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 ethnic, 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.<?>

"Radicalization" simply means any process that leads a person to hold extremist beliefs. These beliefs may or may not lead to overt violence. Just like 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:

Content "Rabbit Holes." People can radicalize by reading or viewing increasingly extreme texts, videos, memes or

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INTRODUCTION

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the increase in extremist online activity that accompanied it, the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL) at American University and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) developed a rapid response resource called *Building Resilience & Confronting Risk in the COVID-19 Era: A Parents and Caregivers Guide to Online Radicalization*. We designed this guide to help build community expertise to interrupt the spread of radicalization in youth during a moment of unprecedented online activity and social isolation.

The Parents and Caregivers Guide is the first step toward a larger project of integrated support resources—both online and o —to help local communities intervene on behalf of young people at risk for radicalization. The focus groups described in this report represent another step toward that goal. Further development of the guide will include expanded content, tailored supplements to meet the specific needs of di erent practitioner communities—such as counselors, coaches, educators, school administrators, and social workers—and more. This process is driven by PERIL's 360-degree approach to research and intervention, which is based on an ongoing cycle of stakeholder needs assessment, research and experimentation, impact assessment, and iterative study and intervention design.

In early 2021, PERIL conducted thirteen virtual focus group discussions in three clusters: with teachers and educators; with school counselors and social workers; and with coaches, mentors, and youth group leaders. A total of 43 professionals across those categories participated in those focus groups, helping our team better understand the range of concerns and needs that each group shared in reaction to reading the *Parents and Caregivers Guide* and through broader discussions about youth radicalization. A fuller review of the project methodology, along with the research instruments, are provided in the appendices to this report.

WHAT WE LEARNED

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS ADDRESSED THREE KEY SUBJECT AREAS:

1. **GENERAL FEEDBACK**—both positive and critical—on the Parents and Caregivers Guide.
2. Suggestions for future **ADDITIONS AND REVISIONS** to the guide.
3. Recommendations—both specific **POLICIES** and general **PRINCIPLES**—for implementing the ideas presented in the guide and its supplements.

EDUCATORS

GENERAL FEEDBACK

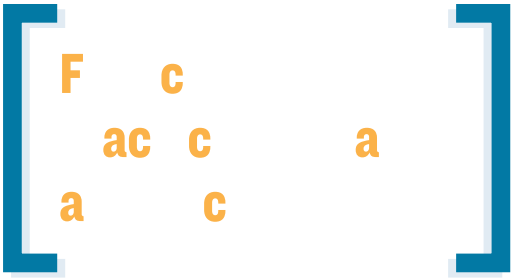
Avoid conflict & build constructive conversations: Educators expressed concern that broaching certain topics with students may lead to conflict. They noted the need to develop strategies for holding constructive conversations on di cult topics and for reducing the risk of conflict during these discussions.

Eliminate assumptions & broaden target audiences: To many educators we spoke with, the guide came across as having been written by white authors, targeting a white audience. Greater e ort should be made to be inclusive of nonwhite parents and caregivers, and to provide trau-

A digital network of support: Information sharing is key to a community's ability to address radicalization and extremism. Educators identified the need for an online platform that could facilitate resource sharing with their colleagues. This platform would provide space to discuss the issue of extremism in schools without feg9ur8heprisxa(.)97 ( )]TJETEMC /P <</Lang (en-US)/MCID 254 >>BDC BT-0.028 Tv

Detail risk factors: Respondents requested more detailed content describing vulnerabilities to radicalization and warning signs that radicalization was taking place. They also underscored the need for content that centers the experiences of young people who may become the target of extremist violence and harassment. These resources, they believe, will help them foster inclusivity and victim advocacy while also benefiting at-risk youth.

Appeal to conservatives: Respondents described a need for resources which appeal to conservatives within their community. Our coaches, mentors, and youth group leaders explained that such resources would help them to cultivate conservatives as stakeholders willing to address the dangers of radicalization with their community.



POLICIES & PRINCIPLES

Develop proactive, local interventions: There is no one-size-fits-all solution to youth radicalization, and our coaches, mentors, and youth group leaders agreed that interventions should be proactive and contextual. As with other respondents, these practitioners also underscored the need for intervention strategies to involve the broader community and address extremism locally.

Teach positive identity & belonging: Respondents noted that school systems and afterschool settings must develop curriculums that center positive identity construction. When youth have a strong sense of positive identity and belonging in their community, they are less likely to become at risk for radicalization.

Foster student-led action, bottom-up buy-in: As with our educator respondents, the coaches, mentors, and youth group leaders we spoke to believed that student-led initiatives are key to confronting extremism in their communities. Our respondents recommended that young people be educated in tactics for staying safe from extremist violence and harassment, as well as how to recognize and respond to the warning signs of radicalization in fellow students, friends, and loved ones.

Establish community & workplace standards: Developing healthy communities and spaces for youth depends on establishing clear standards for what conduct is and is not acceptable. Respondents highlighted how clearly articulated statements of community values and codes of conduct have helped them to model and reinforce safe, positive boundaries within their spaces. Institutions should articulate these values and collaborate with communities to consistently express and revitalize them.

