BUILDING RESILIENCE & CONFRONTING RISK

A PARENTS & CAREGIVERS GUIDE TO ONLINE RADICALIZATION

POLARIZATION AND EXTREMISM RESEARCH AND INNOVATION LAB (PERIL)

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SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLAUDIA WHITAKER

Whether you live with a young person, or now work virtually with youth, radicalization to extremism is something we all should be concerned about. Extremists looking to recruit and convert children are predatory. Like all forms of child exploitation, extremist recruitment drives a wedge between young people and the adults they would typically trust. Radicalization is a problem for our entire society, from the innocent people it victimizes to the family bonds it breaks apart.

PARENTS & CAREGIVERS GUIDE

[illegible]? We wrote this guide with a wide range of caregivers in mind.

[illegible]. This includes parents, grandparents, foster parents, extended families, and residential counselors who are the guardians and caregivers of children and youth living at home, in group homes, and other residential settings. They are on the front lines of recognizing and responding to radicalization.

[illegible]. This includes teachers, principals, school counselors, coaches, music teachers, religious and youth group leaders, scout troop leaders, employers, social workers, mental health therapists, and other adults who engage with youth, even in virtual settings. These adults can form a dense network of trusted role models and authority figures, and are well-placed to recognize warning signs of radicalization. Adults outside the home also o er a key network for in-home caregivers and parents to connect with as a resource and sounding board.

Whether you live with a young person or work with youth virtually or in-person, radicalization to extremism is something we all should be concerned about. Extremists looking to recruit and convert children are predatory. Like all forms of child exploitation, extremist recruitment drives a wedge between young people and the adults they would typically trust. The radicalization of young people is a threat to civil society, from the innocent people it victimizes to the family bonds it breaks apart.

Radicalization occurs in an era of converging crises. From the COVID-19 pandemic to ongoing Black Lives Matter protests against the legacy of police brutality to the systemic racism of voter suppression and legislation that forbids critical appraisals of race and racism in schools. These conditions a rm the need to end and to dismantle white supremacy as an essential step to preventing extremist radicalization. Extremists are seeking to direct these crises in ways that heighten the risks of violence and online radicalization. This guide will help families, caregivers, and youth recognize and confront new risks posed by far-right extremists during this time. It will also help you build resilience against these risks well beyond this moment.

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WHAT IS ONLINE RADICALIZATION? WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

Online radicalization occurs when someone's online activities—reading, watching videos, or socializing—help lead them to adopt politically or religiously extremist views. Extremist beliefs say that one group of people is in dire conflict with other groups who don't share the same racial or ethnic, gender or sexual, religious, or political identity. Extremists believe that this imagined conflict can only be resolved through separation, domination, or violence between groups. This frequently leads to anti-democratic opinions and goals, such as a desire for dictatorship, civil war, or an end to the rule of law.[1]

"Radicalization" simply means any process that leads a person to hold extremist beliefs. These beliefs may or may not lead to overt violence. Just as there are many forms of extremism, there is no single pathway to radicalization. It is a complex process, involving many personal and external influences. Finally, it is important to note that not all 'radical' politics are extremist. Beliefs that challenge established systems of political power are sometimes unfairly labeled this way in order to discredit them. Remember: for someone's political views to be a matter of serious concern, they should match the definition of extremism provided above. Here are some of the most common ways people radicalize online:

C . . . . People can radicalize by reading or viewing increasingly extreme texts, videos, memes, or other content online. Gradual encounters with more and more extreme content—sometimes through automatic recommendations that suggest other videos to watch, books to purchase, or articles to read—can open pathways to radicalization for at-risk people. Healthy skepticism of government can develop into views that promote societal breakdown or violent conflict with democratic institutions. For example, an interest in conspiracy theories might lead to antisemitic world views.

F . B . . Online radicalization is helped by a lack of competing views or challenges to the ideologies people encounter online. Research shows that when someone only spends time with like-minded people, they are more likely to move to extremes.[2]

. . f . Sometimes, people are shown extremist content and propaganda by peers and online acquaintances. Often, such content is treated as a dark joke or "edgy" humor expressed through a playful meme or animated video. But research shows that exposure like this can lead some people to consider extremist positions, preparing them for later radicalization.[3] Jokes, like memes about

RECOGNIZING WARNING SIGNS

There are some specific warning signs that should send up a red flag about the kind of content a child is being exposed to online. If a young person in your life begins to share the following ideas, there is a strong chance they have been exposed to radicalizing material. Here are some signs to watch out for:

F a "Great Replacement" or "White Genocide" in which a white minority is politically oppressed by a non-white majority. Sometimes, this is tied to conspiracy theories that a global elite seeks to remove whites, as they are the greatest threat to global government.

