

Parental Guidance

Safeguarding autistic children and young people from radicalisation





Contents

1. [Introduction and Background](#)
2. [Overview of guidance](#)
3. [Myth busting](#)
4. [What is radicalisation?](#)
5. [What do I do if think my child is being radicalized?](#)
6. [Pathway to intended violence](#)
7. [Online safety](#)
8. [Having difficult conversations](#)
9. [FAQs](#)
10. [Definitions of key terms](#)
11. [Further contacts for advice and signposting](#)

Introduction and background

We are seeing a growing number of children and young people exposed to the risk of radicalisation, both online and offline. What may begin as innocent conversations or interactions can, over time, develop into more concerning influences if not recognised and addressed early. It is vital that *all* children and young people are equipped with the knowledge, confidence, and critical thinking skills to identify and challenge extremist ideas. By raising awareness of the risks associated with radicalisation and encouraging respectful, open dialogue, we can empower young people to develop their own informed views. This not only helps them stay safe but also fosters an appreciation for diverse perspectives which is an essential part of building resilience against extremist narratives.

Protecting children from radicalisation involves understanding the potential risks, recognising early signs of vulnerability, and creating a safe space for open conversations. It's important to be aware of how online and offline influences can shape a child's thinking, and how to build their resilience through critical thinking, confidence, and a strong sense of belonging.

This Guidance Booklet and Toolkit have been designed to help you support your child in developing the knowledge and skills needed to build resilience and stay safe. Research shows that individuals with autism are no more likely than anyone else to engage in violence linked to extremist causes. Autism is a spectrum, meaning every child has a unique set of characteristics, strengths, and challenges. This resource highlights some of the core characteristics commonly associated with autism and provides practical strategies and activities to help you guide your child in recognising and resisting radicalisation.

The Toolkit contains high quality, adaptable autism friendly resources for you to use with your child in order to discuss some of the themes and issues in the Guidance in an appropriate manner. This will help encourage critical thinking and transferable life skills that children and young people can draw on in future to build personal resilience to propaganda and concerning beliefs that may lead them into harm.

The Guidance Booklet and Toolkit was developed with a range of partners from both Crawley Borough Council (CBC) and West Sussex County Council, as well as a range of organisations and young people. We would like to thank them in so generously lending their expertise in order to create this important resource.

We hope these resources help you better understand the risks associated with radicalisation and provide you with useful autism-specific resources to support your child. *Every* child deserves the opportunity to develop the critical thinking skills needed to stay safe, and this toolkit is designed to ensure that children with Autism are equally equipped to recognise and respond to potential dangers with confidence.



Children aged 11 to 15 accounted for the largest proportion of referrals: 2,729 referrals (40%).

Young people aged 16 to 17 made up the second largest group:

892 referrals (13%).

Combined, this means over 50% of all Prevent referrals were for individuals aged 11 to 17

Home Office official Prevent statistics for the year ending 31 March 2024



Source: [Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2023 to March 2024 - GOV.UK](#)



Overview: Helping parents and carers understand autism and safety around radicalisation

This guide explains how your child or young person may be exposed to extremist views and the potential risks of radicalisation. This slide offers a brief overview of the key points covered in the guidance. You will find explanations of some key terms at the end of the guide.

To remember

- **Autism does not increase the risk of violence.** Children and young people with autism are no more likely than anyone else to commit violent acts for a cause or belief.
- **Some young people may be more susceptible in certain situations.** In some cases, a mix of factors, like social isolation, a strong need for belonging, or exposure to harmful content, can make a young person more at risk of being influenced by extreme ideas. However, there is no single cause, and not everyone exposed to these factors will be affected.
- **Awareness helps us protect and support all children.** By understanding these risks, we can better support all young people, especially those with additional needs, to stay safe, feel included, and build resilience.

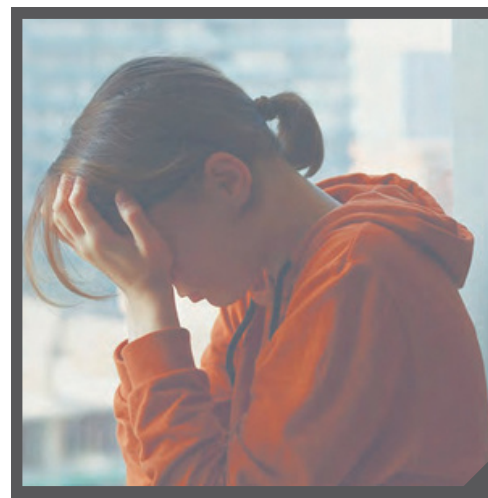
Examples of some of the areas of difference that may impact autistic children and young people that you might want to consider when thinking how best to protect your child from radicalisation:

