



Collingswood Public Schools

It's Where You Want to Learn



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March 1, 2019

Dear Collingswood and Oaklyn Families:

The purpose of this letter is to make you aware of the *Momo Challenge*, an alarming social media trend targeting children and teenagers.

The *Momo Challenge* is a game found on platforms including Facebook and WhatsApp. It features a frightening character asking viewers to perform sometimes dangerous tasks and provide photos as proof. The *Momo* threatens those who do not perform the tasks.

Some of the challenges suggest that the students perform dangerous tasks in school. This information about the challenge is being shared with our teachers and staff so that they may be vigilant during the school day. We are asking you to do the same at home. If you hear your children talking about the *Momo Challenge* or they are active on social media, please spend time addressing this with your child.

While our technology team will address issues within our school network, many of our students come to school with smart phones that give them direct cellular access to the platforms where the challenge takes place.

For more information about the *Momo Challenge* and the importance of discussing internet safety with your children, please refer to the articles below.

Sincerely,

Scott A. Oswald, Ed.D.
Superintendent

Don't Panic, What Parents Really Need To Know About 'Momo Challenge'

 forbes.com/sites/andyrobertson/2019/02/27/dont-panic-what-parents-really-need-to-know-about-momo-challenge

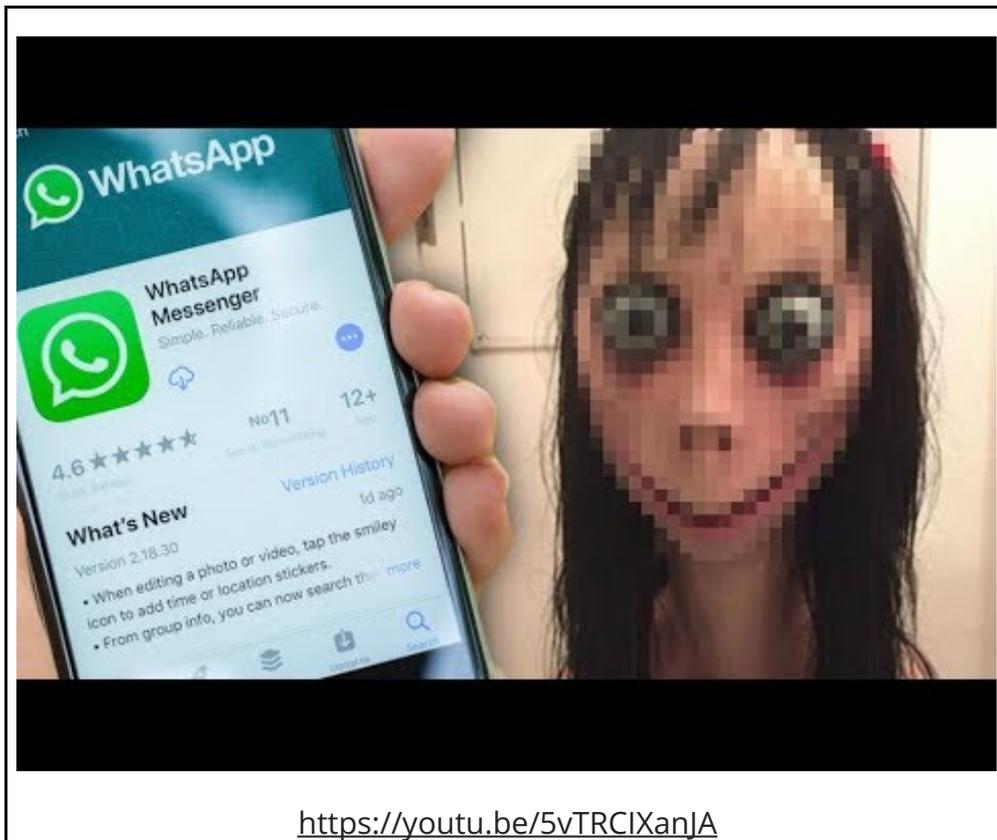
February 26, 2019



You have likely seen a number of stories in your news and social feeds about the dangers of something called *The Momo Challenge*. This usually accompanies an image of a grotesque bird-head with warnings about children being encouraged to harm or kill themselves.

