

Don't fall for it: A parent's guide to protecting your kids from online hoaxes

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It's a parent's responsibility to protect their children from harm, no matter where that threat of harm comes from. But what if the threat is a hoax?

We've seen recently a rollercoaster of panic from parents trying to protect their kids from a supposed online [threat](#) known as the Momo challenge, that has for months been debunked as a hoax.

Yet the panic from [parents](#) continued, as did reports in the [media](#) and even warnings from [celebrities](#) – all of which could have been avoided if parents had done a few simple checks before raising the alarm.

So how can you as a parent protect your children (and yourself) from falling for these hoaxes if you don't even know whether something is not a genuine threat in the first place?

Before I give some help and advice on that, let's look at this latest hoax: the Momo challenge.

The Momo challenge

Momo is a ghoulish character who is said to use social media and other [online tools](#) to encourage youngsters to complete dangerous tasks involving self-harm.

But the whole Momo challenge is a [manufactured myth](#).

The creepy image was copied from a sculpture by Japanese special-effects company Link Factory. Its use in the hoax was [condemned by its original artist several months ago](#).

Even this revelation did not stop the spread – of both the hoax and the warnings about it – continuing for several months afterwards.

The Momo challenge is just the latest in a series of manufactured online hoaxes designed to generate paranoia among adults.

Other online hoaxes

We've had the "blue whale challenge", allegedly linked to numerous teen deaths around the world. The trend later [turned out to be a fake](#).

We were told the [deadly TidePod challenge](#) was encouraging kids to be filmed while eating poisonous laundry detergent pods ([they weren't](#)).

There was also a challenge that linked kids choking to death to snorting condoms for more YouTube likes ([no deaths have been reported](#)).

These hoaxes are carefully designed to grab your attention and incite shock and panic, so you share the information with everyone you know. The designers of the hoax callously tap directly into parents' Achilles heel: their fears regarding their children's safety.

Posting the hoax online fits the designer's aim perfectly because it can travel far and wide online very quickly. This is of course a win from the perpetrators' perspective, whose very aim is to go viral! The more attention they get, the more profit or fame.

What parents should do to help protect your kids from such hoaxes

Hoaxes that threaten your kids one day, and turn out to be fake the next, are mentally and emotionally exhausting for kids and adults. Parents can feel an increasing lack of control.

But this doesn't need to be the case. There are tools and tricks you can apply to help you spot a hoax.

1. Investigate: see if it's real

Information about any so-called [challenge](#) is often shared on social media, where [fake news](#) and misleading information is rife.

If you are concerned about a hoax it's important to investigate, by using a reputable news website or a reliable fact-checking site such as [Snopes](#) or [FullFact](#).

Both are good fact-checking resources that gives readers evidence-based analysis ([Snopes](#) and [FullFact](#) have both published content on Momo).

Even a simple web search of the name of any supposed threat can help you. Add the words "hoax" or "scam" to your search queries and you will very quickly see if there is any real evidence to support the claims of harm you may be hearing about.

2. Help your child investigate authenticity

Use the opportunity to educate your child about these online challenges. When you hear about one, go online with your child and investigate.

This is the perfect opening to help your child understand fake content online. Explain why someone would want to start a hoax to scare people (for example, to achieve fame).

3. Explore alternatives for viewing

You may be concerned about your child using online video streaming services such as YouTube or Facebook, where they could be exposed to any hoax video.

As an alternative, look for other ways for your children to view their favoured content.

Many of the popular shows that kids watch online also have their own apps with pre-screened videos: for example [PBS kids videos](#) and [Disney Channel app](#).

4. Avoid causing unnecessary alarm

It's important to be careful about sharing [news articles](#) that perpetuate a [hoax](#) or myth with other adults.

Before sharing potentially wrong information, do some internet research of your own to check out the accuracy of any threat.

5. Be a critical, alert consumer

We live our lives on the internet, and there is a mass of misleading online information designed to manipulate our thinking.

It's important to read and stay up to date about how the online world operates, and to be critical of what you view and read online.

Ask yourself some basic questions such as:

- who is going to benefit from this online post/article?
- what is the underlying purpose of it?
- is the author/creator trying to sway my thinking, and why?

6. What if you think a threat is genuine?

[Facebook](#), [YouTube](#) and other [social media](#) platforms have options to report anything you think may be a serious threat. If you're still worried, call your local police.

The online space is always changing. Keeping you and your kids safe online involves being aware of emerging and new safety issues, and committing to a bit of research before you panic.

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