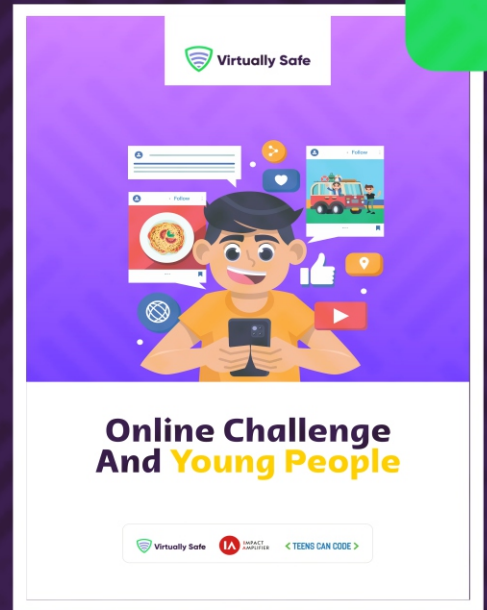




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# Online Challenge And *Young People*



Throughout history, children and adolescents have engaged in various challenges. Whether it was among friends or competing groups, there was always encouragement to participate in contests to demonstrate bravery, resilience and a willingness to face risks.

Challenges on social media have gained much momentum over the past several years endearing both adults and young people to partake in it.

Eventually, it is becoming a pop culture for young people. They see a lot of people wearing/doing/saying something and they want to do it. This is often as a result of peer pressure and fear of missing out (Fomo).

Some of these "challenges" can be silly and harmless while some are outright dangerous and can lead to physical injury, harm and even death.

There have been instances where

online challenges have led to severe harm and even death. During the Safer Internet Forum (SIF) in 2018, Mr. Geert Reynders recounted a distressing account of his son Tim's tragic death caused by his participation in an internet-based "choking challenge" he had come across.

Let me take you through some very popular "challenges" that really shook the internet. Some young people watch these challenges just for fun and entertainment while others do so long enough to score and recreate them, which is why it is a big concern for parents.

Let's see a couple of social media challenges that have swept through the internet recently. Of course, some of them are not as harmful as the others.

## Fainting challenge

The fainting or Pass-Out Challenge involves kids

attempting to achieve a high or induce fainting by choking each other, applying pressure to their chests, or hyperventilating. Of course, this activity is extremely dangerous and has led to the death of many.

## Tide Pod challenge

The Tide Pod Challenge requires biting into a laundry detergent pod, which is clearly a risky thing to do. Despite the obvious risks, some kids engage in this act and share videos of the consequences online. Since the outer coating of the pods is designed to dissolve, their contents are rapidly released into the mouth, leading to chemical burns as well as potential kidney and lung problems for the victim.

## Momo challenge

The Momo Challenge was a social media phenomenon that gained attention but was largely discredited. It revolved around a disturbing image of a statue

portraying a half-bird, half-girl, purportedly urging children to harm themselves. While this challenge is quite old, it resurfaces periodically.

### **The Bottle-Flipping Challenge:**

In this challenge, someone will partially fill a plastic water bottle and attempt to toss it in a manner that allows it to land upright. This challenge gained immense popularity, to the extent that apps were developed to recreate the experience digitally. People enjoy the thrill and satisfaction of successfully flipping the bottle and achieving the desired landing position. It became a widespread trend, with individuals of various ages and backgrounds attempting and sharing their bottle-flipping exploits. It is one of the safest and easy to perform. Up until today, people still engage in the challenge.

### **The Blue Whale Challenge:**

This is an alarming challenge that worries parents. Spanning across 50 days, an anonymous "administrator" assigns self-harm tasks to participants, such as cutting, with the ultimate goal being to commit suicide on the 50th day. The greatest worry revolves around vulnerable teenagers who may be prone to trends and influenced by media related to suicide. Even if the challenge initially started as an isolated incident or a hoax, there is a genuine fear that it could manifest into a real and dangerous phenomenon.

