



Empowering Parents To Raise Their Children To Be Substance-Free

Talk early and often about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Even when it gets tough.

Start Talking! Building a Drug-Free Future



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Talking regularly with youth about the dangers of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs reduces their risk of using in the first place.

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Know! The Trending Online Suicide Game – Blue Whale Challenge

There's yet another online trend catching the attention of tweens and teens around the world. It's called the Blue Whale Challenge. But unlike some of the fun, harmless challenges we've seen in the past, the Blue Whale Challenge poses dire consequences. To win this game is to take one's own life.

This social media game that is being accessed through Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook began in Russia and has made its way into multiple other countries including the U.S. The basis of the challenge is that an anonymous "group administrator," otherwise known as "the curator," hands out 50 tasks to selected players that must be completed, documented and posted during a 50-day period. The tasks start off small but become increasingly more harmful, with players being asked to wake up at unusual hours to watch disturbing videos, self-cut in the shape of a whale and take selfies while hanging off the highest rooftop they can find. In the end, the only way to "win" the Blue Whale Challenge is to die by suicide.

It is being debated whether this challenge is real or just a viral hoax. However, police nationwide aren't taking chances, and are sending warnings to parents and school administrators following the suicides of two U.S. teens whose deaths appear to be connected to the Blue Whale Challenge.

In July 2017, fifteen-year-old Isaiah Gonzales was found hanging in his closet with his cell phone propped up nearby where he had been livestreaming his suicide. According to his family, Isaiah was a happy kid who showed no signs of depression. He had recently joined the ROTC program at his Texas school and was gearing up to start his sophomore year in high school. The family had not heard of the Blue Whale Challenge until after their son's death. In addition to the suicide video, they found other photos of the teen documenting acts of self-harm on his cell phone – connecting back to the challenge.

A second teenage death in the U.S. is also being linked to the Blue Whale Challenge. A sixteen-year-old Georgia girl, whose family is choosing to keep her name private, committed suicide in May 2017. Her death, like that of Isaiah's, came as a shock to family and friends. Following her death, her older brother discovered the link to the Blue Whale Challenge. He found a sketch his sister had drawn of a girl with a name beneath it in Russian. It turned out to be the name of a 17-year-old girl who posted a "goodbye" selfie moments before committing suicide in Russia in November 2015 – that traced back to something called the Blue Whale Challenge. The brother then remembered the picture of the blue whale taped next to his sister's mirror in her bedroom. As he continued to look through her sketches he found pages of whale drawings and magazine cutouts with the words "I Am a Blue Whale" pasted over them, accompanied by drawings indicating self-harm, suicidal statements and multiple entries written in Russian. The family said they had no idea their daughter knew Russian.



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As an adult, we wonder why any youth would get involved in something like this in the first place, knowing the consequences. For one thing, we must consider the tween/teenage brain and where it is in development. Logic is not at the forefront. Curiosity is likely a large factor for seeking out this challenge, but depression and desire for acceptance may play a role as well.

As for what keeps a youth in the game, even after the stakes rise to dangerous levels? Psychological manipulation for one. Former players also say the "curator" threatens blackmail and harm to them and their families if they don't complete the assigned tasks.

As parents, we're shaking our heads in disbelief and wondering what we need to do to prevent our child from getting involved in something so awful. Unfortunately, it's nearly impossible to stay ahead of all social media trends that may impact our youth, so the most important thing we can do to protect our children is to talk them.

- Initiate conversations on the topic: Share the dangers of online challenges such as this; encourage them not to follow the crowd and not to feel pressured into doing anything that makes them feel uncomfortable or unsafe.
- Create an open, trusting environment: Provide them with opportunities to talk to you, then listen without judgement. Make sure they know that no matter what situation they may find themselves in the virtual or "real" world, including something you may find inappropriate, you are there to help them through it.

It is also important to monitor your children's social media activities: Three hashtags that signal this particular game include: #BluWhaleChallenge, #CuratorFindMe and #I_Am_Whale.

Heavy.com, a New York-based digital media company, posted an example List of 50 Tasks. While tasks may vary or change over time, being aware of the types of signs to watch out for can only be helpful.

Sources: TheCourage.com: Parents, you need to know what the 'blue whale challenge' is right now. July 14, 2017. FoxNews.com: Sinister 'Blue Whale Challenge' blamed for Texas teen's death. July 11, 2017. Heavy.com: Blue Whale Challenge – List of All 50 Tasks. July 12, 2017. SafeSmartSocial.com: What is the Blue Whale Challenge? May 19, 2017.

**Please note that the original list of 50 tasks came from Reddit.com and may or may not be authentic.*

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