

## DDSCP Briefing Note: Harmful Online Challenges and Hoaxes

Reports about online challenges and hoaxes/scares are becoming more and more frequent. How practitioners and anyone working with children respond is vital to de-escalating and managing these situations.

### What are online challenges and hoaxes?

Online challenges generally involve users recording themselves taking a challenge, and then distributing the video through social media channels, inspiring or daring others to repeat the challenge. A hoax is a deliberate lie designed to seem truthful.

### Key considerations for all agencies working with children and their families

The agency's Safeguarding or Child Protection Lead should be involved in any pre-planning and decision making around any challenge or hoax. In most cases the Safeguarding or Child Protection Lead is likely to be best placed to lead.

#### 1. Don't panic!

Online challenges and hoaxes can create considerable panic creating pressures to take immediate action. In all cases it is important to take a step back and undertake a case-by-case risk assessment:

- Consider the scale and nature of the possible risk to children and young people.
- Seek support and check the factual basis of any harmful online challenge or online hoax. You can do this via the UK Safer Internet Centre [Professional Online Safety Helpline](https://www.saferinternet.org.uk) telephone 0344 381 4772 or [helpline@saferinternet.org.uk](mailto:helpline@saferinternet.org.uk)

Having an agreed agency plan in place for responding to online challenges and online hoaxes can be really helpful as they support a more measured and effective approach to any concerns when they arise. Plans can be outlined within online safety policies and include letting staff know about who to go to if they have concerns about an online challenge or hoax. Agencies should also consider letting children and young people, parents, carers and staff know in advance, about what they are likely to do when a harmful online challenge or online hoax begins to circulate.

#### 2. Don't name it

Naming an online hoax or challenge and providing direct warnings is generally not helpful and can potentially be harmful by drawing attention to something from which you want to protect children. General online safety messages, including privacy settings, how to block and reporting routes, are much more helpful. It is also important to let children and young people know that if they ever feel worried or concerned about something they see online - or hear about from friends – where they can get help. If a hoax or challenge is related to a specific issue, relevant support services, such as those supporting children's well-being, could be highlighted.

If you believe it is necessary to directly address an issue, make sure you do so on a need to know basis and without exposing children and young people to scary or distressing content. Whatever the response, ask it:

- factual?

- proportional to the actual (or perceived) risk?
- helpful?
- age and stage of development appropriate?
- supportive?

### 3. Supporting and protecting children and young people

All agencies and staff should:

- ✓ Provide safe spaces for children and young people to talk about their online life and to ask questions and share concerns about what they experience online or elsewhere.
- ✓ Ensure there are well promoted, easily understood and easily accessible systems in place for children and young people to confidently report any worries, concerns or abuse.
- ✓ Consider how best they can support children and young people to learn about online safety, in a way that is appropriate for their age and stage of development.
- ✓ Ensure they have appropriate online filters and monitoring systems in place.
- ✓ Share helpful online safety messages with parents and carers, including practical advice about talking to children about their online lives, responsible use, enabling privacy settings, setting parental controls, blocking, reporting and support services.
- ✓ Consider if a child or young person needs additional support, including via an early help assessment and where there are child protection concerns, a referral to children's social care.
- ✓ Follow agency safeguarding/child protection policies and refer to the DDSCP multi-agency safeguarding children [procedures](#).

### 4. Alert relevant authorities

Following advice from the UK Safer Internet Centre [Professional Online Safety Helpline](#) about your concern or evidence an online challenge or hoax has the potential to harm children and young people, key local agencies must be informed. The [DDSCP Safeguarding Children Procedures](#) include a list of all [local contact details](#).

### 5. Helpful resources

- [Harmful online challenges and online hoaxes guidance](#) (DfE) to help settings prepare for and deal with any harmful online challenge or online hoax which might be circulating between children and young people.
- [Advice for schools on responding to online challenges](#) (UK Safer Internet Centre)
- [De-escalating and responding to harmful online challenges](#) (UK Safer Internet Centre)
- [Video - Responding to Online Challenges - Advice from the Professionals Online Safety Helpline \(POSH\)](#) (UK Safer Internet Centre)
- [Parents – scare or prepare?](#) (LGfL) – blog with links to 'scary online challenges' poster and video for professionals
- [Think before you scare](#) (The Education People)
- [There's a viral scare online. What should I do?](#) (ThinkuKnow) - advice for parents and carers
- [Exploring critical thinking online](#) (UK Safer Internet Centre)
- [Education for a Connected World](#) (UK Safer Internet Centre) describes the digital knowledge and skills that children and young people should have the opportunity to develop at different ages and stages of their lives.
- [Project Evolve](#) – resources, activities and professional development materials supporting the Education for a Connected World framework