I've spent the last two days talking to academics, childcare professionals and online safety experts to get to the bottom of what parents really need to know about *The Momo Challenge* and what's the best action to take.

As I expand below, evidence of direct harm caused by the game is yet to be found. It is essentially a viral ghost story. Rather than sharing warnings that perpetuate and mythologize the story, a better focus is good positive advice for children, set up technology appropriately and take an interest in their online interactions.



<https://youtu.be/5vTRCIXanJA>

What is Momo Challenge?

Chain letters have been with us since the mail existed. We know how it goes. You receive an anonymous note in the mail that threatens bad luck or worse unless you send ten people a copy of the letter.

Online chain letters accelerate the spread of these messages while also enabling ongoing back and forth communication from the sender by moving from letters to direct messaging. They also lower the effort required to take part, from printing, addressing and posting a letter to clicking a number to send a **Whatsapp** or text.

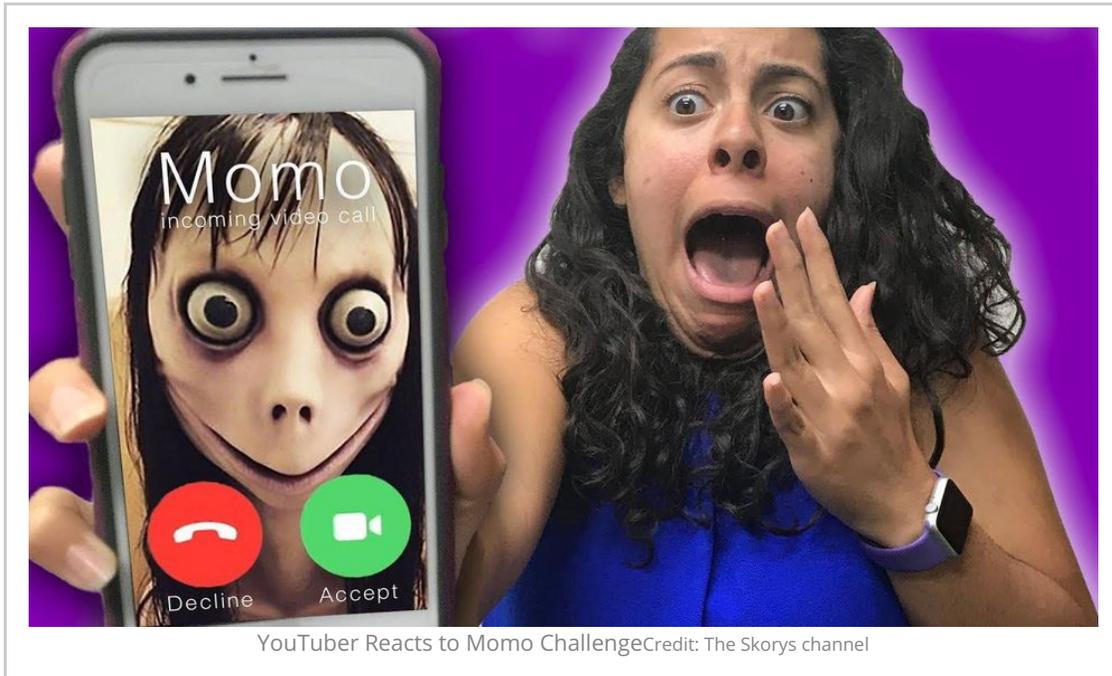
With the *Momo Challenge*, contact is triggered by searching for a special phone number online and sending a text or Whatsapp message. The player enters into a conversation that sends distressing images and aims to persuade them to complete challenges ranging from waking up at certain times to self-harm and even suicide.

What's The Appeal?