- **Differences in social communication** may lead to increased vulnerability due to misunderstanding the intentions of others. They may have found interactions with key adults less helpful than hoped
- **Difficulty understanding others' perspectives** (Theory of Mind), which may lead to accepting radical views without question
- **Special interests and enthusiasms** may result in becoming hyper-focused on topics of interest which can include social media and news. This can be exploited by those promoting extremist ideas
- **Differences in processing information** mean they may be rigid, or singular focused in their thinking and find it harder to switch to alternative viewpoints or grey areas
- **Can be detail focused** (central coherence) and may focus on details and not see the whole picture
- **Uncertainty about what is right or wrong**, especially in complex or emotionally charged situations
- **Heightened sense of fairness and justice**, which can be manipulated by narratives that frame issues as deeply unjust
- **Social isolation**, which may increase the appeal of belonging to a group or cause, and a possible preference for online interaction
- **Social naivety**, making it harder to detect manipulation or harmful intentions
- **Literal thinking**, which can make it difficult to interpret hidden motives, sarcasm or inference



The online world offers young people valuable opportunities to connect, learn, and socialise. However, it also presents risks, as it can be used by individuals or groups seeking to radicalise and exploit children and young people. That's why it's important to have regular, open conversations with your child about their online activity. These discussions can help them feel supported and confident in making safe choices. For practical tips and guidance, refer to the 'Online Safety' section of this booklet.

All young people need safe, non-judgemental spaces where they can explore their thoughts, ideas, and concerns. You can support your child by giving them time to process what they're thinking and by actively listening to their point of view. Creating this kind of open dialogue helps build trust and encourages them to share more freely. For tips on how to approach sensitive topics, take a look at the 'Having Difficult Conversations' section of this booklet.



If you're concerned that a young person may be at risk of radicalisation, the most important step you can take is to share your concerns with someone who can help. You can:

- **Call or contact** your child's school or college and ask to speak to the Designated Safeguarding Lead
- Have a look at www.actearly.uk where you can share your concerns in confidence
- Speak to your local Police Prevent Team by ringing **101** and asking to speak to them. You can find further advice on where to report your concerns in the '[What do I do if I think my child is being radicalised?](#)' section of the booklet.



First some myth-busting: what you might hear and the truth behind it

You may come across opinions or concerns from other parents, online forums, or even your own child. Here are some common myths and the facts to help you feel more confident and informed.

Myth: “This stops my child from sharing their opinions.”

✓ **Truth:**

Support and guidance doesn’t silence young people; it encourages them to explore and discuss difficult topics in a safe and respectful way.

By having open conversations, they learn how to:

- Think critically about extreme views
- Respectfully challenge harmful ideas
- Understand the risks of being drawn into dangerous thinking

You can use the Toolkit resources to help build these skills together.

Myth: “No one will listen to me or my child.”

✓ **Truth:**

Your voice—and your child’s voice—matters. Whether it’s school, college, the local council, police, or Prevent teams, the goal is always to:

- Listen to your concerns
 - Understand your child’s needs
 - Offer support that keeps them safe and well
- This is about care and safeguarding, not judgment or punishment.

Myth: “They only care about certain types of extremism.”

✓ **Truth:**

Prevent supports people at risk from **all forms of extremism**.

This includes:

- Right-wing extremism
- Islamist extremism
- Animal rights extremism
- Mixed, unclear, or unstable ideologies

Every concern is taken seriously, and support is tailored to the individual—not based on a specific belief system.

Myth: “If I report my concerns, my child will get in trouble.”

✓ **Truth:**

Raising a concern is not the same as reporting a crime.

Unless your child has done something that clearly breaks the law, any support offered through **Channel** is **confidential, non-criminal, and focused on safeguarding**.

Yes, the police may be involved—but only as part of a wider team of professionals (like teachers, social workers, and health staff) who are there to help. Their role is to **protect**, not punish.

The sooner you speak up, the sooner support can be put in place—for your child and your whole family.

Myth: “Autistic children are more likely to be violent.”

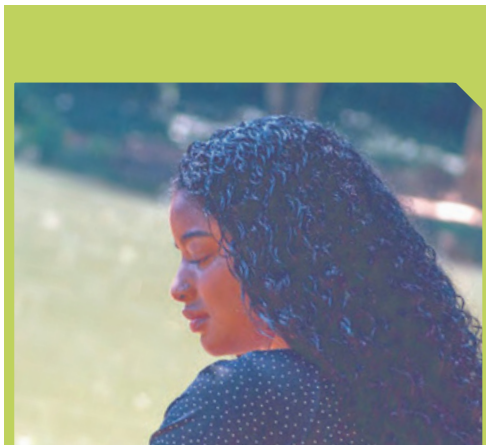
✓ **Truth:**

There is **no evidence** that children or young people with Autism are more likely to commit violent acts than their neurotypical peers.

However, they may have certain characteristics such as difficulty understanding others’ intentions or being drawn to specific interests that mean they may need more support and guidance in understanding the risks of radicalisation.

That’s why it’s so important to:

- Build their **critical thinking skills**
- Help them understand different perspectives
- Support them in recognising and questioning extreme or dangerous ideas



Myth: “My child wouldn’t get involved in anything like this—they know right from wrong.”