B antisemitic conspiracy theories. Sometimes, sincere antisemitism is disguised as ironic belief in more outlandish conspiracy theories (e.g. that Jews are shape-shifting aliens). This can act as a radicalization pathway to more conventional antisemitic views. ***(See "Peer Sharing" for more on the role of humor and irony in radicalization)***

B the necessity of violent insurrections. This can take the form of support for an upcoming second American Civil War. Or, it can be attached to previous events, such as the January 6th Capitol insurrection or the many stando s that have historically taken place between the US government and unlawful militias. Be alert and listen for clues that a young person might be valorizing these events.

B male supremacy or expressions of misogyny, including policing the behavior of girls or young women. Radicalization of this type often includes a view of his-

UNDERSTANDING THE DRIVERS

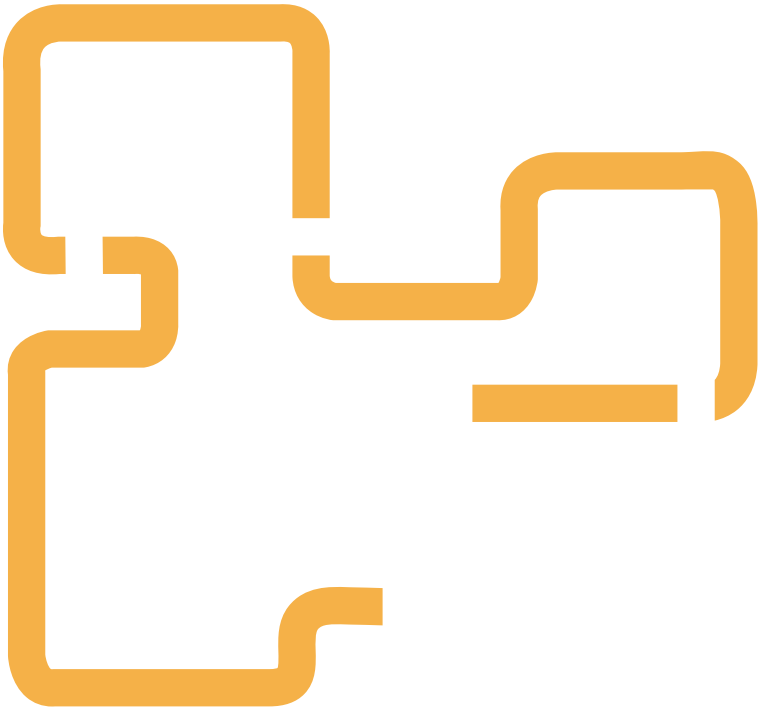
Parents and caregivers can help prevent and interrupt radicalization processes by staying alert to the kinds of vulnerabilities that make youth more susceptible to extremist rhetoric or recruitment. There is no single formula that can explain why one person will be drawn to extremist groups and another one will not, but we do know that most extremists have experienced some combination of the following:

[illegible]. Sudden unwanted changes to our everyday lives can leave people feeling powerless, which makes them more vulnerable to radicalization. Disruptions can be dramatic, like the death of a loved one, a violent assault, or economic hardships. Or they can be seemingly small, like the switch from middle school to high school. There are all-too-many reasons today for youth to lack the most basic sense of security, leaving many dislocated and even traumatized by current events. Extremists are there to o er a false sense of security and the promise of belonging.

C [illegible]. From global climate change to the COVID-19 pandemic, ours is an age of unprecedented crisis. This can leave anyone—but young people in particular—struggling to make sense of it all. Extremists o er simple, false solutions to complex problems, while conspiracy theories o er a sense of control when we feel otherwise powerless.[4]

A[illegible]. When people feel something has unjustly been taken from them, they may turn to extremists for easy answers and a scapegoat to blame. We live in an age of declining living standards, precarious social institutions, and environmental disasters. Many are afraid for their future, and no one knows how these crises might in the end be solved. These fears and the justified grievances that accompany them can o er extremists an "open door" to radicalize and recruit. Extremists use scapegoating and extreme black-and-white thinking to direct that anger and sense of betrayal toward others.

[illegible]. Youthful rebellion can be harmless, or even a healthy part of growing up. But when adolescents rebel with hateful and extremist content, they can cause real damage to themselves and those around them. Rebellion increasingly occurs online, such as by sharing provocative content with both friends and strangers. Some former extremists report that their radicalization began with sharing "edgy" or shocking material as a joke, a way to shock authority figures, or as a way to impress their peers. But all too often, these attempts to rebel and gain status with peers can evolve into actual extremist beliefs. New research even suggests that participating in delinquent online activities like trolling can make a young person find extremism more appealing.



