

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
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the Momo Challenge

axis

Momo Is A No No

The Momo Challenge has recently dominated headlines not once, but twice—first because it was supposedly linked to a 12-year-old's suicide in Buenos Aires, then more recently because it allegedly began popping up in children's videos online. But the second time, it became more complicated: Was it an actual challenge scaring children into harming themselves and others? Or was it made up in order to increase page views and interactions on social media?

This confusion only added to the chaos, with concerned parents unsure who to believe or what to do. On the one hand, if it isn't fabricated, then they want to talk to their kids about it ASAP, as well as take measures to ensure they never fall prey to it. But on the other hand, if it is indeed false, then they don't want to needlessly scare their kids or add to the pandemonium.

This Guide seeks to wade through all the information currently available to help you make sense of the whole debacle and offers practical ways to address it with your children and teenagers.

— What is it exactly?

It's an online challenge that targets teens, tweens, and even younger children (via [snippets in YouTube Kids videos](#)) and encourages them to contact an unknown person called Momo ([represented by](#) a woman with a gaunt face, bulging eyes, and creepy smile) via WhatsApp or Facebook primarily (though any other platform with messaging capabilities can also be used). The account then sends them violent/graphic images and texts, telling them to engage in various "challenges, which start out small and strange, then escalate to harming themselves and others, possibly culminating in the final challenge of committing suicide.

In order to prove that they're actually participating, kids are supposed to send photographic or video evidence of themselves completing tasks. And if they ever try to stop, the account threatens to expose them and/or harm them and their loved ones.

However, in instances of Momo showing up on kids' YouTube videos, rather than telling them to contact an unknown number or account, the face simply appears and makes a threat. Some have even reported [a song](#) (sung by young child with Momo as the image) making the rounds, though it's unclear whether it actually appeared first in kids' videos or someone made it after the hype begun.

— Threatening to harm them. Isn't that extortion?

Yup. Threatening someone in order to get them to do something is the very definition of extortion. But because the person(s) behind it are unknown and because participants are supposed to keep quiet, the chances of anyone getting in trouble for it are slim to none.

— Where'd it come from?

Like many urban legends, it's hard to track exactly how the whole thing started. But [according to Know Your Meme](#), the image (which is actually a photo of [a statue called "Mother Bird"](#) created by artist Keisuka Aisawa for a special effects company) first appeared on Instagram in August 2016. The images "subsequently became an urban legend on the Spanish-speaking web and was associated with 'a phone number that could be added to WhatsApp.'"

From there, the image first appeared on the subreddit [r/creepy](#) on July 10, 2018, then on July 11 YouTuber ReignBot uploaded a video called "[Exploring the Momo Situation](#)." A few days later, on July 25, 2018, [The Buenos Aires Times reported](#) that a 12-year-old's suicide was linked to "the so-called Momo game," which [Fox News reported on](#) on August 2, 2018, referring to it as the "Momo suicide challenge." Finally, it reappeared in February 2019 when people, mainly in the UK, [began reporting](#) strange behavior in their young kids, saying that they'd stumbled across Momo in children's YouTube videos. From there, it went viral because of a flurry of media coverage and school warnings.

However, no one knows for sure who's behind it, why it was started, who's perpetuating it, or where the name "Momo" came from. It's quite possible that copycats are simply seizing an opportunity, rather than just one person (or group of persons) continuing to create more and more accounts and/or videos.

It's worth knowing that Momo is part of what's called "[creepypasta](#)," or "short horror fictions and urban legends mainly distributed through word of mouth via online message boards or e-mail." (Chain letter emails were the first way such stories were spread online.) [Slender Man](#) is possibly the most famous instance of this.

— I thought it was a hoax?

It's possible that it started out as a hoax, prank, or joke. Many reputable sources like [The Guardian](#), [The Atlantic](#), [Snopes](#), and [The Washington Post](#) have written articles calling it a hoax and warning that spreading the hype around it can have just as damaging of effects on kids as if they actually participated in the challenge. It's also extremely hard to find stories or screenshots from someone who has actually interacted with a Momo account on any platform, which seems odd considering how widespread it supposedly is.

But there are actual parents who recount stories of how their children were influenced by Momo, like [this mom](#) whose daughter came across Momo on YouTube or like [this Facebook post](#) or [this one](#) from parents detailing their kids' reactions when they asked if they had heard of Momo (not to mention the countless comments on YouTube videos from parents saying their kids knew about it or had done things because of it). In addition, if participants are threatened with harm if they tell anyone about it, that could make screenshots harder to find.

