

Building resilience to extremism through education

Summary of research findings



Open Innovation Team

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Why did we commission this research?

Data shows that children and young people (CYP) are increasingly being referred to Prevent and arrested for terrorism offences.

Last year, we commissioned HM Government's Open Innovation Team to help us understand how children and young people's resilience to radicalisation and extremism can be built through education.

We commissioned this work to better understand 'what works', so we can accurately assess where and how we can best support the sector.

This document summarises the research findings that schools may find useful when thinking about their own approach to building resilience.

A huge thank you to the Open Innovation Team for conducting this research and shaping additional Prevent/building resilience support to the sector.

Context, drivers and trends

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There was consensus among experts on the context, drivers and trends regarding extremism which many will be familiar with.

Key drivers rooted in unmet psychological and social needs

- Lack of personal identity
- Lack of sense of agency over their life
- Lack of belonging
- Grievance narratives

Extremism can offer a false sense of safety or belonging.

Radicalisation pathways are complex

- Pathways cannot be predicted
- Drivers detailed to the left can affect anyone, many who experience these will not be radicalised
- No standard profile of an extremist

Trust in public institutions is low

- Includes mainstream press and media
- Young people are driven to other, unregulated platforms
- Here, they can quickly encounter hateful & intolerant narratives and mis/ disinformation

How can we build resilience?

Six key approaches

Six key approaches were identified by a range of experts including academics, school leaders and practitioners, based on the key drivers identified.

These resilience building approaches complement and reinforce each other and could form an integrated strategy.

Citizenship education

**Critical thinking and
media literacy teaching**

**Developing personal
identity**

Mixing with others

**Facilitating open
dialogue in schools**

**A whole school
approach**

Citizenship education

- **Citizenship education can provide CYP with a positive avenue to pursue change.** Understanding our democratic system supports them to have a legitimate voice on the issues that concern them, reducing feelings of powerlessness that can fuel extremism.
- Teachers and experts **support the core of Fundamental British Values, but find the current form alienating and superficial in practice.** FBVs are often presented as fixed and prescriptive rather than concepts CYP can actively engage with.
- There is evidence that **citizenship education can increase support for democracy** and commitment to participate in it, but this is highly dependent on the quality of delivery.
- **Opportunities for participatory learning and debate are key.** Open classroom environments where students are supported to come to their own conclusions are most effective, and emphasis on local contexts can promote a sense of belonging.
- **Strengthening the philosophy and political science content of citizenship could increase its depth and rigour.** Although citizenship is currently part of the KS3 and 4 curriculum, its emphasis has changed over the past few decades. Currently, it is often incorporated into PSHE and taught by non-experts.

Critical thinking and media literacy

- Critical thinking and media literacy can help CYP identify the flaws in extremist narratives, and the dis/misinformation that fuels them.
- **Media literacy** is the ability to access, understand, and create communications across various contexts, and is important for discerning reliability of information. **Critical thinking** is the analysis of information to form a judgement.
- **These skills need to be appropriate to the online world**, where CYP are exposed to a large amount of information from many sources, usually lacking traditional editorial oversight.
- **Critical thinking should go beyond fact-checking.** Students may be able to form better judgements if they learn how knowledge is constructed, validated, and challenged.
- **Integrative complexity** is a critical thinking approach that **can address extreme and polarised thinking.** It involves the ability to think broadly and flexibly and recognise multiple perspectives.
- **Awareness of cognitive biases and the mechanics of social media could help CYP avoid being manipulated.** Understanding factors like the positioning of content helps students realise why they might be seeing certain information that may not be true.

Developing personal identity

- Understanding how identities shape behaviours and attitudes could **build resilience to extremist narratives** that use a sense of purpose and **group identity** to promote intolerance.
- **Exploring personal identity in a structured way can help CYP navigate the development of a sense of self.** It involves assessing how cultural inputs from media, relationships and social groups shape how we understand and see ourselves.
- Having a clear sense of identity can also build resilience by helping CYP **understand their values and set life goals.**
- **Identity mapping** visually represents different aspects of who we are. Experts believe that a focus on plural identities – encouraging CYP to see themselves as multifaceted – **builds adaptability and tolerance for complexity and difference.**
- A full **statutory curriculum for PSHE could strengthen the exploration of identity** in schools. Identity is sometimes addressed as part of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, but the depth and quality of this teaching varies.

Mixing with others

- **Meaningful interaction in diverse groups builds trust, fosters empathy and counters prejudice**, which can build resilience to extremism.
- **Simply being in a shared space with other groups may be insufficient.** CYP could work together towards a common goal, and facilitators should be trained to manage potential conflicts.
- **Diversity initiatives should recognise power dynamics** and lived experience of inequality, to prevent their reproduction in school environments and facilitate genuine understanding.
- **Collaborative community-based projects** where young people work together on shared goals – such as volunteering, local events, or school-community partnerships – can fit into citizenship or PSHE and make learning more locally relevant.
- There is **broad consensus on the effectiveness of mixing initiatives** for fostering social cohesion and reducing prejudice, from general evidence for contact theory and impact evaluations of mixing programmes.
- More research is needed to determine **whether these positive impacts are sustained** over time.

Facilitating open dialogue

- **Open dialogue can help students feel heard and valued**, reducing grievances that could escalate into extremism. Evidence suggests that addressing subjective feelings of disenfranchisement is important in preventing radicalisation.
- Open dialogue in schools involves **honest discussion about difficult issues, facilitated by a teacher**. It allows participants to express their perspectives, emphasising active listening, mutual understanding, and constructive engagement with differences.
- Constructively engaging with other perspectives can develop **empathy and critical thinking skills**, and teachers have opportunities to address misinformation.
- There are **currently inadequate opportunities for open dialogue in schools**. Low teacher confidence, fear of controversy and limited space in the curriculum are barriers.
- **Formalised opportunities for dialogue can be built into curriculum subjects**. Structured Academic Controversy and role-play exercises help CYP take up different perspectives and form nuanced compromise positions, and could be used in citizenship, history or English.

A whole school approach

- **School culture can help address the drivers of extremism** by being a place where CYP experience that they matter, learn to navigate the interests of others and feel a sense of belonging.
- Theoretical learning can be embedded by **a whole school approach that embodies democratic values.** The principles that are taught to CYP can be undermined if their school experience doesn't reflect them.
- This ethos involves consistently **integrating inclusivity, pluralism, and open dialogue across the broader school culture** as well as the curriculum. This includes behaviour policies, approaches to dealing with conflict and anti-bullying practices.
- **School councils or holding votes can be ways to build trust** and promote collaborative decision-making. Arguments or controversies can be used as opportunities to practice open dialogue and conflict resolution.
- **Involving parents and caregivers** in decision making and resolving conflict **can enhance a sense of community** and shared responsibility.

Summary and future DfE work

Summary

DfE is committed to supporting the sector in building resilience in children and young people through education.

To support putting some of this into practice, we will be gathering various case study examples where schools are demonstrating these approaches. We know many that many schools will be doing these and doing them well.

We are also working to create additional teacher training to upskill and raise teacher confidence in facilitating open dialogue on difficult topics in the classroom.

This work will be published on our Educate Against Hate website [here](#)