



# PENNSYLVANIA STATE POLICE

## COMMUNITY AWARENESS BULLETIN

CAB 003-2019

March 1, 2019

### **“THE MOMO CHALLENGE” AND YOUTUBE VIDEOS**

The Pennsylvania State Police has been made aware of reports of videos intended for children in which images of a character known as “Momo” have been inserted, as well as encounters with Momo over social media platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook. However, while there have been numerous reports of such encounters in the press and on social media, there has been almost no direct evidence that such a challenge exists, no verified reports of children harming themselves or anyone else following the demands of the challenge, and therefore, it seems likely that the Momo Challenge is less of a threat and more of a phenomenon that has simply taken on a life of its own.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of the Momo Challenge, an image of a woman with distorted features allegedly instructs viewers to commit acts of violence against others and ultimately, acts of self-harm under threat of a “curse” or that Momo will injure them. The challenge apparently started in Latin America in 2018 and spread to the United States via Facebook, but it has never been established who is behind it or what his or her intent was. In February 2019, new warnings about the challenge made the rounds through social media. In a CBS News story, one mother claimed that her daughter, who is on the autism spectrum, began to display unusual behavior and ask unusual things. The girl turned on a gas stove without letting it light, which created a potentially explosive situation. The girl later revealed that she was encouraged by the character to do dangerous things.<sup>2</sup> These claims have not been verified.

Additionally, there are credible reports of videos on YouTube Kids, a platform designed to be safe for children, that have content that may be inappropriate for minors. This content includes self-harm, suicide, sexual abuse, human trafficking, and gun violence.

In the last few years, social media challenges and pranks have emerged that encourage Internet users to replicate viral trends via livestreaming or by the posting of results online. While some social media challenges have promoted charitable giving or educational awareness, a variety of challenges and pranks have also inspired users to participate in activities that can result in serious injuries or death. Adolescents are often the most vulnerable to partake in dangerous online games in order to seek the approval of friends, associates, and general Internet users from around the world. Individuals who participate in unsafe challenges or pranks often fail to measure risk appropriately and focus on the recognition and attention obtained from completing each challenge successfully. Posting the video or photo on social media platforms, such as Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook, often encourages additional individuals to take part in the activities.<sup>3</sup>

### **Keeping Children Safe Online**

The Pennsylvania State Police recommends the following tips to help keep children safe online:<sup>4</sup>

- Use the parental controls available through your Internet service provider, device, and apps to minimize the risk of your children’s access to inappropriate content. Parental controls and filtering software are not perfect, so your presence while your children are using the Internet is still necessary.
- Bookmark favorite sites so your children can find them easily and directly.
- Start a conversation around appropriate online behavior, including what to do if your children find content that is frightening or that makes them feel uncomfortable. Make sure they know who they can talk to if they encounter a situation they do not know how to handle.



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- Ensure your children know not to share personal information of any kind with anyone. The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) restricts what a commercial website can collect and requires a parent's consent, but that does not mean that an individual cannot ask personal questions.
- Make sure your children (and you) know that clicking on random links or downloading unfamiliar or unexpected attachments is how malware is spread.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lorenz, T. (2019, February 28). "Momo is not trying to kill children". *The Atlantic*. Retrieved on 02/28/2019 from <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/02/momo-challenge-hoax/583825/>.

<sup>2</sup> Staff. (2019, February 28). "Momo challenge" nearly deadly for family, California mother says. *CBS News*. Retrieved 02/28/2019 from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/momo-challenge-nearly-deadly-for-family-california-mother-says/>.

<sup>3</sup> Whigham, N. (2017, July 16). The advent of social media has brought a new dynamic to those trying to navigate the challenge of adolescence. *News.com.au*. Retrieved on 03/01/2019 from <http://www.news.com.au/technology/online/social/the-adolescent-brain-and-the-dark-side-of-social-media-challenges/news-story/147b76986b97f4568d8b6a590b4cabc5>.

<sup>4</sup> Ben-Joseph, E. (2018, April). "Internet safety". *KidsHealth.org*. Retrieved on 03/01/2019 from <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/net-safety.html?WT.ac=ctg>.

<sup>5</sup> Federal Trade Commission (2015, November). "Malware". *Consumer Information*. Retrieved on 03/01/2019 from <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0011-malware#avoid>.