

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

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Games I write about the intersection between technology and family life.

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.

## 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

Momo Challenge image shared on Twitter  
Credit: Midori Hayashi, a Japanese Doll  
Artist

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 Facebook 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".