✓ **Truth:**

Many parents feel this way and it’s completely understandable. But the reality is that young people are still learning how to recognise risks, especially online. Even if your child knows the difference between right and wrong, they may:

- Struggle to spot when someone is trying to influence them in a harmful way
 - Come across extreme or inappropriate content without realising it’s dangerous
 - Not fully understand when their own behaviour crosses a line
- For children with autism, this can be even more challenging. They may:
- Have a more limited understanding of social risks
 - Take things literally or miss hidden meanings
 - Be more trusting or focused on specific interests, which others could exploit
- The online world changes quickly, and it wasn’t designed with children’s safety in mind. Age checks are often unreliable, and harmful content can be just a click away.

What Can You Do?

The most important thing is to have regular, open conversations with your child about what they’re doing online. These chats don’t need to be formal; they just need to happen often and in a way that feels safe and supportive. You can find helpful tips and conversation starters in the Online Safety section of this booklet.



Myth: “People with autism can’t form relationships—so they’re unlikely to be groomed.”

✓ **Truth:**

While some individuals with Autism may find social situations more challenging, that doesn’t mean they don’t want meaningful relationships or a sense of belonging. An autistic individual may feel more comfortable online where they can engage with others in a more predictable and structured environment, and it could be here that they are befriended by someone with harmful intentions.

Having a sense of kinship, security and belonging applies just as much to someone with autism as it does to anyone else, and unfortunately extremists will exploit this.

Myth: “People with autism don’t feel emotions, so they’re unlikely to care about extreme ideas.”

✓ **Truth:**

People with autism absolutely do feel emotions—they just might express them differently from neurotypical individuals.

They can have strong beliefs, deep interests, and passionate views about the world around them especially when they perceive some injustice. Unfortunately, this emotional depth can be **exploited and used** to manipulate or influence them toward harmful ideologies.

Myth: “You can’t change someone’s behaviour once they’re drawn in.”

✓ **Truth:**

Change is always possible—with the right support.

If a young person with autism becomes involved in harmful thinking or behaviour, it doesn’t mean they’re beyond help. In fact, support through programmes like **Channel** focuses on:

- Understanding the young person’s interests and motivations
- Encouraging positive passions and safe communities
- Gently guiding them away from harmful influences, not by arguing, but by offering better alternatives

Just like anyone else, young people with autism can grow, learn, and change when they feel supported and understood.

Myth-busting

resources

Some useful websites for helping you with fact checking and 'myth-busting' generally:

The Full Fact Toolkit – this was originally developed to be aimed at 14-16-year olds. It is an excellent resource for fact checking and spotting misinformation and 'fake news', particularly on the internet, and could be an opportunity for challenging views and 'myth-busting' fake news:



www.fullfact.org/toolkit

Snopes – this is an excellent fact checking website for misinformation, fake news, urban legends, conspiracy theories etc. Really useful and comprehensive:



www.snopes.com

BBC verify – a 'news service dedicated to clearing up fake news stories and finding the truth':



www.bbc.co.uk/news/bbcverify

Channel 4 Fact Check – 'Goes behind the spin to dig out the truth and separate political fact from fiction':



www.channel4.com/news/factcheck

Factcheck.org – factcheck posts and debunk false [news stories](#):



www.factcheck.org

LGfL – films and resources to 'help children spot fake news and build digital literacy skills'. Aimed at primary aged children but may provide useful advice nonetheless:



<https://lgfl.net/safeguarding>

PolitiFact.com – uses a 'Truth-O-Meter' rating which makes it quick and visual to see whether something is true or false:



www.politifact.com

The News Literacy Project – 'provides programs and resources for educators and the public to teach, learn and share the abilities needed to be smart, active consumers of news and information and equal and engaged participants in a democracy':



www.newslit.org



A Commission on Fake News report published in June 2018 found that only 2% of children in the UK have the critical literacy skills they need to tell if a news story is real or fake.

LGfL; Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills in Schools, run by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Literacy and the National Literacy Trust, June 2018.



What is radicalisation and extremism?

Radicalisation is the process by which someone begins to adopt extreme views on political, social, or religious issues. Not all radical ideas are harmful—many positive changes in society have come from people who challenged the status quo and pushed for progress.

However, **extremism** occurs when someone believes that using fear, violence, or threats is justified to achieve their goals. This becomes dangerous when individuals or groups try to force change through harmful or illegal actions, rather than through peaceful or democratic means.

Violent Extremism is defined by the Crown Prosecution Service as:

“The demonstration of unacceptable behaviour by using any means or medium to express views, which:

- Encourage, justify or glorify terrorist violence in furtherance of particular beliefs;
- Seek to provoke others to terrorist acts;
- Foster hatred which might lead to inter-community violence in the UK.”

Children accounted for 69% of cases adopted by Channel in 2023/24.

Published December 2024

[Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2023 to March 2024 - GOV.UK](#)

Prevent and Channel work together to safeguard vulnerable individuals from being drawn into terrorism.

Through early intervention and tailored support, thousands of people have been helped to move away from harmful ideologies and towards more positive futures.

Home Office, Prevent and Channel Factsheet, 2024

Source: Prevent and Channel factsheet – 2024 – Home Office in the media



What should I consider when thinking about how to protect my child from the risk of radicalisation?

