



What is important to understand about extremist influencing?



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CHILDREN AND YOUTH ARE EXPOSED TO VIOLENT AND EXTREMIST MATERIAL ONLINE

The radicalisation of children and young people, and their exposure to extremist influences online, has become a significant concern both in Finland and internationally. Social media platforms and gaming environments have made extremist ideas and communities easily accessible. Hate speech and violent material have already become commonplace on many online platforms – and, unfortunately, also part of the digital reality for many children and young people.

Young people are particularly attractive targets for extremist movements, as youth is a development phase in which a person's own worldview and ways of thinking are still taking shape. Young people's thinking is often black and white, and their ability to understand complex relationships of causes and effects is still developing. That is why extremist material can be particularly appealing to young people as it provides clear and simple answers to complex questions. The key development tasks of adolescence include the formation of one's own identity and separating from parents. At the same time, young people are still practising key life skills, such as emotional management and self-regulation. This makes them particularly receptive to external influences.

As a parent, it is good to be aware that children and young people are likely to encounter violent and hostile material online that is intended to influence their attitudes. Potential risks should be discussed with children and young people in advance and it should be ensured that they have the necessary skills and competence for safe internet use. The most important thing is to show genuine interest in the young person's digital life and to support them in challenging situations.

Exposure to violent and hostile material causes anxiety and fear and overall has a negative impact on mental health. Extremist material also undermines trust in a democratic society, normalises violent and discriminatory attitudes, increases polarisation and makes it difficult to approach matters objectively.

Violent radicalisation

Violent radicalisation is a process in which values, attitudes and the worldview become more polarised and begin to contain violent traits. Violent radicalisation can lead to extremism as it progresses.

Violent extremism

Violent extremism refers to the support, encouragement, threat or actual use of violence based on an ideology. Extremist worldviews are typically united by opposition to diversity, equal human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Extremist online influencing

Extremist online influencing is an activity that uses online platforms to spread and normalise violent ideologies and to attract new people to participate in the activities of the extremist group. Influencing is targeted at both large groups and individually selected individuals.

WHAT KIND OF MATERIAL DO YOUNG PEOPLE ENCOUNTER?

Extremist content is characterised by the glorification and justification of violence as well as belittling, degradation and deliberate dehumanisation of certain groups of people. Such content also aims to undermine trust in democracy. Young people in particular are exposed to discriminative and racist material as well as speech that incites hatred. It is also common to come across images depicting various acts of violence online.

Extremist content is spread on social media platforms and in games that are popular among children and young people. Tiktok, Instagram, Telegram, Roblox, Minecraft, Discord and Snapchat are familiar to many young people and are used as tools for extremist online influencing.

Often, young people do not need to actively seek out violent or hateful content, but they are exposed to such materials on social media and gaming platforms regardless, for instance through recommendation algorithms or content shared by friends.

Extremist content can be difficult to identify because it is often disguised by humour, memes or code language. Often, the aim is to influence on an unconscious level, in which case the extremist message is consciously faded out.

Means of extremist online influence:

- **Using code language, double meanings and references** – The purpose is to create a “secret inner circle” in order to promote cohesion and to portray other groups of people as enemies.
- **Using humour and popular culture** – Entertaining content appeals to young people, fades out hostile messages and increases identification.
- **Emotionally appealing communication** – The content exploits feelings of injustice and bitterness and aims to channel them into hostile attitudes.
- **Spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories** – Spreading incorrect and false information to justify a violent ideology.
- **Using game related imagery and gamified elements** – Popular digital games are transformed into versions that promote hostile ideologies.
- **Grooming** – The groomer seeks to establish a trusting relationship with the child in order to manipulate them into extremist activity later.

WHAT SIGNS MAY SUGGEST THAT YOUTH HAS BEEN INFLUENCED BY EXTREMISM OR HAS DEVELOPED VIOLENT ATTITUDES?

Pay attention to the way one speaks. Speech makes thinking and attitudes visible.