D . F . . Strange as it sounds, many extremists embrace hate hoping it will bring them closer with someone they love.[5] Whether a family member, boyfriend/girlfriend, or close friend, we all want to be in agreement with those we care about. It is sometimes easier to embrace extremism than to reject a loved one and their beliefs. When a loved one is radicalized, it puts everyone around them at risk.

B . A major driver toward extremist groups is a desire to be a part of something bigger than oneself. Youth who are highly isolated or lack a sense of belonging to groups outside their families are at higher risk from groups that o er them purpose, meaning, or belonging. Former extremists often mention that extremist groups had become like a family to them, countering their loneliness and isolation.

> **Extremists o□er simple, false solutions to complex problems, while conspiracy theories o□er a sense of control when we feel otherwise powerless.**

C . Boredom and idleness can help spread conspiracies or lead people to adopt radical ideologies. These beliefs engage a person's curiosity and give them an emotionally rewarding subject to explore. For already vulnerable people, the world of online conspiracy theorists and hate groups can become even more attractive. It is not uncommon for boredom to accompany other risky circumstances, such as social isolation or the search for love.

D B E . Even if a child is at risk from one of these factors, it does not mean they will automatically adopt extremist beliefs. A little attention can prevent risks from becoming full-blown problems. Pay extra attention to what the youth around you say and where they go online. Then, be ready to listen.

ENGAGE & EMPOWER

The good news is that parents and caregivers are the people in the best position to stop radicalization in its tracks. If you're concerned about a child or young adult you know becoming radicalized, here are some strategies to engage them:

LISTEN to what young people are saying. If they begin to repeat themes or vocabulary associated with extremists and conspiracy theories, try not to ridicule or punish them. Ridicule and scolding have actually been shown to strengthen problematic belief systems.[6] Instead, suggest that the people spreading these messages may have their own motives besides the truth and a child's well-being. Then, reach out for help from one of the resources provided at the end this guide.

ASK QUESTIONS about what children are doing online, what they are learning, and what kinds of websites and platforms they spend time on. Approach these questions from a place of curiosity rather than monitoring. Ask open ended questions, like "What values do *ou* stand for?" or "What kind of person do *ou* want to be?" Asking questions that show genuine interest in a child's activities and hobbies may open up new lines of communication and sharing about what they do online. Ask questions that let them teach you something from their lives, like "How does that game work?" or "How do you think your teachers could be do better in the way they speak about racism?" Teenagers may open up more if you raise questions during casual activities where they are not the only focus of your attention. Talking while driving in the car, folding laundry, or taking a walk can reduce the pressure.[7]

DISCUSS the news with children in an age-appropriate way. Visit sites like the News Literacy Project to learn how you can avoid misinformation and propaganda. Screen content they are watching by looking at the reviews and parent/child ratings on Common Sense Media. Proactively suggest materials published by trustworthy news sources and read an article together each day. Subscribe and listen to a credible current events podcast together. Pay attention to the new Tw 9.8728 9.85 294 612 Ti2en-US

Preventing online radicalization is about more than just recognizing and avoiding risks. It's also about building resiliency and strengthening a sense of belonging and identity so that youth are less vulnerable or susceptible to extremist rhetoric. Here are some strategies you can use to help strengthen youth resilience:

EA E children and share your vision for making a better society and world. Explain that it is okay to feel uncertain. Point out everyday people—volunteers, community members, neighbors, and charitable organizations—who help others during times of crisis. Show children safe ways in which they can help, too. This might include helping an elderly neighbor, reaching out to a classmate who may lack social support, or doing volunteer work for disaster relief organizations.

E children to take charge. Extremist groups thrive when ordinary people feel their lives are out of control. Find everyday ways a child can exercise control over their environment. Talk to children and try to remember times when they took control of a situation—a sporting or gaming success, a minor emergency they helped solve, an important errand or chore they accomplished. Allow them to plan meals or to make family TV and movie viewing choices. Where appropriate, ask older adolescents for their opinion in household decisions and show them when you follow their advice.

C A E E harmful gender stereotypes that encourage violence by engaging young people in thoughtful discussions around empathy and emotions. Help them develop an understanding and appreciation for gender beyond the binary of boys and girls.

C EA E roots and strengthen children's identity at home, in their family and their broader community. Extremists prey on young people who lack a sense of belonging, and one of the best ways to create resilience to extremist messaging is to strengthen youth's sense of positive identity and belonging. Youth who already have a strong sense of meaning, engagement, and purpose in their lives are less likely to be drawn to the promises of extremist groups who o er it to them. Parents and caregivers can help by sharing family stories, highlighting friends and relatives who have fought for justice against oppression, and reinforcing values about community and caring for others.