A third scenario is probably most likely. [BuzzFeed News describes it](#) this way: "It's also

possible that media coverage has helped amplify the Momo Challenge into existence, creating a vicious cycle that encouraged people to post more Momo videos, sparked panic, and even caused police departments to issue warnings both about the challenge itself and the media's promotion of it."

So even if it was a hoax, and even if the challenge was invented by, say, a website or an influencer to drum up page views or likes, it has now taken on a life of its own. Regardless, ***the fear that kids and parents feel because of it is real.*** Any threats, videos, or posts connected to the Momo image, regardless of where they come from, are scary and alarming and possibly powerful. One dad we spoke to said his 6- and 8-year-old children came home from school talking incessantly about Momo. Luckily, he had heard of it so he was prepared to talk about it with them, but when he asked them where they heard of it from, they said their friends (not the school).

So ignoring it or hoping that it's not true doesn't actually help. Yes, we definitely shouldn't share articles or videos that are fear-mongering, click-baity, or sensationalist because that only feeds the fire. But we *should* calmly and rationally talk with our kids about it, as well as make sure other parents and caring adults are aware of it and on the lookout for it. More on this in a bit.

—— So are my kids at risk?

If they have access to the Internet, yes. Even if they're young, if they watch YouTube/YouTube Kids, Momo or other harmful or scary images [could appear suddenly](#) and without warning—and there are [documented cases](#) of this happening long before Momo. It's a problem that [YouTube has been slow](#) to remedy, so parents have started campaigns like [#YouTubeWakeUp](#) to raise awareness. (Check out [this excellent TED Talk](#) to learn more about the weird content available on YouTube Kids.) In addition, if your kids have access to social media or video games or anything with messaging capabilities, it's possible that an unknown person could try to contact them and coerce them into doing harmful things—and it doesn't matter if the original Momo account or someone else entirely is behind it.

In addition, even if you don't allow your kids access to the Internet yet, it's quite possible that they could see it on a friend's device or overhear their friends talking about it. Whether we like it or not, Momo and its resulting fear have become a cultural phenomenon that has far-reaching effects.

—— What platforms are at risk?

The main platforms that have been reported thus far are **Facebook**, **WhatsApp**, and **YouTube**, though browsing through comments on YouTube videos or social media posts about it shows people reporting finding it on Fortnite, Roblox, and TikTok.

Beyond that, it's quite possible that it can show up anywhere. Instagram, Discord, Snapchat, Marco Polo, Kik, Houseparty, Messenger, Twitter, Pinterest, Tumblr, Yubo—

anything with Direct Messaging capabilities could potentially be used to contact unsuspecting users as Momo and threaten them.

In the brief time we spent looking for it on Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, and Marco Polo, we either found nothing related to the challenge or a story warning users about the challenge (Snapchat). It's possible that these platforms have tried to block the hashtag or remove anything with the Momo image. However, on Facebook, there were many private accounts called "Momo" with the image that had hundreds of friends. It's possible that "friending" these accounts could lead to cyberbullying, if the people behind the accounts are trying to copy Momo.

When we looked for it on YouTube, the vast majority of results were from news sources simply reporting on it or other users explaining it or showing proof that it exists. Perhaps in an effort to cull the phenomenon's virality, [YouTube announced](#) it is demonetizing all videos related to it, even those from credible sources,

—— Ok, what do I do in light of all this info?

Pray. The chaos, confusion, and fear surrounding this issue are enough to make any parent decide to remove their kids from society and escape into the woods. But we're not in this alone, and our God is much bigger than any threat, hoax, or combination thereof. And He is always with us! Before doing anything else, take the time to ask Him to calm and comfort you, to teach you to rest in His peace and power. Then ask for wisdom, discernment, and judgment in how best to address the issue with your family.

Finally, ask Him to protect their hearts and minds from the evil of this world, and, if they've already been exposed, to heal them and fill them with His presence. It's important to remember that "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against [evil rulers and authorities](#) of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places." Regardless of whether the challenge is real or a hoax, there is true evil in our world, and prayer is one of the most vital weapons we have in combating the destructive forces of darkness. So pray. Pray with your children and encourage them to pray as well. Pray that God would protect them, hem them in, and guard their hearts from evil.

