

# Young people, radicalisation & autism

# Introduction

This resource has been developed as part of Parent Zone's Resilient Families programme, funded by Prevent counter-terrorism strategy.

You'll find information and guidance on what radicalisation is, how far-right ideologies are spread online and how it can impact autistic young people.

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## About

Parent Zone is an organisation working to improve outcomes for children and families in the digital age. The [Resilient Families programme](#) helps children, young people and families understand online risks, and to know how to respond. It also supports learning from online experiences and recovering when things go wrong.

The [Prevent](#) strategy was founded to tackle terrorism in the UK. It uses early intervention, through surveillance and referrals, to prevent people from being radicalised.

# Understanding radicalisation

## What is radicalisation?

Radicalisation is a process where someone comes to have extreme views about the world and others. Having extreme views can affect how someone thinks and acts.

There can be many types of extreme views. The government Prevent strategy defines extremism as the “vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also include in our definition of extremism calls for the death of members of our armed forces, whether in this country or overseas.”

Examples of extreme views include:

- extreme right-wing or left-wing beliefs (eg, neo-Nazism, or environmental activism)
- misogyny
- racism (eg, anti-migration, or anti-semitism)
- transphobia or homophobia
- violent ideologies (eg, religious terrorism)
- conspiracy theories

In many cases, extreme views will overlap and fit into several of these categories. For example, someone with extreme right-wing views on nationalism or immigration may also have extreme views about the rights of women.

## Extreme right-wing ideologies online

Britain's most senior counter-terror officer, Matt Jukes, has said that **19 out of 20** children who were arrested last year for terrorism offences were linked to an extreme right-wing ideology.

Young people, particularly males, are exposed to extreme right-wing and misogynistic ideologies online. The ways someone comes to adopt these views (ie, to become radicalised) is constantly evolving.

The rise of popular figures like Andrew Tate has seen children and young people increasingly encounter misogynist content and views.

[Research from Hope not Hate](#) found that males aged **16-17** were more likely (**79%**) to have encountered content from Andrew Tate than to know who UK prime minister Rishi Sunak was (**58%**). Though this research doesn't suggest young people widely endorse these views, it does demonstrate just how accessible this content is.

## Radicalisation in online environments

Radicalisation processes can happen when someone grooms another into having extreme views. They can also occur when someone sees or interacts with extremist content.

A young person might encounter radical persons or extreme content on:

- social media (eg, algorithm-recommended content feeds, or others' posts)
- online gaming
- influencers, streamers and other popular online figures
- messaging platforms
- video sharing platforms
- forums
- the dark web

Extreme content (eg, disinformation, or misogynist views) can be found on some popular, well-known platforms like X and YouTube.

Emerging online spaces and platforms can also be risky and harmful when they lack moderators or other safety features.

## The impact of algorithms

Individuals can view extreme, radicalising content without actively seeking it due to how social media algorithms work.

Social media algorithms are designed to show users more of the content they predict they will enjoy. Extreme content can be shared, seen and interacted with by wide audiences, which would spur the algorithms to further prioritise showing it to others as it is considered popular or entertaining. This is known as ‘algorithmic amplification’ – a snowball effect.

If an individual interacts with the content, an algorithm may suggest more similar content, assuming that the individual likes that content. It may not take into account whether the individual agrees or disagrees with the content. By showing more similar content, a user’s feed of content can come to be dominated by certain types of content, in some cases extreme. This is called a ‘filter bubble’.

This mechanism partly explains the rapid rise of Andrew Tate-related content on social media over the last few years.

High levels of engagement with clickbait headlines and short-form videos meant that algorithms recommended this content to users despite some of Tate’s official accounts being banned for things like misogyny and hate speech.

## Routes into radicalisation online

Some factors can make someone vulnerable to becoming radicalised, or form part of the radicalisation process. Often, these processes are gradual and happen over a period of time.

**Vulnerabilities:** someone who is lonely, insecure, or struggles forming relationships could be vulnerable to radicalisation if they want acceptance from a group, or wish to meet others.

**Role-assigning:** this is where someone is given tasks or a ‘role’ within an online group (eg, creating or sharing posts on social media). This can make someone feel important.

**Reward systems:** these are where someone is rewarded for their behaviour. Rewards could be financial, or they might be things like praise and compliments.

## Impact and harms

Becoming radicalised can have a serious negative impact on a young person. There are a number of possible risks and harms.