### **The Hot-Pepper Challenge:**

By its name, you can tell what this challenge is about. It typically is about consuming extremely spicy peppers, such as habaneros or ghost peppers, while recording oneself enduring the intense heat and attempting to cushion the burning sensation by drinking milk. While many individuals manage to complete this challenge without serious consequences, there have been situations where people have required medical attention and ended up in the hospital due to the extreme effects of the peppers.

### **Doodle Challenge:**

The Doodle Challenge involves drawing or doodling on a sheet of paper attached to a person's back, and then having that person recreate the drawing on a sheet in front of them. The person drawing on the front sheet relies solely on the hand movements and gestures of the individual drawing on their back. Although it may seem confusing when described, participating in this challenge can be a fascinating experience.

### **Don't Rush Challenge:**

This social media trend gained immense popularity due to its combination of creativity and entertainment. Participants would briefly cover their camera with a brush after revealing their natural, non-makeup appearance while wearing casual attire such as pajamas or robes. Then, upon removing the brush, they would showcase a fully made-up or glamorous look with stylish outfits. The challenge







involved virtually passing the brush to another person.

This challenge got a huge response from the audience. Following the "pass the brush challenge," numerous similar challenges emerged on social media, inspired by its concept, such as the "pass the phone challenge" and the "pass the pocha challenge." Notable celebrities like Storm Reid, Skai Jackson, Riele Downs, Marsai Martin, Eris Baker, Shahadi Wright Joseph, Lexi Underwood, Kyla Drew Simmons, Prajakta Koli and others participated in this challenge on social media.

### **The Don't Leave Me Challenge**

This challenge is about sharing a terrible joke or a pun and then quickly running away from the camera shouting "Don't Leave Me." This challenge focused on how corny an individual's joke could be. It became a highly amusing social media trend that was enjoyed by many people.

Even renowned celebrities such as Grammy award-winning rapper Tyga, Nigerian rapper and actor Falz The Bahdguy, Nollywood actress Funke Akindele, Nollywood actor Kanayo O. Kanayo, popular Nigerian female DJ and Apple Music radio host Florence Otedola (also known as DJ Cuppy), Bollywood actress and dancer Nora Fatehi and a lot of others participated in this challenge on social media, showcasing their humorous side.

As mentioned earlier, some of these challenges may not be bad on their own but that's still not a reason to encourage young people to participate in them. The reason is simple. Young people often do not know when and where to draw the line. They may start off participating in the safe ones but before you know it, they may be eating a full plate of pepper paste or choking themselves in the name of a social media challenge.

## How did we get here? You may ask.

**B**efore the internet era, participating in such challenges held a sense of honor; refusing an invitation would result in negative reactions from peers and the group or individual who issued the challenge. The introduction of online challenges has added new dynamics to the mix. Now, the potential audience is vast, and participants strive for likes and comments. In addition to accepting and engaging in a challenge, it is also expected to be recorded and shared on social media platforms. The number of views and likes has become a crucial aspect of the entire process.

Scientific research has established that the teenage brain, specifically the pre-frontal cortex, isn't fully developed. This incomplete development contributes to a reduced ability among young individuals to assess and manage risks effectively or consider the potential negative consequences of their actions. They are often enticed by the excitement, thrill and risk involved, often encouraged by peers or the prospect of gaining temporary fame. In males, the pre-frontal cortex reaches maturity around the mid-twenties, while in females, it matures in the early twenties. Consequently, young people

are inclined to be attracted to these challenges without thoroughly thinking of the potential outcomes and repercussions.

*There are several reasons online challenges hold significant appeal for children and adolescents.*

*Let's analysis some of those reasons:*

### **For fun**

Adolescents and kids have enjoyed watching or participating in pranks and challenges, long before this digital era. It has not changed, it only got upgraded.

### **Competitive Nature**

Children are naturally competitive in nature. That's why they will always strive to do something to gain the attention and praise of their parents. At every chance they get, they want to outshine their siblings or classmates. Same thing applies online, only that this time, they want applause and likes from strangers.

