

A Quick Guide to Understanding Extremism and Radicalisation in Young People

A toolkit for parents, carers and frontline workers



**GROUNDSWELL
PROJECT**

Haringey
LONDON

WHAT'S INSIDE

- Understanding Extremism
- Signs of Radicalisation
- The Digital Dimension of Radicalisation
- Effective Interventions
- How to Access Support

Introduction

Extremist ideas, that promote violence and hatred, continue to pose a serious threat to our communities and wider sense of national cohesion. This is particularly the case for young people who are at a phase in their lives where they are seeking a sense of identity, belonging, and answers to difficult questions. As such, they can be drawn towards extremist narratives and groups that promise simple answers to complex problems.

Understanding how extremist networks operate and how radicalisation can occur is, therefore, vital from a safeguarding point of view. Knowing what early warning signs look like, allows professionals and families to act before harm escalates. As such, early and proportionate responses can make a real difference in safeguarding young people.

This guide is designed to support that process. It will help you recognise potential indicators of radicalisation, understand common pathways into extremism, and make you aware of what local support is available. This will allow you to build confidence in responding in a timely and supportive manner, preventing harm before it can take place.

What Is Extremism?

Extremism is when people hold hateful or harmful beliefs and/or promote the use of violence, hatred or intimidation to achieve their goals.

Extremists adopt an in-group vs out-group mentality in which their in-group is superior and others are not only inferior but also a threat. Extremism comes in many forms and guises and is not restricted to one community or identity group.

Key hallmarks of extremism include:



"Us vs. Them" Mentality

Creating deep divisions by viewing anyone outside a specific group as an enemy.



Binary Thinking

Replacing critical nuance with black-and-white perspectives that leave no room for questions or debate.



Justification of Harm

Crossing the line from belief into action by validating violence or intimidation of the out-group.



Mythical Perfection

Obsessing over an idealised, non-existent past or an impossible, perfect future world.



Superiority and Entitlement

Believing one's group is inherently better, more righteous, or more deserving than others.



Conspiracy Obsession

Replacing evidence-based reality with simplistic conspiracies that scapegoat entire communities.

What Is Radicalisation?

Radicalisation is the process where someone starts to follow extreme ideas or begins to support hate and violence. This change usually doesn't happen overnight. Instead, it happens slowly after a person spends a lot of time looking at extremist content online or talking to groups and individuals who use "us vs. them" logic to influence how people think.

How the process unfolds:



The Small Starting Point

It often starts in a very small way that doesn't seem dangerous. For example, it might begin by someone laughing at or sharing "edgy" jokes and memes that make fun of certain groups of people. At first, it feels like "just a joke," but this starts to make bias and prejudice feel normal.



Escalation and Isolation

As the person spends more time in these circles, the ideas get stronger and more serious. They may start to stay away from friends or family who disagree with them.



The Outcome

Eventually, this constant stream of hateful ideas can change the way they see the world, leading them to support or even take part in harmful and violent actions.

How Do Young People Get Radicalised?

There are many different pathways into radicalisation, and it is important to remember that not every young person will follow the exact same trajectory or go on to commit acts of violence. Radicalisation is often a highly personalised process, shaped by individual experiences, personal vulnerabilities, and social circumstances.

It typically occurs when unresolved grievances, personal frustrations, or unmet social and emotional needs create a sense of isolation or disconnection, which can then be exploited by extremist narratives, content, or recruiters seeking to influence behaviour.

Some of the most common pathways into radicalisation include:

- Consuming violent content (such as gore and mass attack videos) and finding extremist forums and groups that share this content
- Following charismatic figures, influencers, or ideological leaders who glorify violence and extremist views
- Being influenced by friends, siblings or other family members
- Over-identifying or empathising with attackers, perpetrators, or violent figures
- Accepting and spreading misinformation, disinformation, or conspiracy theories

Understanding these pathways helps highlight that radicalisation is often gradual, subtle, and reinforced by both online and offline social influences. Early recognition and support can make a significant difference in preventing further escalation.



The Online Dimension

Social media platforms are built on **complex algorithms** designed to maximise your screen time, not your safety. By prioritising "retention," these systems continuously feed you attention-grabbing content to keep you scrolling. For vulnerable users, a simple curiosity can quickly spiral into an addictive cycle, trapping them inside toxic propaganda and harmful online communities.

Key dynamics at play include:



Algorithmic Profiling

Systems track user behaviour and demographics to serve increasingly sensationalist content, prioritising platform retention over safety.



Echo Chambers

Constant exposure to fringe ideas within isolated groups creates a distorted perception that these views are widely accepted and mainstream



Artificial Urgency

Harmful narratives often manufacture a sense of impending catastrophe, pressuring young people to take immediate action



The "Rabbit Hole"

Automated recommendations can transition users from mainstream interests into unregulated digital spaces dominated by disinformation and conspiracy theories.

Why Are Some Young People Drawn to Extremism?

Extremist groups often attract individuals by meeting emotional and psychological needs that may be unmet elsewhere. They offer a clear sense of purpose and meaning, particularly to those who feel uncertain about their identity or future. Through tightly controlled communities, they promise belonging and acceptance, creating strong in-group bonds that can feel supportive and validating. They present participation as exciting or adventurous and this can be particularly attractive for a young person who is struggling socially, feels like an outcast or has unexplained grievances.

Extremist narratives also elevate members by portraying them as important, heroic, or chosen, which can be especially appealing to young people experiencing low self-worth or seeking to find their place in the world.

By simplifying complex social and personal problems, extremist ideologies provide clear enemies or scapegoats to blame for frustration, failure, or injustice. Over time, these promises help draw individuals further into extremist worldviews while discouraging critical thinking, alternative perspectives, and healthy connections outside the group.

