Better Internet for Kids

Insafe insights on… online challenges

The Insafe network of awareness centres, helplines and youth panels, in partnership with INHOPE (the International Association of Internet Hotlines, dedicated to the removal of illegal online content), operate Safer Internet Centres (SICs) in Member States, Iceland, Norway and Russia in the drive to keep children and young people safe online. Through a range of services, SICs respond to the latest online issues, helping to promote the many opportunities the online world offers, while also addressing the challenges. And while Europe's children and youth are the main benefactors of this work, BIK also reaches out to, and collaborates with, a range of other stakeholders – parents and carers, teachers and educators, researchers, industry, civil society, decision makers and law enforcement.

The "Insafe insights…" series draws on the experience and expertise of the Insafe network to tackle some of the most topical issues encountered in its day-to-day operations. Drawing on statistics and helpline case studies, this document aims to outline the issue and some possible responses, while also pointing to sources of further information and support.

Online challenges… a definition

Since the dawn of time, children and young people have taken part in challenges. Friends or rival groups would encourage each other to take part in contests in order to show that they were not averse to risk or too weak or frightened to take part. Prior to the arrival of the internet, taking part in such challenges was a matter of honour – if you were invited to take part and refused then this would provoke a negative response from peers and most certainly from the group or individual that had presented the challenge in the first place. Online challenges have brought additional dynamics – now the audience is potentially huge, and those taking part are chasing likes and comments. There is an added element that not only do you accept and take part in a challenge, it is videoed and shared on social media platforms. The number of views and likes received is now seen as an important part of the whole process.

We know from scientific research that the pre-frontal cortex of the teenage brain has not fully developed and so they will find it more difficult to think about and manage risk or consider the potential negative consequences of what they are about to do. They will be drawn in by the thrill, the risk and the excitement, often encouraged by peers or their chance of a moment of fame. In boys, this part of the brain has not fully developed until the mid-twenties and in girls the early-twenties, and this means that they will absolutely be attracted to some

of these challenges without giving a great deal of thought as to the potential outcomes and consequences.

There are a number of reasons why online challenges prove to be so attractive to children and young people and some of these are explained in more detail below.

- **To have/provoke fun** – children and young people have always enjoyed watching and taking part in pranks and challenges, since long before the internet emerged. Recent research from Ofcom in the UK found that 45 per cent of three- and four-year olds watch YouTube videos with 40 per cent saying that these are funny videos or pranks.
- **Competition and comparison** – everyone loves competition and the mass audiences which many of these online challenge videos attract means that the element of competition is heightened. Being better than someone else is a powerful driver. Wanting to be more successful than others or, indeed, the best is part of our human nature.
- **Inspiration** – it is important to remember that not all challenges are likely to have negative consequences, and some can help to raise awareness of a particular issue or cause (see below for further information on the different types of challenge). Clearly videos of other people taking part in challenges can act as a stimulus for others to do the same – they set an example.
- **Status** – those taking part in challenges will often report that the more daring or extreme the challenge, the more likely they are to want to take part as this will improve their status online. They are likely to get more visibility and feedback if the challenge is particularly difficult or extreme.
- **Social recognition** – knowing that thousands or millions of people have watched you taking part in a particular challenge is a very powerful driver for some young people. Equally, knowing that many others have watched you doing something and then copied or replicated that themselves is a reason to carry on and perhaps even do something more extreme to increase that social recognition.
- **Followers** – we know that the most popular YouTubers have millions of followers. More followers means not only more attention but more money. As one YouTuber explained, "*if people want to see it then I don't mind doing it*". This is all about the number of followers and how that converts to popularity/notoriety and, of course, money.
- **Attention** – it is human nature that we crave attention. People want to feel part of something and that they have a contribution to make; that others are interested in them. Maslow referred to belonging in his hierarchy of needs. This is a type of attention according to Baumeister and Leary who wrote in 1995 that "*everyone has a strong desire to form and maintain personal attachments*". Prior to the internet these were with people that we knew – now they are with anyone who reacts to what we do online.
- **Clicks** – as mentioned earlier, the number of views often translates into a monetary value, particular for influencers online. One estimate suggests that if a YouTube channel receives 1,000 views, that would be worth around $18 of which 45 per cent is kept by YouTube so this means that a YouTuber would make, on average, around $9.90 per 1,000 views.
- **Pushing your limit** – for example, with online pain challenges, YouTubers will try and see where their limit is. Many openly acknowledge the discomfort that this can cause but the desire for likes, views and comments is powerful and means that individuals will

push boundaries. One YouTuber caused outrage by pretending to carry out an acid attack. He actually threw water at people in the street, but it closely resembled an acid attack. This individual apologised but also said that he would continue to post extreme videos as "*you've got to push boundaries to get the views*".