Along with a trend in scary video games like *Five Nights at Freddy's*, *Granny*, *Slenderman* and *Bendy*, and the *Ink Machine*, children are drawn to the horror-taboo nature of the image of the **Momo** character. Like the Killer Clowns trend, these are the ghost stories of the digital age.

Playground chatter is amplified by YouTuber's trying out the Momo game (or pretending to try it out) in their videos. Many of these videos actually fail to make contact with Momo, and some are intentional fakes.

Video games that allow customization like Roblox and Minecraft are also seeing Momo themed costumes in games being created and shared by other players. In turn, these are used to create more YouTube videos, so the cycle continues.



Is It Real?

The image and the story of children harming themselves or their families is, of course, shocking. However, as [ParentZone](#) recently highlighted, the number of reported cases of children harming themselves because of the game is extremely low. Even those cases that are linked in the media, of teenagers killing themselves in Asia and South America, are not suggesting the game was the direct cause.

Andy Phippen professor of social responsibility in IT at Plymouth University, told me, "things like Momo become social media storms because folk are so keen to share. It's a nasty looking image which looks scary, so, the gut feeling would be this would scare kids. But check the sources and the evidence trail soon runs dry. It's viral content at the end of the day, propagating just adds fuel to the fire, and creates unfounded hysteria. Don't believe everything you read online."

I've spent a day trying to contact the numbers found from [Googling](#), but have so far been unable to get a response from Momo. Additional research on sites like That's Nonsense or Snopes offers the full history and uncovers a clear

pattern of viral rather than real danger.

What's the Danger?

Carmel Glassbrook, manager of Professionals Online Safety Helpline, told me they have received calls on the topic of Momo, from schools and local authorities and police. "The main problem", she said, "was not the phenomenon itself but that professionals and parents were sharing posts about Momo without checking on its validity. It has become a viral topic, founded more on scaremongering headlines than well-researched facts."

A [BBC article](#) about the Momo trend shared police concerns and linked the game to "hackers", although without many details. While it is possible that hackers are using a game like this to acquire information, the level of data shared makes this unlikely.

The real danger, as highlighted by Glassbrook, is that carers and parents are distracted from the real issues of teaching children how to safely thrive online while chasing viral shock-fads like this.

Staying Safe Online

Rather than warning children about specific dangers such as Momo, parents and professionals can better help children by teaching them good practices online.

It's important that children know that they should not be trying to contact strangers online, regardless of the method. Setting privacy systems on devices with your child is a great way to have this conversation and agree on automatic precautions.

"A much better approach," said Glassbrook, "is for professionals to focus on ensuring the door is open for children to talk about these kinds of issues and teaching good practice rather than telling them there's a big red button they mustn't push."

Fostering an atmosphere of openness and transparency about online activity ensures that children can thrive. If you do notice them switching screens on their devices when approached or new numbers or email addresses on their devices it's worth checking in with them.

Keep video games and YouTube watching, two major ways these stories circulate, in shared family spaces. In video games, you can also set-up restrictions on friends and accessing user generate content that may include Momo themed add ons.

YouTube has been marking videos including Momo content as being "identified by the YouTube community as inappropriate or offensive to some audiences". And that "viewer discretion is advised". If you have **Restricted mode** on for your child's account this content is not available to them.

Savvy Kids

Researching the topic was a little depressing, but as I dredged up all manner of spoof or amped up Momo scare videos on YouTube I found one ray of hope from two girls who not only saw through the viral-fad, but also offered good advice "to not go behind your parents back" and not "watch videos because that's what people who make the video want: views".

Momo online safety guide for children and parents

practicalparenting.com.au/momo-challenge-online-safety-guide-for-children-and-parents

By Nicola Conville

February 28, 2019



The 'Momo' challenge has been around for some time, but concerns around the game have recently re-emerged, with [police issuing warnings](#) to parents and schools. If you are worried about your child's safety, here is a comprehensive guide to Momo and how you can protect your child, educate them and keep them safe. You can also read about Safer Internet Day at kidshelpline.com.au.