There are many reasons why someone might become radicalised, and these can vary greatly depending on the individual and their circumstances. Factors such as low self-esteem, a sense of not belonging, or feeling misunderstood can increase a child's vulnerability. However, radicalisation is rarely the result of a single issue. It typically involves a combination of influences, including exposure to extreme ideas and ideologies.

Our goal is to reduce this risk in every way we can. By understanding some of the core characteristics of autism, we can better support autistic children in building resilience and recognising potential dangers, helping them stay safe from individuals or groups who may seek to exploit them.

- **Theory of mind** – difficulty in understanding or empathizing with other people's thoughts, feelings, or perspectives may make it harder for your child to question extreme viewpoints or fully grasp the potential consequences of certain actions.
- **Special interests** – your child may have intense interests that they enjoy exploring in great detail. While this can be a strength, it may also lead them to focus on topics that raise concern, especially if they are researching these interests online without guidance.

In some cases, this behaviour may be linked to **counterfeit deviance** where socially naive behaviour is misinterpreted as intentional. This could result in your child being drawn to darker or more troubling content without fully understanding the risks or dangers involved.

- **'Black and white' thinking** – differences in processing information can make the simple, clear-cut messages often used in extremist narratives seem logical and appealing. These ideologies may resonate strongly with your child, especially if they involve perceived injustices. Due to a **heightened sense of fairness and justice**, your child may have intense emotional reactions to such content, making it important to help them explore more balanced perspectives.

- **Literal thinking** can make it difficult for autistic children to recognise nuance, sarcasm, or hidden meanings. As a result, they may be more susceptible to accepting extreme ideologies at face value, without questioning the underlying assumptions or intentions.

• **Social isolation** – this is a consistent risk factor in cases of violent extremism. An autistic child may be more vulnerable to isolation due to difficulties understanding social norms and unwritten rules, a preference for solitude, or negative past experiences in face-to-face social settings. There can be an increased risk of bullying from peers which may increase feelings of social isolation and an autistic child may not be able or motivated to seek out help from key adults in school. These challenges can make it harder to form meaningful connections increasing the risk of seeking belonging in unsafe or harmful spaces.

• **Social naivety** – autistic children may have difficulty interpreting social situations and responding in ways that align with typical social expectations. As a result, they might struggle to recognise others' intentions or understand the potential consequences of their own actions. This can make them more vulnerable to manipulation or exploitation, especially in unfamiliar or unstructured environments.

• **Sensory processing differences** - The online environment can be especially appealing because it offers a sense of control over sensory input. For example, if your child is seeking stimulation, the internet can provide fast-paced, visually rich content. On the other hand, if they feel overwhelmed, they can easily pause a game or stop watching a video to regulate their sensory experience. This flexibility can make online spaces feel safer and more manageable, but it also highlights the importance of guiding their digital choices to ensure they remain safe and appropriate.

• **Low self-esteem** – Extremist groups often use powerful tactics to create a strong sense of identity, belonging, and trust. For children and young people who struggle with low self-esteem or have difficulty fitting into other social groups, this sense of inclusion can be especially appealing.

This guidance and toolkit will help you to mitigate some of these concerns.

What do I do if I think my child is being radicalised?

This list has been taken from the WSCC website and is by no means exhaustive. You know your child best and if you are concerned, then please feel free to have an informal chat with a professional, as detailed below.

Potential signs:

- isolation/withdrawal from family/friends
- obsession with and secrecy around the internet/social networking sites
- becoming uncooperative/disengaged
- using abusive/aggressive/extremist views/comments/ threats/language
- fascination with weapons/chemicals/explosives/extremist activity/events
- significant changes in relationships
- the use of seemingly scripted speech that is new and expresses unusually strong opinions
- change in behaviour or appearance due to new influences
- seeking to recruit/'groom' others to an extremist ideology
- possession of violent extremist literature.

Who can I talk to if I am worried?

If you are worried that your child may be becoming radicalised, then the contacts below can provide support and advice:

- Your child's school, college or university. Ring and ask to speak to the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) about your concerns.
- call **101** and [ask for to speak to your local Prevent Team](#)

A new dedicated website www.actearly.uk and advice line has been set up to provide advice, guidance and support for anyone who is concerned that someone they know may be at risk from being radicalised by extremists or extremist content online.

You can also call the national Police Prevent Advice Line on **0800 011 3764** to share your concerns in confidence. The sooner you reach out, the sooner the person you care about can be protected.

If you are concerned about **online material** that a young person may have encountered, which promotes or encourages terrorism, extremism or violence, then you can report it **anonymously** on [Report online material promoting terrorism or extremism - GOV.UK](#)

If you are concerned that something urgent and potentially dangerous is happening. You should:

- report suspicious activity to the police by calling

confidentially on **0800 789 321** or by completing the form on the ACT campaign website which allows you to report any concerns you have about a family member.

- If you feel it is an emergency, call **999** and explain your concerns.

What could happen if there are concerns?

If someone like a teacher, college staff member, or Prevent team has concerns about your child, the first step is usually a supportive conversation. This is nothing to worry about. It's often just an informal chat to:

- Share any observations
- Offer advice or support
- Help you understand what to look out for in the future

If the concerns are minor

You may be offered early help or support as a family. This could include things like mentoring, counselling, or other services to help your child stay safe and well.