- **Human nature** – as one YouTuber explained, "*it's funny to watch your friends fall on the floor or throw up*".
- **Social psychological factors** – for example, schadenfreude; taking pleasure in someone else's misfortune is nothing new. For years there have been programmes on mainstream TV which have encouraged viewers to send in clips of themselves, family members or friends slipping over on the ice, kicking a football through a closed window or similar – just basically getting things wrong. People watch these programmes because they think they are funny, despite the fact that, in some cases, people can be hurt.
- **Brain development** – not thinking of consequences until it is too late. We know from the scientific research that the pre-frontal cortex of the teenage brain has not developed to a point where young people will think about risk or consequence – they will do something and then regret it later.

It is important to recognise that online challenges vary hugely and not all are problematic or likely to attract negative consequences. For example, the ice-bucket challenge, which was popular in the summer of 2014, was used as a way of raising awareness of ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, often referred to as motor neurone disease). The challenge (which was also referred to as the ALS ice-bucket challenge) involved an individual having a bucket of ice-cold water thrown over them (or them pouring it on themselves). Once someone has taken the challenge, they nominate someone else to do it within 24 hours – if they do not, then they should donate some money to charity. This particular challenge saw celebrities, politicians and athletes all sharing videos of themselves participating in the challenge and this, in turn, meant that it spread more quickly and more widely. In the UK, 1 in 6 people took part in the challenge and ALS received over $100 million worldwide in donations.

Another relatively harmless example is the mannequin challenge which appeared in 2016. Apparently started by some students at a school in Florida, this challenge requires those taking part to be frozen in action like mannequins while being filmed. Once again, many celebrities and politicians took part in this; some did so in order to raise awareness about particular issues.

Other challenges are more problematic although, as noted earlier, children and young people may not see the potential risks. A good example is the eraser challenge. This is where someone rubs an eraser on their bare skin as hard as they can while reciting the alphabet. Although this initially does not seem too dangerous, it can cause painful burns and scars on the skin and can sometimes cause infection. Another example is the salt and ice challenge, where participants put salt onto their body and then place ice on the salt. This causes pain in the form of a burning sensation and the idea is to video this to see who can tolerate the pain for the longest amount of time.

Sadly, there have been some online challenges which have resulted in serious injury and loss of life. Mr Geert Reynders spoke at the Safer Internet Forum (SIF) in 2018 and shared the harrowing story of his son Tim who died as a result of taking part in a choking challenge that he had seen online (see also the June 2019 edition of the BIK bulletin).

Equally, the BBC created a short video clip which has proved very useful when discussing online challenges with children and young people, as well as parents and teachers. The video shows what happened when three YouTubers, who take part in online pain challenges, came face to face with a mother whose child died as a result of taking part in one of these challenges. It is a powerful and compelling insight into the potential risks but also the motivations for some of the YouTubers who promote them.

Some of the potential risks are outlined below:

- **Bad choice of role models** – unfortunately, some of the YouTubers who carry out these pranks and challenges are not setting a good example, but more vulnerable young people can try and replicate what they are doing, sometimes with disastrous or even fatal consequences. Just as in the offline world, there are some online friends that are not a good influence.
- **Consequences aren't shown** – the BBC video mentioned above looks at the potential aftermath of pain challenges and shows YouTubers admitting that their videos glamorise challenges and don't show the dreadful aftermath of some of the challenges. One speaks about drinking a bottle of vinegar and explains that the following two hours (not shown on the video) were the worst in his life as his body was desperate to get rid of what he had just consumed.
- **Impression that there are no risks** – as mentioned above, the viral videos rarely show the aftermath of a challenge and, for the reasons mentioned earlier (related to brain development), young people will often not think about the potential consequences until it is too late.
- **Not knowing where to draw the line** – often young people are spurred on by their newfound fame. Videos will often attract huge numbers of comments urging them to film another video and take the challenge to a new, more extreme level. Again, the lack of an ability to think about possible consequences is a problem.
- **Health issues** – people have died when challenges such as the choking challenge have gone wrong. Young people talk about the moment of light-headedness and euphoria which can be achieved by breathing again after having temporarily cut off the flow of oxygen to the brain but, of course, this can easily go wrong with fatal consequences. Others show the scars from taking part in the 1000-degree knife challenge where a knife is heated to a very high temperature and then placed onto the skin.
- **Shifting of reality** – for some young people, challenge videos can blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy and they genuinely believe that what they are doing will have no consequence.
- **Social pressure** – exclusion if you don't participate/watch. Peer pressure has always been difficult for some young people; feeling as though you are showing weakness if you don't do what others are doing is a powerful reason to take risks and push boundaries. With the added potential humiliation of a much larger group being aware of your reluctance to take up a challenge thanks to the reach of social media, this can cause some to do things that they would never normally consider. Indeed, some challenges, such as the ice-bucket challenge, would actually feature (at the end of the video) the person doing the challenge nominating others to do it next. Not complying can have consequences within a peer group or online community.
- **Creation of harmful communities** – for all of the reasons mentioned already, online challenges can be toxic and can encourage individuals to normalise risk and take on more and more extreme activities in a quest for recognition or approval.