What is the Momo challenge?

The 'Momo' challenge is an online game that appears on Facebook, Whatsapp and [Youtube](#). The scary doll-like figure allegedly targets children and teens and asks them to participate in a game which involves setting them challenges or dares that become increasingly violent and scary in nature. Some of the reported challenges include cutting off their hair, waking up at odd hours and other forms of self-harm. Momo also threatens users if they don't carry out the 'dares', threatening harm to them or their families.

Who is Momo?

The 'Momo' character is symbolised by a woman with stringy hair, bulging eyes, a grotesque smile and bird's feet. The image was actually taken from the

work of Japanese artist Midori Hayashi, who is not associated with the game. The Momo character is, however, deeply distressing and scary-looking to children.

Is the Momo game dangerous?

A number of incidents linked to Momo have been reported around the world ranging from attempting self-harm. The game has also been linked to teen suicides, mainly in South America.

Police in Northern Ireland expressed concerns about the game, saying it is threatening the lives of local children.

“As creepy as she looks, 'Momo' isn't going to crawl out of your child's phone and kill them,” a statement said. “The danger lies with your child feeling pressured to either follow the orders of any app via 'challenges', or peer pressure in chat rooms and the like.”

How does Momo come in contact with children?

Recent reports indicate that Momo is seen through social media platforms including Whatsapp, Facebook and Youtube – even Youtube Kids. Quite often cartoons on Youtube can start out innocently enough but halfway through, the character will appear, frightening and distressing children.

Even though Youtube monitor and remove videos that are inappropriate for children, the rate at which the cartoons are uploaded onto the platform makes it difficult. Often cartoons may be watched thousands of times by children before they get reported and removed.

Also, video apps such as YouTube have an ‘up next’ feature whereby similar videos are automatically uploaded one after another. So your child may be watching an official Peppa Pig video, then a hacked version featuring inappropriate content may follow on automatically. This is how many children have ‘accidentally’ seen the Momo character on Youtube or YouTube Kids.

How do I protect my children online?

According to [National Online Safety](#) in the UK, there are several ways you can help protect your child when they are using apps or devices.

1 Tell them it's not real

Much like any other monster or fictitious character, it's important that your child understands that Momo is not a real person and cannot control them, tell them what to do or harm them. Also, tell your child not to go openly searching for this content online as it is only going to upset them and cause them distress.

2 Be present

While it's not always possible to be with your child 24/7, it's important that you are close to them when they are watching videos or playing with devices so you can monitor what is going on. Also, talk with your child about how they use devices and watch for any signs of behavioural changes.

3 Talk regularly with your child

Have frequent open and honest conversations with your child about screen time and let them know that they can talk with you about anything and everything. Encourage your child to feel confident about having discussions with you about issues and concerns they have related to the online world.

Getty Images

4 Set parental controls on all devices

Set up parental controls for your devices at home to help restrict the types of content that your child can view, as well as help you monitor their activity. On YouTube, turn off the 'suggested auto-play' on videos to stop your child from viewing content they may not have selected.

5 Talk to your child about peer pressure

Trends and challenges can be tempting for kids to take part in regardless of how scary they seem and especially if 'everyone else is doing it.' Talk to your child about how they don't need to bow to peer pressure or do anything they are not comfortable with, either online or offline. If they are unsure, encourage them to talk to you or another trusted adult.

6 Do your research

As a parent it's natural to feel worried for your children's safety, in the online or offline world. However remember not everything you see online is true. Check the validity of the source and be mindful of what you share as it may cause unfounded worries.

7 Report and block

Flag and report any material you deem to be inappropriate or harmful as soon as you come across it. You should also block the account/content to prevent your child from seeing it.

8 Get support if necessary

Speak with educators at your child's school if you have concerns regarding their online activity. If your child sees something distressing it is important they know who to turn to for support and guidance. They can also contact the Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800.