These include:

- changing the way something thinks, feels or acts
- impact on relationships (eg, family, friends or colleagues)
- acting in ways that are dangerous
- being put in risky or harmful situations
- referrals, which might affect a young person's work, education or opportunities

It is also important to know that sharing extreme content or making threats online can be illegal. It may also be illegal to search for or download some types of information, like instructions on how to carry out attacks or videos which glorify terrorism.

## Spotting the signs of radicalisation

There are a number of signs that can indicate someone is being radicalised.

These include:

- showing aggression towards a group of people
- spending more time engaging with specific content online
- expressing a strong desire for change
- becoming more withdrawn or secretive
- using new language or saying things that sound scripted
- having less interest in old activities or friends
- changes to appearance

It is important to note that showing some or all of these behaviours **does not necessarily** mean that a young person is being radicalised.

# Case studies

## Case study 1: gaming

In May 2021 a 16-year-old boy from Merseyside was arrested after his online behaviours were reported.

His actions after he was radicalised over time by far-right extremists. He initially met these individuals through the online game Fortnite and then later moved onto the social media platform 'X' (previously known as Twitter).

After struggling to form relationships with others, the young person was approached by individuals who were described in court as 'professional trolls'.

The young person's views and subsequent behaviours gradually became more and more extreme – including performing Nazi salutes while at school, and posting online his plans to carry out a terror attack on a synagogue.

Other posts were racist, transphobic, or promoted violently misogynistic 'incel culture'. The young person also had detailed instructions for the making of bombs.

After pleading guilty to racial hatred and possessing terrorist material the young person was given a 12-month referral order.

# Case studies

## Case study 2: curiosity and fixation

A month after the Manchester Arena bombing in 2017 a 17-year-old autistic boy was arrested and given a life sentence for planning a terror attack.

A police raid revealed a ‘martyrdom letter’ in which the young person declared that he was a soldier of the Islamic State, as well as weapons – including a knife and hammer – in his rucksack.

The teenager found extreme content and was ultimately radicalised online. When speaking in court he insisted that he was just curious, quoted as saying:

“I wanted to see how easy it was for people who had an interest in terrorism to go online and get information, because the police and the government are trying to crack down on terrorism and radicalisation.”



# Radicalisation and autism

The possible relationship between autism and vulnerability to radicalisation is debated by many experts.

However, certain autistic characteristics could, in some circumstances, make someone more susceptible to certain radicalisation processes or some online environments more risky.

It might also be more difficult to recognise the signs when someone with autism is (or isn't) being radicalised. This may mean that a radicalisation process isn't recognised, or that an incorrect referral to a specialist is made.

Some autistic behaviours that may increase the chances of being vulnerable and at risk are discussed below.

## Being less critical

A young person with autism might be more likely to take the things they see online at face value. They may also treat all information as being equally valid and accurate, or struggle to assess a range of sources.

Increased levels of confidence in computer skills and tech literacy may also mean that a young person thinks they are less likely to be caught out by some forms of disinformation, like AI and deepfakes.

This may mean that a young person with autism is more likely to believe extreme content – for example, in forums, social media platforms or on gaming streams – when online.

## Being highly focused

Autistic young people can become highly focused and interested in specific topics or themes. They may also be anxious or worried about current affairs and events and wish to find out more information.

When looking into and researching a topic a young person could end up focusing on extreme or harmful content without realising.

For example, a young person with an interest in WWII history might spend lots of time focusing on the Holocaust, eventually becoming exposed to radical views about certain groups of people or disinformation like Holocaust denial.

When high levels of interest are paired with social media algorithms a young person may find themselves stuck in a vicious cycle where they only see increasing amounts of similar, extreme content.

## Curiosity about boundaries

Young people with autism can be curious about boundaries online.

They may, for example, wish to get around things like content filters, a restricted mode on a search engine, or want to visit parts of the web that require tech to access (eg, the dark web).

An autistic young person may also not fully understand why certain rules and boundaries are in place to begin with.

Boundaries, restrictions and regulated online spaces are one way to help minimise extreme content and contact from harmful, radical individuals.

Wishing to push or get around these boundaries and to access less moderated areas of the internet can therefore increase the risk of radicalisation and exposure to extreme content.

## Lower risk assessment

Young people with autism may not be fully able to identify some possible risks.

They may also struggle to understand how some rules and restrictions can keep them safe, or believe that the online world doesn't have the same sorts of risks as the 'real' or offline world.