- **Lack of empathy and respect** – as discussed earlier, there are TV programmes which encourage viewers to laugh at the misfortune of others. Watching the humiliation of someone else should not be seen as entertainment but sadly it is and of course there is a fine line between those two things – entertainment and humiliation – with these particular videos.
- **Promotion of violence** – some online challenges can normalise violence or aggression towards others. A recent headline read "*Russian face-slapping champion becomes YouTube star*" and told the story of slapping championships which are described as a "*display of tolerance for pain designed to enliven weightlifting shows*". Of course, video footage has been uploaded to YouTube with large numbers of comments (not all positive) but the issue is that it has been shared widely and some find it amusing.
- **Breaking laws/violating others' rights** – some online challenges will encourage others to break the law and potentially put other innocent members of the public at risk. The Bird-Box challenge, for example, encouraged people to carry out a range of different activities while blindfolded – including driving a car. The potential for fatal consequences is clear.
- **Loss of values** – there is a concern that people are becoming desensitised to things that they see online. Harmful content becomes commonplace and does not provoke the same reaction as it would if it was seen in real-time in a face-to-face situation.
- **Personal data/imagery** – the internet does not forget. We all make mistakes, but the internet means that, in some cases, it is impossible to forget a bad decision. Viral videos survive and attract new armies of viewers and followers and, while there can be serious consequences for YouTubers who overstep the mark and do something so outrageous that it provokes a negative reaction, in many cases even the negative attention can be seen as positive. It could be argued that it doesn't matter why people are looking at a video, even if they find it shocking and are appalled by it – a view is a view and contributes to the income that can be generated.

Experiences from the Insafe network

Given the nature of the work that Safer Internet Centres do, it is understandable that they are often the first to hear about online challenges, whether from a distressed parent or teacher or, indeed, from children and young people themselves. There is a dilemma here about whether a particular challenge is a trend, something which is likely to go viral, or perhaps simply a one-off. Inappropriate content is addressed at every Insafe Training meeting and, in recent years, there have been discussions about children and young people being exposed to inappropriate online challenges which, in some cases, had led to young people self-harming or committing suicide. One was known as the Blue Whale challenge and was an issue which needed to be addressed quickly. Despite being a hoax, it was clear that young people were harming themselves as a result, and authorities faced the dilemma of when to alert people to the issue: do it too soon and you could be accused of scare-mongering; too late and you're not doing your job. Discussions about this type of thing at a network level mean that a consistent approach can be applied and this was seen more recently with concerns over the Momo challenge. Helplines, awareness centres and social media providers met quickly following press coverage in Austria and the UK to devise a strategy for working with the media to provide useful information around the issue. This multi-stakeholder approach is beneficial to all involved and means that Safer Internet Centres are able to provide accurate, timely and reliable information to those who need it. There are well

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established and trusted channels of communication between the network and various social media providers, and the Insafe Coordinator is always seeking opportunities to further develop and extend this network.

Data which is collected from Insafe helplines shows that there has recently (in the first quarter of 2019) been a rise in the number of reports about the Momo challenge. Further statistics can be found at www.betterinternetforkids.eu/helpline-statistics.

In February 2019, the South West Grid for Learning, a partner in the UK Safer Internet Centre commissioned some research in the immediate aftermath of the Momo challenge. *Digital Ghost Stories; Impact, Risks and Reasons* looked in detail at the impact that some of the irresponsible press coverage had. Clearly one negative outcome was the number of searches in schools for the term *Momo* went up dramatically as a result of the media hype surrounding it. The study contains some useful thoughts around how to address these online hoaxes.

Insafe helpline case studies

Helplines receive contacts from parents who are worried about their children getting involved in online challenges, as well as from some young people themselves. it is clear that such challenges and hoaxes can cause significant distress as can be seen from the following examples.

