" in white. Below the arc, there are two circular icons: a yellow one with a smiling face on the left and a red one with a lightning bolt and a sad face on the right.

Challenge Danger

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Advice for Schools

► **Embed in school policies**

Include online challenges and hoaxes in key policies such as behaviour, child protection, staff conduct, and use of technology.

► **Verify before responding**

Check the facts before reacting. Avoid spreading unverified information, as it can amplify fear or curiosity - especially with hoaxes.

► **Consider the impact**

Responses can create unintended worry. Avoid drawing attention to harmful content, especially with younger or more vulnerable pupils.

► **Prepare communications in advance**

Have draft letters or templates ready to respond quickly and clearly. Ensure messages are calm, factual, and supportive.

► **Build digital resilience**

Support pupils in developing critical thinking and safe online habits. Encourage staff and families to focus on positive behaviours online and offline.

Need support?

Contact the Education Authority CPSS or Safer Schools NI for safeguarding advice and to report emerging trends.

✉ Email us at saferschoolsni@ineqe.co.uk

☎ Call our team on **02896 005 777**

📍 Visit our site at saferschoolsni.co.uk