If there are more serious concerns

- If professionals believe your child may be at risk of being influenced by extremist ideas, they might make a **Prevent referral**. This doesn't mean your child is in trouble - it's about getting the right support early. The referral is reviewed by the police:
- If they decide there's **no risk**, the case is closed, and other services may still offer support.
 - If they believe there is a **potential risk**, your child may be referred to something called the **Channel Panel**.



Case study

"Callum was a teenager whose teacher became aware of his involvement in promoting a far-right Facebook page which had upset another student. He had been invited to "secret" group meetings connected to football games.

Without family influence around he was getting attention and social support through his involvement in this group. He said he didn't have a problem with most people - just Muslims: Muslims were not like "us". He said he'd watch them all "doing their Sharia law."

Through the Channel process, the school worked with the police, social care and a local youth group to support him through challenging the ideology he had developed, providing him with career advice, and connecting him to an ethnically diverse local youth group. His confidence grew, as did the bond with his family.

He dismissed the ideology that he had connected himself to and realised he had been heading down the wrong path."

Source: Gov.uk Channel Programme, updated Dec 2018 (www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/the-channel-programme)

What is the Channel Panel?

The Channel Panel is a group of professionals (like teachers, health workers, and social workers) who work together to support young people who may be vulnerable to radicalisation. The focus is always on **care, support, and safeguarding**, not punishment.

The important thing to note is that the Channel Panel does not criminalise in any way.

It is a voluntary (you or your young person would have to give permission to allow panel members to discuss your situation), confidential programme which aims to support your young person and ensure they or others are protected from harm.

Where else can I get help or support?

Educate against Hate Gives parents and school staff practical advice on protecting children from extremism and radicalisation.



www.educateagainsthate.com



NSPCC Provide support and tips to help you keep children safe



<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/>



Your Space Information for younger people about radicalisation and extremism.



www.westsussex.gov.uk/education-children-and-families/your-space/life-radicalisation-and-extremism



Internet Matters Radicalisation – advice on helping to prevent children becoming radicalised online.



www.internetmatters.org/issues/radicalisation



Sussex Police Advice and contact details regarding the Prevent agenda and terrorism.



www.sussex.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/t/terrorism-in-the-uk

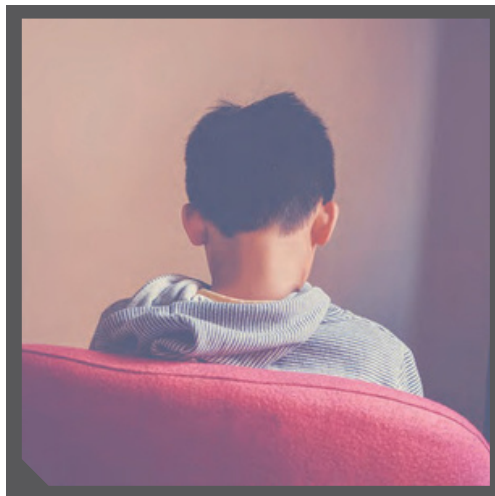
Understanding the pathway to intended violence

Experts have developed a model called the **Pathway to Intended Violence** to help identify the steps someone might take if they are moving toward committing a targeted act of violence. This model has been adapted over time to better understand how and why this might happen.

As expressed before, there are many factors influencing why an individual may develop extremist ideas and beliefs. That's why it's so important to be aware of the **early warning signs** or **risk factors** that could suggest a young person is being drawn into harmful thinking or behaviour. If these signs are recognised early, the right support can be put in place to help them stay safe and avoid being exploited.

In this guide, we've included an adapted version of the **Pathway to Intended Violence** to help you understand how this process might unfold. You'll also find an **autism-specific version** in the Parental Toolkit, which you can explore with your child if appropriate.

Please keep in mind that this is just a model, it doesn't predict behaviour, and it won't apply to every situation. But it can be a useful tool to help you spot concerning patterns and seek help early, so that any potential harm can be prevented.

