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Dear Parent/Carer

There have been a few Online Safety concerns from parents and children over the past couple of days about inappropriate chain messages and videos appearing on children's devices and YouTube Kids. Thanks to advice from many sources, including Internet Matters, I would like to provide some information about this viral phenomenon.

Evidence of direct harm from this so-called 'game' is yet to be found in what seems to be a viral ghost story. Rather than sharing warnings that continue the story, a better focus for us as parents and professionals is good, positive advice for children; setting up technology appropriately and taking an active interest in their online interactions.

The image and story of children and young people harming themselves or families is, of course, shocking. However 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 to teenagers self-harming and taking their lives in Asia and South America are not suggesting the game is a direct cause.

Things like chain-mail messages become social media storms because people are so keen to share. It is a nasty-looking image so gut feeling would be that this would scare young children. However, when you check the sources, the evidence trail soon runs dry. It is viral content and sharing it only adds fuel to the fire, creating unfounded hysteria. Our key message to you: **do not believe everything you read online.**

The main problem appears to be not the phenomenon itself but professionals and parents sharing Facebook posts about these shock stories without checking its validity. It has become a viral topic founded more on scaremongering headlines than well-researched facts.

The real danger is that parents and carers are distracted from the real issues of teaching children how to safely thrive online while tracing viral shock-fads like this. So how to stay safe online? Rather than warning children about the specific dangers, parents and professionals can better help children by teaching them good practices.

It is 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 automatic precautions.

A much better approach is for parents and professionals to focus on ensuring the door is always open for children to talk about these kinds of issues and teaching good practice rather than telling them about a 'big red button' that they must not 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 find that new numbers or email addresses begin appearing on their devices, it is 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-generated content (that may include scaremongering add-ons). YouTube have been marking videos including viral content like this as 'viewer discretion is advised'. If you have restricted mode turned 'on' on your child's account, then this content is not available to them.

As always, please remain vigilant. We would not expect children to cross a busy road without first teaching them and showing them how to, so we cannot expect children to stay safe online if we neglect to teach them how to do so.

Many thanks

Miss Horsfall
Online Safety Lead

