What parents need to know about ONLINE CHALLENGES

**MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING**

As well as having the potential to cause actual physical harm, some challenges can be extremely upsetting for children. Many are created with the sole purpose of instilling fear in an individual in order to coerce them into doing things that could have a long-term emotional effect on them.

**VARYING LEVELS OF RISK**

As a parent or carer, it's important to take a balanced view and understand that not everything online has the potential following by and interaction can be a force for good. For example, the Ice Bucket Challenge, which swept the nation, set out to raise money and awareness of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). At its height, over 28 million people uploaded, commented on, or liked Ice Bucket Challenge related posts on Facebook. It's equally important to be aware though that online challenges often have a darker side. Malicious trends and challenges can expose children to dangerous or even life-threatening situations, so it's critical that parents and carers help their children understand what steps to take to mitigate them.

**‘FOMO’ - FEAR OF MISSING OUT**

The ‘Fear of Missing Out’ (FOMO) is a strong emotional characteristic, particularly displayed in young people. The nature of viral challenges encourages children to explore and push boundaries. They tap into FOMO by feeding on a child's natural desire to join in, be accepted and share experiences with their friends and the wider online community. A recent study also found that FOMO is one of the greatest causes of Social Media addiction.

**STRIVING FOR LIKES**

In a major study by the Children’s Commissioner, it was found that children as young as ten years old are reliant on ‘Likes’ for their sense of self-worth. A major concern around viral challenges is not knowing how they ‘begin’. Coupled this growing appetite for acceptance with commonplace peer pressure and the potential problem is compounded. The result is that young people are being drawn into online challenges, because it is all their friends are doing, saying ‘no’ can seem like a very hard thing to do.

Top Tips for Parents

**COMMUNICATION & MONITORING**

It’s important to talk to your child regularly and monitor their online activities. Encouraging honesty and openness, will give you a much clearer viewpoint of how your child is interacting online and what concerns they have. Create an atmosphere of trust. Ensure they feel they can confide in you or another trusted adult regarding anything they may have seen or experienced online that’s upset them.

**THINK BEFORE ACTING**

As with most concerns in life, let common sense prevail when it comes to Viral Challenges. Young people need the freedom and space to explore and go in all guns blazing may well be counter-effective. Address the importance of safety and wellbeing, both online and offline, by getting the facts and understanding the risks. Start a discussion about the Online Challenges that may have captured your child’s interest, gauge their likely involvement and explain the importance of thinking and acting independently when it comes to participating.

**SETTING UP EFFECTIVE PARENTAL CONTROLS**

As with all online activity, ensuring you have effective parental controls set up on all devices will help filter and restrict the dangerous or inappropriate content you don’t wish your child to access. Additional measures for protecting your child include checking the privacy settings on your child’s devices, monitoring their friend’s list, ensuring their personal information is safe and secure and keeping a watchful eye on the content they’re sharing.

**REPORTING & BLOCKING**

Parental controls can only go so far in blocking potentially harmful content. A rise in the deceiving of social media algorithms, has led to age inappropriate content increasingly appearing on platforms and apps used by children. Where possible, you should regularly monitor what your child sees online and flag/report any content which is inappropriate or dangerous. You should take the time to talk to your child, define what you consider to be appropriate content and show them how to report and block users/accounts themselves.

**VALIDATE SOURCES**

Not everything is as it seems. Some people create fake content that's designed to 'shock' in order to encourage rapid sharing. If your child has seen something online that has triggered concern you should encourage them to, check its origin, verify that it came from a credible source and check the comments made for any clues to its validity.

**FACING REALITY**

Trends and Viral Challenges can be tempting for children to take part in; no matter how dangerous or scary they may seem. As a parent or carer it can be difficult to keep pace with the very latest Online Challenges emerging. In recent months these have included potentially dangerous crazes, including the ‘Bird Box’ challenge, which was inspired by Netflix’s popular film and encourages followers to upload videos of themselves attempting everyday tasks while blindfolded. The best advice is to keep talking with your child. Show that your taking an interest and not just judging. Ensure your child knows they don’t have to get involved and if they’re unsure, let them know you’re there to talk before they consider participating. Children often need reassurance that not everything they see online is real. If your child has viewed distressing or frightening content it’s important to talk to them about their experience, support them and, if required, help them find additional support.

**SOURCES**


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