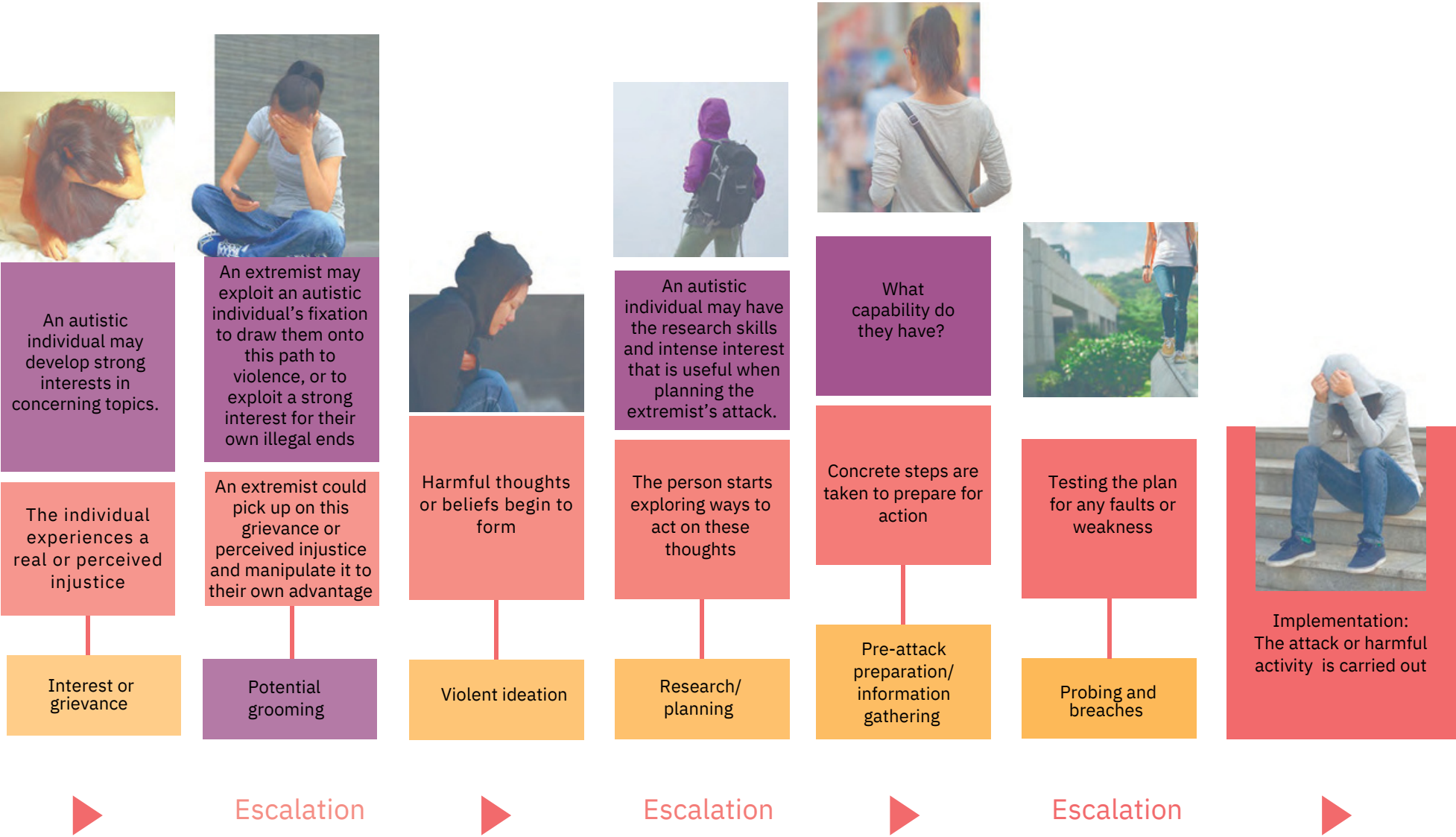


It could be like getting into gangs on the street, [you] might not know what you are getting yourself into.

Quote from an autistic young person



Adapted pathway to intended violence



De-escalation: A Supportive Approach

Putting the right support can in place to help children stay safe and avoid being exploited

Identify Early Signs

Be alert to vulnerabilities or concerning behaviours that may indicate distress, isolation, or harmful thinking.

Raise and Report Concerns

Share your observations with trusted professionals or safeguarding teams to ensure timely support.

Provide Positive Guidance

Gently redirect the young person away from violent or harmful interests by offering safe, constructive alternatives.

Build Resilience and Fulfilment

Help them feel valued and connected by fostering supportive relationships, meaningful activities, and a sense of purpose.

Online safety

The internet is a big part of everyday life for young people. It helps them learn, connect with others, and explore their interests. Whether they're chatting with friends, sharing memes, or watching videos, the internet offers countless opportunities for learning, connection, and entertainment.

But while the internet has many benefits, it also comes with risks—especially when it comes to who they might meet and what they might be exposed to.

The following sections will help you understand the common online risks that children and young people may encounter and provide practical guidance to help you reduce these risks and keep your child safe online.

How technology can make children vulnerable to radicalisation

For autistic children, online spaces can feel safer and more comfortable than face-to-face interactions.

Risks that autistic children may face in the online space

Autistic children may:

- Struggle to tell the difference between real friends and people who are pretending to be friendly.
- Find it hard to understand other people's intentions or emotions.
- Not realise when someone is trying to manipulate or take advantage of them.
- Have difficulty understanding the impact of their actions on others.

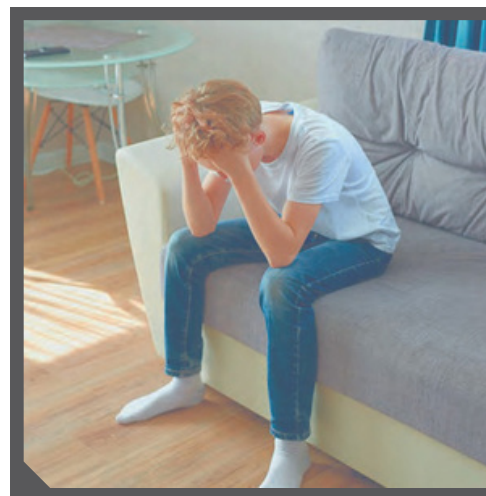
This can make them more vulnerable to people who want to influence them in harmful ways.