A 12-year-old girl contacted the Slovenian helpline and explained that she was interested in the Blue Whale challenge and wanted to be able to participate in this. The helpline counsellor spoke to the girl and tried to determine why she found the challenge so appealing and why she wanted to self-harm. A discussion took place to outline the dangers and to provide more information about the challenge, which is actually a hoax. The girl was reassured following the discussion and told the counsellor that she would not get involved in this.

Very often it is parents, carers and teachers who get in touch with concerns about these online challenges and a father contacted the Bulgarian helpline and explained that his daughter had fears and obsessions around the Blue Whale challenge. The girl had been very anxious and concerned about the challenge for some time; her parents had tried to reassure her and explained that the challenge was not real and was a hoax. Despite this, the girl was really finding it difficult to sleep at night and was regularly only getting between three and four hours. Following a lengthy discussion, it became clear that the girl had worries related to death, self-harm and knives, as well as some obsessions about specific rituals. Some of these fears existed before she became aware of the Blue Whale challenge. The helpline counsellor discussed the possibility of the girl visiting a psychologist; however, the father explained that they had already tried this, but it was not effective largely due to the fact that the psychologist was unfamiliar with the Blue Whale challenge. The helpline counsellor explained that it was not so important that the psychologist understood everything about the Blue Whale challenge but, rather, that they would be able to talk about the emotional concerns and stress that the girl was experiencing. Equally the helpline was very happy to speak to the psychologist and provide information about the Blue Whale challenge.

The case above is a good example of how sometimes a lack of understanding can sometimes inadvertently create a barrier to effective support and guidance. Ultimately a lot of online safety issues are about behaviour as opposed to the technology itself and, as the Bulgarian helpline demonstrated, information can easily be provided about a particular app or challenge; tackling the behaviour is the most important aspect of the recovery.

The Insafe network has agreed that when a new challenge emerges, and particularly when there is extensive (and often inaccurate) media coverage around this, the best approach is for dialogue and discussion. Young people need to feel that they can talk to someone about any concerns that they have and for these to be addressed in a sensitive and professional manner.

The suggestions below may be useful for parents/carers and educators when trying to address these issues with children and young people.

- Open up the conversation – adults should recognise that, in the main, this is about having fun and many of the challenge videos are harmless. However, there is a line and parents and teachers should try to engage their children and pupils in a dialogue which will help them to distinguish between the different types of challenge.
- Do it together with your child – parents can watch videos with their children and try to empathise and see what all of the fuss is about. The Chief Medical Officer in the UK recently told parents that they should be aware of what their children are doing when they go online but not be too intrusive or judgmental. Parents needs to show that they are interested in why their children like particular content online.
- Parents and teachers do need to talk about potential consequences and ensure that children are well informed.
- It is important to make time for this type of discussion and ensure that the appropriate time and the place is found to start the conversation.
- Parents and teachers should make it clear that they are available for further questions or conversations, ideally without prejudices or punishments. Of course, there needs to be consequences if children and young people have got something wrong or messed up – but these need to be proportionate and adults should understand that an overreaction can be potentially damaging to future relationships.

Insafe resources

Safer Internet Centres have developed various educational resources and awareness-raising videos aimed at helping teachers, parents and carers, and children and young people, to discover the online world safely. A selection of resources touching on issues relating to online challenges are detailed below:

- Latvian Safer Internet Centre: Six tips to protect your children from the Blue Whale – this informative leaflet provides teachers and parents with information on the existence of the Blue Whale challenge, also explaining the speculation and buzz created by it on social media. The leaflet presents advice for parents and teachers on actions needed if they notice that children are trying to get involved in the game, such as discussing it among peer groups or searching for violent content related to this so-called game.

- UK Safer Internet Centre: Online challenges advice for parents – some conversation starters to help parents and carers to start a discussion with their families about their time online.

- UK Safer Internet Centre: Online challenges and peer pressure – this resource offers advice for parents and carers to help start a conversation with young people about the risks associated with online challenges and, especially, peer pressure to participate.

- UK Safer Internet Centre: Advice for schools on responding to online challenges – eight tips for schools on how to respond to viral challenges and crazes in school.

Many more resources are available from the full resource and video galleries on the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) portal, in a variety of languages, covering a whole range of online safety issues.

Further information and advice

For further information and advice, please contact your national Safer Internet Centre – check the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) portal for contact information.

To keep up to date with safer and better internet issues more generally, visit the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) portal, subscribe to the quarterly electronic BIK bulletin, or check out the Insafe Facebook and Twitter profiles.