### **Motivation or Inspiration**

This is a crucial factor to consider, as not all challenges are expected to yield negative outcomes. Some challenges can actually generate awareness for specific issues or events as in the case of "Halleluya challenge" in Nigeria. Watching videos of individuals participating in challenges can serve as a catalyst for others to follow suit, as they provide a role model or inspiration.

### **Social recognition**

Everyone enjoys attention. We

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like it when thousands or millions of people watch us participate in a particular challenge, how much more young people? Attention is a very powerful motivation for some young people. Also, the fact that you have some people view your video content is enough inspiration to do more and maybe even go extreme to increase that social recognition.

### **Followers**

Social media is a game of numbers. Of course, a lot of celebrity YouTubers have millions of followers. The number of followers you command will determine the level of attention you'll have and of course, how much you get paid by the platform. A YouTuber once said,

"if people want to see it then I don't mind doing it". This statement right here is a trap. It means that you are ready to do just anything to gain the attention of the crowd. Clearly, it's a numbers game and many people go to any extent to win the game. This is certainly not a ground that you want your naive and highly impressionable teenagers to play on.

### **Pushing the boundaries**

Challenges like the pain challenges, YouTubers had people literally inflicting pain on themselves to see where their limit is. Some participants confessed the discomfort and danger attached to such yet, their desire for likes, views and comments is powerful enough to make them do it regardless. One YouTuber caused commotion by pretending to spray acid on people whereas it was water that he was actually spraying them with. This guy apologised, yet still said that he won't stop posting extreme videos as "you've got to push boundaries to get the views" according to him.

If this is not crazy, then tell me what it is.

### **Impression that there are no risks**

Since most trending videos don't show the aftermath of a challenge, it will be hard to tell what it looks like or its implications. Again, as mentioned earlier, teenagers and children rarely think of implication until it is already late. If the after effects of such actions are filmed and shown online, maybe we'll



have less people trying it. After effects like severe pain, damage of organs or other parts of the body, infection, hospitalization, and death will be a life lesson to anyone trying to participate in a deadly online challenge.

### Peer Pressure

The influence of social pressure is a significant factor, particularly when it comes to the fear of exclusion if one does not participate or watch certain activities. Peer pressure has always been challenging for many young individuals, as one is seen as weak if they are not able to do what others are doing. This motivation to take risks and push boundaries is intensified by the potential humiliation of a much larger audience being aware of one's reluctance to engage in a challenge, thanks to the extensive reach of social media. As a result, some individuals may find themselves doing things they would never have considered under normal circumstances. For instance, certain challenges, like the ice-bucket challenge, often included the person doing the challenge nominating others to participate in it next and failing to

comply could lead to consequences within their peer group or online community.

Have you seen why it is next to impossible for some teenagers to not be at the forefront of social media challenges?

### *How do I respond to this phenomenon as a parent?*

#### **Understand their state of mind.**

As a parent, you should always remember that our young people hardly think of consequences until it is almost too late. They lack what it takes to properly process thoughts. For some reasons children and young people may not see the potential risks. In fact, research has shown that the pre-frontal cortex of the teenage brain has not developed to a point where they will think of pros and cons. This is why they always regret their actions after they have done it and landed themselves in trouble.

**Have Conversations about it with them.**

Don't assume they will figure out the right thing. Talk to them about it. The reason is that you are not always with them and anything can go wrong in a split second while you're away. As a parent, you can learn more about social media by asking your teenager questions about their online experiences, like, "Have you come across anything on Instagram that has recently troubled you?"

You can share your concerns and reservations about social media challenges. Also ask them of their thoughts and perspectives so that you'll know the state of their mind. Such open conversation can improve your teenager's mental health, decision making and social skills.

Also, research results have revealed that watching media content with your teens and discussing issues that come up can help with their brain development and critical thinking. It can also help to resolve questions because now they have the chance to ask questions about their gray areas.



Talk about the issues of "likes" and "comments"

Discussing the reasons behind teenagers' involvement in certain behaviors or their curiosity about risky activities can be beneficial. By having conversations about the joy of getting "likes" and comments online, parents can assist teens in recognizing similar rewarding experiences in offline settings. For instance, participating in school sports teams or joining extracurricular clubs can offer opportunities for building social identity, fostering self-esteem, and establishing meaningful connections with others. Research indicates that engagement in sports can be a valuable avenue for achieving these positive outcomes.