It's not always about violence

Radicalisation doesn't always mean encouraging violence. Some autistic young people have been drawn into things like hacking or spreading messages online—without fully understanding the consequences. People who want to exploit them may be interested in their skills or intense interest in certain topics.

Why the internet is so appealing to autistic individuals

The internet offers structure, facts, and a sense of control – this predictability can be both comforting and appealing to autistic young people. Unfortunately, people with harmful intentions know this. They may use simple, black-and-white messaging that seems to offer clear answers and provides a sense of belonging.



Why extreme online content can be risky

Autistic children and young people often enjoy spending time online, especially when it involves learning about topics they're passionate about. In fact, research shows they may be more likely to use the internet in a very focused or intense way (Finkenauer et al., 2012). While this can be a positive outlet, it also comes with some risks.

The internet is full of information but not all of it is true. Some websites or videos may share **false or harmful content**, and children can sometimes become **drawn to dark or extreme topics** without fully understanding the risks.

This can lead to them **spending a lot of time focused on worrying or harmful themes** and **being more vulnerable to online grooming**, where someone tries to influence or manipulate them.

Practical tips to help minimise the risks for your child online:

Parental controls

Parental controls are important to set up – they can be used to block upsetting or harmful content, control in-app purchases or manage how long your child spends online. Parental controls can be set up on devices and Wi-Fi as well as search engines.

If you become aware that your young person is searching for inappropriate content online, then have a conversation with them about why this may be (you can refer to the '[Having difficult conversations](#)' section of this booklet to help you with this). If you are still concerned following your conversations, then refer to the '[What do I do if I think my child is being radicalised?](#)' to find out where you can voice your concerns.

Think about if your child uses your phone or device and what they can potentially access if you have more lax settings on them:



Internet Matters:
www.internetmatters.org/parental-controls



<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/>

Screen time

It can be good to consider agreeing limits for time spent online. Many devices now have settings where you can manage and monitor the amount of time spent on certain apps or the device itself



Internet Matters (Screen time):
www.internetmatters.org/issues/screen-time



Family agreement

You may want to consider using a family agreement tool which can help you to agree and manage how you spend time online as a family



NSPCC Family agreement:

www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/online-safety/o2-nspcc-family-agreement-template.pdf

Childnet Family agreement:

www.childnet.com/resources/family-agreement



Privacy settings

Privacy settings should be managed on each app/game/account and device. This may seem daunting but there are lots of helpful guides to assist you.



Thinkuknow:

www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/articles/a-parents-guide-to-privacy-settings

Age restrictions

All console games, like movies, have age restrictions and these can be found on the front cover of the games. These have been developed by the Pan European Game Information (PEGI) and give a recommended age based on the content and its suitability. Be careful however, as this rating does not take into account its functionality – such as the ability to chat to other gamers.

With tablets and smartphones becoming more powerful, it's no surprise that many children now play games on these devices just as much as on traditional gaming consoles. Because of this, it's important for parents to understand how age ratings work on mobile platforms like iOS, Android, and Windows.

The good news is that this has become easier. Most apps and games in the **Google Play Store (Android)** and **Windows Store** now use **PEGI age ratings**—the same system used for video games across Europe. These ratings help you quickly see whether a game or app is suitable for your child's age.

Keeping an eye on age ratings is a simple but effective way to help keep your child's digital experiences safe and age-appropriate.

Age recommendations/ratings also apply to many social media platforms. However, be aware that there is currently no age verification system in place, so any young person can join a social media site if they change their birth date to that of at least the minimum required age



PEGI:

[pegι.info/page/pegι-age-ratings](http://pegi.info/page/pegι-age-ratings)

Remember, that **age restrictions are a guide**. You know your child best and are best placed to use your judgement on what you deem suitable.

How to report

It is important both you and your child know how to report any harmful content or abuse



Internet Matters:

www.internetmatters.org/report-issue

Have a conversation

Most importantly, having regular conversations about online activity is key. Make sure to talk about the positive, fun and exciting things they are doing online, as well as consistently reinforcing safety advice and support. To help you with these conversations, there are some great toolkits and resources you can use



O2:

www.o2.co.uk/help/nspcc/parents-vs-kids



<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/inappropriate-explicit-content/distressing-content/>



Safer Internet (advice):

www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-centre/parents-and-carers/have-conversation



Childnet:

www.childnet.com/parents-and-carers/have-a-conversation

Keep up to date

Technology is constantly evolving, and it can be hard to keep up with what your child is doing or using online. New apps, games, and platforms appear all the time, and it's completely understandable if you find it challenging to stay informed.

You're not alone and you don't have to figure it all out by yourself.

There are trusted resources available to help you:

- Stay informed about the latest online trends and risks
- Understand the platforms your child may be using
- Learn how to support safe and healthy digital habits

These tools can give you the confidence to have open conversations with your child and help keep them safe online.