Research. You're reading this Guide, which is a great start. But also take some time to read a few articles, see what you can find on YouTube or Facebook (or your kids' favorite apps), read other parents' comments or reviews, and talk to other parents about what they know.

Ask Questions and Discuss. Calmly and gently ask your kids about the extent of their exposure to the challenge. (Or, if you'd rather not mention the challenge so as not to fuel the hoax, simply ask them if they've ever seen anything weird, disgusting, scary, or disturbing online to get the conversation going, though it's worth noting that many parents say that mentioning the name Momo quickly reveals if kids have seen/heard of it or not.) Find out how it made them feel or if they felt compelled to do what they were told to do. Find out if their friends know about it or have thought about participating.

Why do they think someone would participate? Why do they think it's become so huge? Do they think it's a hoax? Obviously, your line of questioning will depend on your kids' ages, but use this time simply to get them talking about it.

Once you've taken plenty of time to listen to their perspective, experiences, and emotions, calmly and gently talk with them about it. If they're old enough, explain extortion to them and how it's never ok. Empower them with the courage to not allow themselves to be the victims of someone trying to harm them. If they see something, tell them to say something! Let them know what they should do if/when they come across weird, disgusting, disturbing, or frightening content.

Most importantly, let them know that they're not in trouble, bad, or at fault if they do come across such content. Many kids often don't report seeing inappropriate things because of the shame and guilt they feel. (The book [Good Pictures, Bad Pictures](#) teaches kids how to identify and report pornographic images, but it may also be helpful in talking about other images, as well.)

Take Appropriate Action. Depending on what your kids have told you, you may need to report an account or a video to the platform, as well as do some damage control with your kids. If they've been exposed, they may be frightened, as well as afraid to talk to you about it. Make sure they know that you love them, are here for them, want them to feel safe with you, and that no one is going to hurt them.

One researcher on media manipulation at Harvard [told BuzzFeed News](#), "What parents do need to realize is that content [on YouTube] is often packaged with a fair amount of advertising, and as a result you do have to pay attention. That could mean that parents should go to the official website to watch Sesame Street instead of YouTube."

Also, talk with other parents and come together as a community or neighborhood to share in the responsibility of educating and protecting your children. Having more eyes and ears on the ground in tune to what your children are seeing and listening to can only help.

If Necessary, Enforce Better Boundaries. If what you've learned from this situation is concerning, it might be time to enforce better technology boundaries with your kids. With younger children, it's smart to never let them watch or play on private devices or with headphones. Then that way, if something inappropriate comes up, you will know and can talk about it right away. It may also be worth telling them not to watch videos you haven't approved when at a friend's house or on a friend's device.

With older kids, it may be important to enforce a no phones in the bedroom policy or to use parental controls and time-limiting measures. We highly recommend setting their phones up so that they can't download new apps without your permission (see our [Parent's Guide to Smartphones](#), [Parent's Guide to iOS](#), and [Parent's Guide to Android](#) for more on this). And have discussions with them about why conversing with strangers can be dangerous.

Pray Some More. The chaos, uncertainty, fear, sadness, confusion, and pain caused by this phenomenon are all not the way it's supposed to be, and they're definitely not from

God. Let's continually pray for His protection, guidance, and wisdom as we parent our children in today's technology-driven world.

— What do I do about my kids' (or my own) fear and anxiety over it?

Honestly, even if this whole thing is fake, it does bring sharply into focus the reality that the Internet is a dangerous place. And that can make any of us worry. We love our kids immensely, so none of us want our kids to stumble upon something harmful or be exposed to pornography or be contacted by online predators. Yet it seems impossible to guard against all the evils of this world. So we can easily be overcome by fear, worry, and anxiety. What can we do?

At the same time, if our kids hear about things like Momo and [other creepypasta legends](#) from their friends or at school, or if they stumble upon them on the Internet, they can be consumed with worry and fear about what might happen to them. How can we help them?

First, we have to realize that our kids are watching us. If they observe us worrying and fretting while we're telling them not to be afraid, they'll recognize our words as hollow. So we need to deal with our own fear. This might mean talking to a trusted friend, family member, or pastor; going to therapy; finding good outlets for nervous energy; and even having someone hold us accountable.