Repeated use of harmful or discriminatory language should be taken seriously and addressed in time. Examples of such signs are:

- Questioning the principles of diversity and equality, for example by belittling girls and women or expressing negative views toward sexual and gender minorities.
- Using degrading or discriminatory remarks disguised as humor, such as making demeaning jokes about specific groups of people.
- An emphasised us versus them thinking, where they are wrong, despised or dehumanised (i.e. they are compared to animals or invasive species, for example).
- A sense of victimhood, where one feels targeted, mistreated, or marginalized by other groups of people, or the recognition of human rights for other groups.
- Considering one's own worldview, thoughts and qualities or those shared with a community to be superior to other perspectives and qualities.

Exposure to extremist content often increases anxiety and fear. In some cases, young people may also withdraw and isolate themselves. If one is highly reluctant to discuss their online experiences or their social circles and interests become significantly narrow, it is important to make an effort to engage and explore what may be going.

HOW TO PROTECT YOUTH FROM EXTREMIST INFLUENCE?

1. Support youth in processing difficult emotions and encourage positive interaction with different people.

- Support young people to form meaningful relationships and ensure they have access to safe and supportive communities, since extremist groups often appeal to the need to belong and feel valued.
- Encourage interaction with people from different backgrounds and promote empathy, as strong empathy skills help build meaningful relationships and enhance the ability to understand other peoples' experiences and perspectives.
- Support young people in dealing with difficult and unfair experiences, as a sense of injustice can contribute to the development of extremist views.
- If youth experiences social exclusion or feelings of being an outsider, process these experiences together to prevent them from developing into bitterness or hatred toward others.
- Practice emotional skills together with youth, including identifying, expressing, and managing emotions. Feelings of uncertainty or a lack of perspective about the future can cause fear and anxiety, which are also actively exploited in extremist influencing.

2. Show interest in the digital life of youth.

- Remember that digital environments play an important role in young people's lives—they are key tools in communication and formation of meaningful relationships, and also important spaces for building one's own identity. For young people, the internet is also a place to learn new things, relax, be entertained and maintain relationships with friends.
- Don't hesitate to ask—you're not expected to know everything. Invite youth to tell you about topical social media trends, the platforms they use, and what they encounter there.
- Listen genuinely—do not dismiss or ignore online experiences. What happens online affects young people's well-being just as much as offline experiences. Open interest and discussion create a sense of safety and support youth in processing their online experiences.
- Do not blame or punish young people if they tell about encountering disturbing content online. Remember to also stay calm yourself — this will make youth feel safe when discussing difficult and upsetting topics.

3. Strengthen youth safety in digital environments.

- Engage in discussions with youth about topical online phenomena: For example what kinds of themes disinformation typically focuses on and what are the common mechanisms used to legitimize violence in digital spaces.
- Discuss with young people what to do when encountering extremist content: Ask them to tell a safe adult about the content they encountered, not to share the content or react to it, and to report the content to the service provider. If necessary, inform the authorities together.
- Learn about the security settings and reporting practices of digital platforms together with young people. For example, many platforms allow you to limit the visibility of malicious content.

4. Emphasise equality and the positive effects of democracy.

- Encourage young people to interact with diverse people and to respect differing viewpoints. Rather than reinforcing polarization, highlight shared traits and common human experiences.
- Discuss freedom of speech and remind youth that it also involves responsibility and respect for other people - freedom of speech does not entitle the violation of anyone's human rights.
- Emphasise the positive impacts of equality, human rights and a democratic society on both individuals and communities.

Hate speech not only harms the individual, but it also erodes trust in society, increases polarisation and weakens the fundamental pillars of democracy. Discussing the digital world is also important because it helps young people learn to recognise the broader impacts of harmful content and understand that hate-fuelled speech and exposure to violence in online environments shape people's attitudes and actions beyond the online sphere.

Do not hesitate to ask for help if you have serious concerns about the well-being of youth.

- Contact the parties involved in young people's daily life, such as schools, educational institutions or youth services, for support
- Local multidisciplinary Anchor teams provide support in issues related to the radicalisation of young people
- You can report a concern and get help from the police in the Net tip online service

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