What Does Vulnerability Look Like?

Extremist networks tend to target individuals who are exhibiting certain vulnerabilities related to unmet social needs and unresolved grievances.

These typically include:

 **Emotional Distress**
This includes unresolved anger, a deep sense of injustice, or feeling powerless in the face of personal or global grievances.

 **Social Isolation**
A lack of belonging or a confused sense of identity can make people vulnerable to groups offering a ready-made community.

 **Searching for Meaning**
Individuals lacking a clear purpose or seeking "salvation" and a fresh start are often drawn to the absolute answers extremism provides.

 **Personal Struggles**
Low self-esteem and ongoing mental health challenges can make it harder for someone to challenge or resist manipulative influence.

Examples of Extremist Actions

All of the actions listed below are illegal, seriously harmful, and may result in long prison sentences, criminal records, and lasting personal consequences.

Understanding the risks and consequences is crucial, because even behaviour that may seem minor or just a “joke” can escalate quickly and have real-world effects.

- *Downloading or sharing extremist or real-life violent content, even as a “joke”*
- *Joining or taking part in extremist groups, including online chat communities*
- *Vandalising places of worship, community buildings, or other property with extremist messages or symbols*
- *Encouraging or pressuring others to commit extremist, violent, or harmful acts, including joking or dares*
- *Participating in violent riots, intimidation, or harassment of others*
- *Live-streaming violent acts, self-harm, or abuse toward animals*
- *Acquiring, making, or using weapons*
- *Planning or carrying out violent attacks*

These behaviours also carry **serious legal consequences** and can also have long-term effects on mental health, relationships, and future opportunities, especially for young people.



CASE PROFILE

Demographic:

16 Year-Old Male

Context:

Online Forums &
Anonymous Activity

CASE STUDY

BASED ON TRUE EVENTS

A 16-year-old boy began participating in online forums and group chats that shared violent gore content, including graphic videos of attacks. He used an anonymous username to post and interact. On one occasion, another user uploaded photos with weapons, suggested they might carry out an attack in a shopping centre. The boy replied to the posts saying he “should do it” beneath the photo, sent him messages of encouragement and told him how to livestream it and post it.

Some weeks later, news broke of a violent attack in the US, which increased concern about the online exchange. This led to a police investigation into the boy’s online activity, which was treated as **“encouraging or assisting a crime”** under UK law.

Outcome & Impact: The attack, investigation and its aftermath contributed to several months of difficulties and poor mental health for the boy and his family.

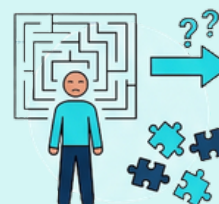
What Are **Some** Signs That a Young Person Is Being Radicalised?

1. Increasing Control & Isolation



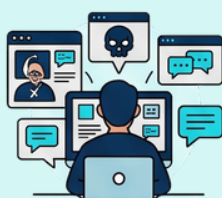
Growing influence by a person or group, social withdrawal, ostracisation, and disengagement from school, work, or community

2. Loss of Direction



Lack of purpose, future goals, or increasing fixation on “making something happen”

3. Immersion in Extremist Spaces



Participation in extremist or violent chat groups, forums, excessive time online, or sharing extreme content

4. Adoption of Extremist Beliefs



Blaming specific groups, repeating harmful stereotypes, and believing conspiracy theories

5. Behavioural Instability



Withdrawal, a change in social circle or swings between low self-worth and entitlement

6. Fixation on Violence



Fantatising about attacks, expressing support for violence, or collecting weapons or related materials

7. Wellbeing and Mental Health Decline



Poor sleep, poor hygiene, deteriorating mental health, self-harm or suicide ideation, or disturbing writing or imagery

What Is Prevent?

- Prevent is one of the four strands of the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy, **CONTEST**.
- It operates in the pre-criminal space and focuses on stopping people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism, particularly through early intervention.
- Prevent works with schools, local authorities, health services, and communities to identify and support individuals vulnerable to radicalisation before harm occurs. It focuses on all forms of extremism.
- The aim of Prevent is to provide safeguarding advice and support for those who need it and to ensure extremist ideologies do not exploit young and vulnerable people.

ACCESSING HELP

- Seek advice from your local Prevent team by contacting 101 asking to speak to the Prevent team, or calling the national Prevent line on **0800 011 3764**. You don't need to give specific details and can remain anonymous when seeking advice.
- Look up the Haringey Prevent page at haringey.gov.uk or email Haringey Prevent at prevent@haringey.gov.uk
- Search for the ACT Early website at actearly.uk for warning signs and advice
- If you are concerned someone is being harmed, or has been threatened, doxxed or there is comprising information or content including Child Sexual Abuse Material call the non-emergency police line 101 immediately to speak to an officer.

Signposting

- **Childline:** Call 0800 1111 (Free, private, and doesn't show on the bill)
- **NSPCC Helpline** (0808 800 5000) – For advice and support on child abuse, online grooming, or sexual exploitation. nspcc.org.uk
- **The Mix:** Text THEMIX to 85258 for free 24/7 crisis and mental health support. themix.org.uk
- **Report Harmful Content:** To get help removing leaked info: reportharmfulcontent.com
- **Report Remove:** to get sexual imagery taken down: childline.org.uk
- **Shore Space:** a place for teenagers worried about their sexual behaviour, including resources and help if they are in trouble with the law, sextortion. An online chat function freely available. shorespace.org.uk
- **Safer Internet:** For advice and support to children and young people, parents and carers to promote the safe and responsible use of technology saferinternet.org.uk
- **Police – Online Safety / CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command)** (<https://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/>) – Report sexual abuse or exploitation online safely.
- **Haringey Hate Crime Team** - elvan.asutay@haringey.gov.uk