REFLECTIONS ON GROUP FEEDBACK

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understanding of extremism and their willingness to intervene on behalf of young people at risk of radicalization. (See Appendix C for this assessment tool.)

PROCEDURES

Potential focus group participants were informed of their rights to confidentiality. Following receipt of their consent to participate, participants received a PDF version of the *Parents and Caregivers Guide* and took the pre-test quantitative assessment (see Appendix C) via email.

On the day of their respective focus group, respondents logged on to the Zoom platform, where they verbally consented to being recorded and having their ideas used to inform future content. Participants then responded to a series of open-ended questions posed by the facilitator, which led to further discussion with and among other members of the focus group. The facilitator and (at minimum) one other PERIL team member were present during the focus groups, taking notes on both verbal content and body language/non-verbals. When focus groups concluded, participants were contacted one final time with a request to complete a post-test quantitative assessment.

DATA ANALYSIS PLAN

Following each focus group, a minimum of three PERIL

APPENDIX B
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

TABLE 1. FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOLS FOR TEACHERS/EDUCATORS

MEETING DATA	PARTICIPANT DATA
Date: PERIL Sta : Start Time: End Time:	Number Participants Scheduled: Number Participants Attended: Job Classification: Length of Service:
INTRODUCTION Good (morning/afternoon). I'm Pasha Dashtgard from PERIL. This is (PERIL sta member #1) who is my co-host and (PERIL sta member #2) who is our notetaker. We'd like to start today by reviewing why we're here and what it is we are doing, as well as going over the rules of this focus group.	
PURPOSE This focus group is being conducted with the goal of eventually creating a guide that teachers, school counselors, and school sta can use to identify, prevent, and intervene on behalf of students who may be falling down the rabbit hole of online extremism and radicalization. We've already developed a *Parents and Caregivers Guide*,	

CONSENT

Reminder that consent was received via email confirmation and by agreeing to join the Zoom call for the focus group. This means that you've agreed that it is okay for us to record this focus group for our own analysis, and you are okay with us using quotes from this session in our reports for PERIL & SPLC's use only. To reiterate per that same email, your feedback, commentary, as well as transcriptions of said audio, will be used for further analysis of prevention and intervention strategies within the field of education.

ROUNDTABLE INTRODUCTIONS

I'd love to go around the group and get a sense of who is here, what your job or role is with students/youth, and how long you've been doing that for. I'll start ...(move onto PERIL sta , then participants). Please either put in the chat or write down any questions or ideas you are having as they come up for you. We want to address any thoughts you have that aren't explicitly asked of you by me.

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Question 1: Have you had an experience or instances where a student has said or done something that reflects racist, sexist, or homophobic beliefs? What was it?	**Probes:** • How did you feel? • What did you do? • Who (if anyone) did you tell? • What would you have wanted beforehand to address it, or to address it more e ectively?
Question 2: Have you had an experience or instances where a student has said or done something that reflects more extreme/fringe beliefs, such as views in line with white supremacy, Qanon, incels, or neo-Nazis?	**Probes:** • What did you do? • How did you feel? • Who did you tell? • What would you have wanted beforehand to address it, or to address it more e ectively?
Question 3: What do you think schools should be doing to address extremism among students?	**Probes:** • What is the right format to broach this topic at your school? ○ Building a school coalition with teachers/ administrators? With students? ○ Bring it to the PTA? ○ Get school administrators involved? ○ Student assemblies?

Question 4: What do you think would be some e ective ways of preventing online radicalization among students?	**Probes:** • What are some things teachers/educators could do if they are trying to de-radicalize a student who is being exposed to this stu at school? • What are some things teachers/educators could do if they are trying to de-radicalize a student who is being exposed to this stu at home? • What are some challenges you anticipate in trying to prevent online radicalization among students? • What would be helpful in mitigating these challenges?
Question 5: What did you think about the *Parents and Caregivers Guide*?	**Probes:** • What stuck with you? • What are some changes you would like to see made for an audience of educators? • What is needed that was not present? • What resources would you want added? • Did you have trouble finding information in the guide/using the guide?
Question 6: How would you broach this topic with parents (as a teacher/educator)?	**nhMad/P Lang n-US MCID 934 DC BT0.77 0.14 ut.d s BT0.**

APPENDIX C
FOCUS GROUP PRE /POST QUANT ASSESSMENT

TABLE 2. FOCUS GROUP PRE /POST TEST QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT

QUESTION	RATING SCALE						
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1. D ? ?							
2. D ? ?							
3. D ? ?							
4. D ? ?							
5. D ? ?							

CREDITS

This report is a joint project of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project and American University's Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL). We gratefully acknowledge the parents, caregivers, teachers, therapists, principals, and researchers whose insights informed this report. For more information on PERIL, visit . . / . For more on the SPLC's Intelligence Project, visit ://. . /PERIL.

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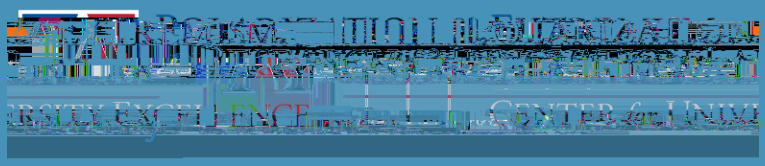
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