A E cultural practices and knowledge that are di erent from your own. Listening to and learning about others' lived experiences is a critical step in anti-racist practice. Exposure and deep engagement with di erent kinds of people, along with rich cross-cultural experiences, have been shown to create "o -ramps" from extremist movements and ideologies.[9] The more people spend time in like-minded groups, the more likely they are to move toward extremes. Don't stay silent about the history and ongoing injustices of white supremacy and male supremacy. ***(See "How to Get Help" below for resources and where to get started.)***

DE acceptance, kindness, and empathy for others. Individuals who have left extremist movements regularly point to the kindness of others—even in the face of hate and violence—as a driving factor for leaving the movement. Schools who have launched kindness campaigns have reported fewer disciplinary referrals and reduced bullying.[10] Finding concrete ways for children to help others—by gathering donations for a food pantry, joining you in helping a neighbor who is elderly or has a disability, participating in neighborhood cleanups—can help forge kindness in ways that make it harder to be drawn to hate.

C EC with the broader network of trusted adults in the child's life for additional resources and help. If a child needs deeper understanding of the historical experiences of marginalized peoples, hate speech, or extremism, reach out to their teachers and principals and request resources. Religious leaders, therapists, coaches, youth group leaders, and other adults in a child's life can be an important sounding board and brainstorming partner for how to better engage with youth or assess warning signs.

E E BE that you are not alone. There are dozens of organizations working to prevent and intervene in radi

Teaching Children about Prejudice & Racism

• No Racism in Schools #1865: https://www.noracisminschools.org

• Embrace Race, Resources: https://www.embracerace.org/resources

• Telling the Truth About Slavery Is Not Indoctrination by Clint Smith III: https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/real-stakes-fight-over-history/616455/

• The Antiracist Research & Policy Center: https://www.bu.edu/antiracist-center/

• The Western States Center's toolkit on addressing white nationalism in schools: https://www.western-states.org/schools

• "Anti-Racism Resources for Parents and Kids," Healthline: https://www.healthline.com/health/parent8 Tn-US.oen-US (a/)69.5-69.85 0 0 9.85 60 518.34 Tm[s)9.8 (tcis)9.9 (t-c0 0 r9I (hea69g9.85 0 0 9.85 60 5 0 9. 0 0 9.81 6

Preventing & Dealing with Extremism

• My Child Is Sharing Conspiracy Theories and Racist Memes. What Do I Say?," Western States Center: https://westernstatescenter.medium.com/my-child-is-sharing-conspiracy-theories-and-racist-memes-what-do-i-say-ea1c8916d064

• "Ten Ways to Fight Hate: A Community Response Guide," SPLC: https://www.splcenter.org/20170814/ten-ways-fight-hate-community-response-guide

• "Five Things Educators Can Do to Address Bias in Their Schools," NEA EdJustice: https://neaedjustice.org/2019/10/11/5-things-educators-can-do-to-address-bias-in-their-school/

• "A Teacher's Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism," United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000244676

• "What if I was Wrong?," an Educator's Book of Activities to Prevent Radicalization: https://indd.adobe.com/view/57aec2f5-a65e-49 -941f-aa85e600c4f9

• "Radicalization and Violent Extremism: How Do I Talk About It With My Child?": https://info-radical.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/How-do-I-talk-about-it-with-my-child_CPRLV.pdf

• An Information Kit for School Personnel, Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence: https://info-radical.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/INFORMATION-KIT-FOR-SCHOOL-PERSONNEL.pdf

• "The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators," Data & Society: https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/

Online Safety

• The National Online Safety website, which hosts a variety of guides, webinars, and learning modules for parents, teachers, and caregivers about internet safety, platforms, and online learning: https://nationalonlinesafety.com/

• The Center for Internet and Technology Addiction: https://virtual-addiction.com/

• The National Substance Abuse and Mental Health Helpline: www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline

• "What Parents Need to Know about Tik Tok," National Online Safety: https://nationalonlinesty:

APPENDIX

ENDNOTES

1 See for example Berger, J.M. 2018. *Extremism*, MIT Press; Mudde, Cas. 2019. *The Far Right Toda* , Polity Press.

2 See Sunstein, Cas. 2013. *Going to Extremes, How Like Minds Unite and Divide*, Oxford University Press.

3 See Phillips, Whitney. 2019. "It Wasn't Just the Trolls: Early Internet Culture, 'Fun', and the Fires of Exclusionary Laugher," *Social Media and Societ* Vol. 5(3); Greene, Viveca S. 2019. "'Deplorable' Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies," Studg N2eIn ANMC /P ≠Lang (en-US)/MCID 1233 ƀDC BT50wckp269t1w LiTm[Redpilling Normies)20.1 (,)40 ((.1 n))Tj/Span≠

CREDITS

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