### **Be empathetic.**

Try to put yourself in their shoes. Being an adolescent comes with a lot of pressure. Most social media personalities and influencers are their peers. So, watching them on YouTube doing a challenge could

influence them greatly.

### **Help them to wear their thinking cap.**

Let's face it, teens sometimes behave in such a way that makes us think "are they really thinking"?. Truth is sometimes they are not. So, you need to help them process their thoughts well, putting all the factors on the table. Help them to know what questions to ask themselves about each challenge to know if it's safe or not. For instance, questions like:

**What's the origin of this challenge?**

**What's the benefit of this challenge?**

**What use is the benefit of this challenge?**

**What's the health implications of this challenge?**

**Why should I participate in this challenge?**

**Will I be proud to pull out this video in the near future?**

**Does this challenge support or kick against my values, dignity**

**and belief? Etc.**

Honestly answering these and many more questions could help them to think straight.

To make it safer, take a step further. Instruct them to always get your consent before they partake in any challenge. This way you can be sure of nipping any potential emergency at the bud.

### **Let them know how it affects others.**

We should teach our teenagers to be empathetic and avoid laughing at other people's misfortunes or experiences.

Absence of empathy and regard is evident when certain TV shows promote laughter at the expense of others' misfortunes. It is sad that witnessing someone's humiliation has become a form of entertainment, although it is important to acknowledge the delicate distinction between amusement and humiliation in these specific videos. You should discourage them from



**"Are they really thinking"?. Truth is sometimes they are not. So, you need to help them process their thoughts well.**



participating in such. One way to achieve this is by encouraging them to ask self reflection questions like "if I had this same experience and someone laughs at me, will I like it?"

### Model the right habits.

It is unfortunate that some parents record their kids partaking in online challenges. Some even go as far as participating themselves. As a parent, you have to ensure that your actions are seeding the message you intend. Today's challenge may not be harmful, but

tomorrow it might be and many young people don't always know when and how to draw the line.

### Have a family media plan

A family media plan is a set of guidelines and agreements that a family establishes to manage and regulate the use of media devices, including smartphones, tablets, computers, television and social media platforms. It aims to promote healthy and balanced media habits within the family while addressing concerns such as excessive screen time,

inappropriate content, and lack of face-to-face interaction.

This is a highly recommended step to take in protecting your teen from harmful social media activities like "challenge".

This plan will help you and your teen decide screen-free times, media curfews and right media habits. It will also assist your teens to form friendships, stay connected with relations and reduce anxiety that comes with unguarded social media usage.

## Here is a guide for creating your family social media plan.

**1. Encourage good media habits:** Discuss and agree upon guidelines for choosing positive and beneficial media content. Encourage your teen to prioritize educational or informative materials, and discourage excessive use of entertainment-focused or potentially harmful content.

**2. Embrace social media for positive purposes:** Recognize the potential benefits of social media for your teen. Encourage them to use it as a tool for building and maintaining friendships, staying connected with distant

loved ones and accessing resources for physical and mental health support. Help them identify trustworthy sources and platforms that promote well-being.

**3. Set screen-free times:** Establish specific periods during the day or week when the entire family agrees to refrain from using screens. This can include meal times, family activities, or designated quiet times.

**4. Implement media curfews:** Determine appropriate time limits for media usage, especially

during evenings and before bedtime. Encourage your teen to engage in other activities such as reading, hobbies, or physical exercise during these times.

Despite the dangers attached to most social media challenges, teenagers still find them fun and exciting. The fact that almost an average teenager has a phone/ipad or laptop with which they can access the internet and be on almost all the social media platforms including Facebook, IG, Tiktok, Snapchat,

YouTube etc, makes it harder to control their participation in these stunts. However, by adequately following the above principles, you can save your little ones from the craze of "Challenge" going on on the streets of social media.