An autistic young person might also quickly assume that somebody they have met or spoken to online is their friend. This can make them more susceptible to grooming and radicalisation, especially when paired with reduced critical thinking skills.

## Reliance on social cues

Young people with autism can be reliant on social cues to regulate their behaviour. This means that they observe the things that others say and do to help them decide how they themselves should act.

Some social behaviours observed online can be harmful, for example, homophobic or misogynistic language used by a popular influencer.

If these behaviours are regularly encountered an autistic young person might feel that they are good social cues to emulate, especially if they do not understand why they may be inappropriate or offensive in the first place.

This could lead to a young person acting in extreme or radical ways.

## Social isolation

A young person with autism might feel increased levels of social isolation. They may prefer to speak to others online because the social demands are lower than in person.

They might also find that an online community gives them a sense of acceptance and confidence.

Spending more time socialising online could increase the chances that a young person is exposed to extreme views, for example, by a radical online community, users of an online game or content on a social media feed.

These risks and possible harms can be made more likely when the young person has limited critical thinking skills, is overly trusting or wishes to emulate the behaviours of others.

# Radicalisation: working with autistic young people

When working with an autistic young person, there can be several things to consider.

## Not make assumptions that content is okay

The tastes and interests of young people change continually, this is no different with autistic young people.

You may need to check in with autistic young people regularly about their online behaviours and interests or supervise some of their activity (eg, search history).

## Remember the difference between tech literacy and media literacy

Many autistic young people are tech-savvy, but this doesn't always mean that they are less vulnerable or more resilient.

Although they may be very familiar with an online environment and good at navigating it, they can still be susceptible to things like disinformation content or grooming.

## Do some research

If you're ever unfamiliar with a platform, trends or a topic that an autistic young person engages with and is interested in, the best thing you can do is find out more.

You might consider checking out a trend first-hand via social media, looking at videos explaining a platform or some safety features on the platform, or thinking about whether parts of a particular topic could be extreme or harmful.

# Working with parents and carers of autistic young people

Parents and carers of autistic young people can be supported in a number of ways. You could decide to look at general information like:

- types of extreme beliefs and ideas
- routes into radicalisation
- signs that someone is being radicalised.

Parents and carers are also best placed to recognise changes in their children. Encourage them to trust their parental instincts and to ask for help if they need it.

You could suggest that they ask themselves questions about how their child is engaging with others, or content, online. These might include:

- Is your child repeating phrases that they've heard others use?
- Is your child critical of other people's motivations?
- What sorts of content does your child engage with? What do they think about it?
- Is your child critical of sources of information?

Parents and carers with less technical skills may also need further support, especially if they have previously had difficulties keeping boundaries and restrictions in place. You may need to take a look into some parental controls or safety settings with them.

## Referrals

It can also be helpful to discuss the importance of Prevent referrals. In 2020, only 2% of Prevent referrals came from family and friends.

This is despite Prevent claiming that “friends and family are usually the first to spot the worrying behaviour changes which can indicate that a loved one is heading down a path towards radicalisation” and possible harm.

These will not always be necessary, and it is natural for some parents to be hesitant about referring their child.

However, there are circumstances where this will be the most effective (and therefore necessary) way to keep a child safe and to minimise the likelihood or severity of harm.

## Specialist organisations

There are several organisations that can offer further advice and support for parents, children, or professionals.

Note that you have a safeguarding Prevent Duty and that in some cases you will be legally required to contact your designated safeguarding lead (DSL) and/or to make a referral to Prevent. Always seek the advice of your DSL.

It is also worth considering that although many helplines offer confidential advice, they may not be able to keep information private if they consider that a situation poses an immediate or significant risk to a young person or others.

Young people can contact **Childline** to speak to professionals through their online or mobile helplines about a whole range of topics that might worry them.

[childline.org.uk/get-support](https://childline.org.uk/get-support)

**Family Lives** offers information as well as help and support lines to parents and carers. They can be contacted through mobile or a number of online channels.

[familylives.org.uk](https://familylives.org.uk)

**Educate Against Hate** provides downloadable resources and links to training modules for professionals, as well as accessible information on radicalisation and extremism.

[educateagainsthate.com](https://educateagainsthate.com)

If you wish to get more advice about a specific situation involving a young person or would like to make a referral to Prevent, you should contact **Act Early UK**.

[actearly.uk](https://actearly.uk)

There are also localised Prevent services that can offer support for families and professionals in your area.