Second, we have to open the lines of communication. If we don't talk to our kids about it first, they're highly unlikely to bring it up with us themselves. Tell them that they can talk to you about anything, even things they might be ashamed of or are worried will make you mad. Tell them you'll do your best to remain calm and react calmly and rationally. Of course, this doesn't mean there won't be consequences if they've behaved poorly or done something wrong, but remind them that they won't be punitive and that you're on their side, that you want to help them flourish and have an abundant life—just as God does.

Third, depending on your kids' ages, it might be appropriate to be honest and vulnerable about your own fears and/or struggle with fear. Obviously, it wouldn't be good to dump it all on them, but admitting things that scare you and how you find rest in God can really help. Vulnerability breeds vulnerability.

Fourth, remind them that it's not a sin to be afraid. They're not bad people if they have fears! In fact, it's such a part of the human experience in our fallen world that the NIV has [over 70 occurrences](#) of the command "Do not be afraid." (That's not to mention other variations, like "fear not" or "do not fear.") God knows, which is why He tells us to turn to Him. In fact, God's Word often follows up the admonishment to not be afraid with some action God is or will be taking on His followers' behalf. So it's important that we and our children don't condemn ourselves for having fear, but it's equally important that we actively take steps not to live from a place of fear.

Last but not least, pray with them and teach them how to pray well. Often, kids learn to thank God for things but have no idea how to talk to Him when they're afraid (or hurt or lonely...). Help them hone this skill. Teaching them [to pray Scripture](#) is one good option. Here are some passages to start with:

- *When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.* (Psalm 56:3)
- *Peace is what I leave with you; it is my own peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world does. Do not be worried and upset; do not be afraid.* (John 14:27)
- *When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul.* (Psalm 94:19)
- *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.* (Psalm 23:4)
- *Humble yourselves, then, under God's mighty hand, so that he will lift you up in his own good time. Leave all your worries with him, because he cares for you.* (1 Peter 5:6-7)
- *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Romans 8:38-39)
- *You who fear him, trust in the LORD—he is their help and shield.* (Psalm 115:11)
- *Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.* (Deuteronomy 31:6)
- *For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.* (Isaiah 41:13)

Discussion Questions

- Have you seen or heard about Momo?
- Have you seen or heard scary or weird images or videos?
- What did you see/hear?
- How did it make you feel?
- How can I help you with what you're feeling?
- Do you know what to do if you come across videos/posts with Momo or other scary images?
- What should you do if you someone threatens to harm you or your family?
- What should you do if your friend is partaking in a challenge like the Momo challenge?
- Why do you think someone might want to join a challenge like this?
- Do you think threats to harm you or expose you if you tell others about it are real? Why/why not?
- Do you feel like you know how to handle your fear? Why/why not? How can I help?
- Do you feel like you can talk to me about anything? Why/why not?

Conclusion

Hoax or not, the Momo Challenge and its hype illuminates the evil that lurks not only in the dark corners of the web, but throughout our broken world. But evil does not have the last say. It's not new, and it's already been defeated on the cross through the power of Christ. He is even now faithfully working in His world to redeem, renew, and ransom all things. And while He doesn't promise we will be immune to evil, He does promise He will be with us to the very ends of the earth. "What, then, shall we say in response to these things? [If God be for us](#), who can be against us?"

In the meantime, let's join Him in the fight against evil by preparing our kids for the world they inhabit, by exposing evil, and by being forces of God's goodness and agents of restoration in our world.

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a *free* weekly email offering biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [A Parent's Guide to Smartphones](#)
- [Reclaiming the Smartphone: 4 Important Conversations](#), free video series
- [A Parent's Guide to Social Media](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Internet Filtering & Monitoring](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Suicide & Self-Harm Prevention](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Worrying & Fear](#) (coming soon!)

Additional Resources

- "[Momo Challenge Safety Guide](#)," Smart Social
- "[How Much of a Threat Is the Purported 'Momo Challenge' Suicide Game?](#)" Snopes
- "[Momo Hoax: Schools, Police, and Media Told to Stop Promoting Viral Challenge](#)," *The Guardian*
- "[We Don't Know If the Momo Challenge Is Real, and That's the Problem](#)," BuzzFeed News
- "[The 'Momo challenge' isn't a viral danger to children online. But it sure is viral.](#)" *The Washington Post*
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#), 1-800-273-8255
- [Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide](#)
 - [Warning Signs for Suicide](#)
 - [Talking with children about suicide](#) (it won't inspire or cause suicide)
- [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#)

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