Free monthly Staying Safe Online: e-newsletter: www.westsussex.gov.uk/staying-safe-online

Further helpful resources

Empower young people to tackle online hate and challenge negative behaviours in their digital spaces with this [interactive tool](#)

A guide for parents around online safety: [Learning Disabilities, Autism and Internet Safety - Cerebra](#)



www.internetmatters.org/inclusive-digital-safety

STAR SEND Toolkit: Aimed at educators, however could be a useful tool for initiating discussion.



www.childnet.com/resources/star-send-toolkit



Ofcom's research found that 59% of 13 to 17-year-olds had seen potentially harmful content online in the previous month

Ofcom, Online Safety Act
Implementation, April 2025



Source: [How Ofcom is helping children to be safer online – a guide for parents - Ofcom](#)

Having difficult conversations

Some of the issues in this guide can feel confusing, uncomfortable, or even overwhelming to talk about. But having open, honest conversations with your child is one of the most powerful ways to help them stay safe, both online and offline.

Children and young people, especially those with additional needs, might find it hard to:

- Understand other people's beliefs or intentions
- See things from someone else's point of view
- Express their own worries or questions clearly

That's why it's so important to create a safe, calm space where they feel able to talk and be heard without fear of judgment.

As a parent or carer, you play a vital role in helping your child explore their thoughts and feelings. These conversations can build their confidence, strengthen their critical thinking, and reduce the risk of them being drawn into harmful or risky behaviour.

Sometimes, your child might say something that surprises or even shocks you. That's okay. What matters most is how you respond.

The following advice, shared with kind permission from the **Tim Parry and Johnathan Ball Foundation for Peace**, offers practical tips on how to respond calmly and constructively, so you can keep the conversation going rather than shutting it down.

Parents naturally have a big influence on their children's views so it's important to encourage children to see and respect different points of view.

Educate Against Hate



Three Steps to Responding Calmly and Constructively

When your child shares a strong opinion or says something that concerns you, it's important to stay calm and keep the conversation open. Here's a simple three-step approach to help guide your response:

1. Affirm the individual

Let your child know they've been heard. Use statements that show you're listening and that their thoughts matter. You could say:

- "Thanks for sharing that with me."
- "I can see this is something you've been thinking about."
- "It's okay to have questions or feel unsure."

2. Explore the viewpoint

Try to understand what's behind what they've said. What are they feeling? What might they need?

You could ask:

- "What makes you feel that way?"
- "Where did you hear about that?"
- "What do you think that means?"

3. Broaden their perspective

Gently introduce other viewpoints, facts, or examples to help them think more critically.

You could say:

- "That's one way to look at it. Can I share another idea with you?"
- "Did you know that...?"
- "What do you think someone else might say about that?"

Tips for talking with your child about difficult topics

These tips can help you create a safe, respectful space where your child feels heard and supported

Really Listen

- Show genuine interest in their point of view.
- Let them finish speaking before you respond.
- Acknowledge their thoughts, even if you don't agree.

Give Them Time

- Some children need extra time to process what's been said.
- Be patient and allow pauses in the conversation.
- Consider coming back to the discussion later to allow for processing time and development of thoughts on the subject.

Set Ground Rules

- Agree to take turns speaking.
- Avoid interrupting each other.
- Keep the tone respectful and calm.

Stay Neutral

- Try not to react emotionally even if you're shocked or disagree.
- Staying calm helps keep the conversation open.

Challenge Ideas, Not People

- Encourage your child to question opinions, not attack individuals.
- Help them understand that respectful disagreement is healthy.

Gently Correct Unkind Comments

- If your child says something offensive or inappropriate, respond calmly.
- Explain why the comment may be hurtful and how it could affect others.
- Use real-life examples or social stories to help them understand.

Speak Clearly and Literally

- Avoid idioms or vague language, say exactly what you mean.
- If they don't understand something, look it up together using a trusted source.

Follow Up

- Let them know they can always come back to talk more.
- Use tools or activities from the Toolkit to keep the conversation going.



What can I do if my child is concerned about a recent terrorist attack or the ongoing threat of an attack?

The following online resources may be helpful in having sensitive and difficult discussions about violent attacks



[Protecting Children from Online Violence | Internet Matters](#)



[Childline: Worries about the world page \(For children\)](#)

Source: Educate Against Hate: Top tips to help parents discuss radicalisation and extremism with young people https://educateagainsthate.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/EAH_Parents_Top-Tips_English_AW_Interactive.pdf

Frequently Asked Questions

Whether you're looking for answers yourself or supporting another parent, these questions and responses are here to help. They cover common concerns and provide clear, reassuring information about keeping young people safe, especially when it comes to online activity and emotional wellbeing.

You might find these helpful for your own understanding, or you can use them to guide conversations with other parents who may have similar worries.

Q: If I report my child, will they get in trouble?

A: No – reporting your concerns is not about getting your child into trouble. It's about keeping them safe and helping them get the right support. Unless your child has done something that breaks the law, raising a concern is a safeguarding step, not a criminal one.

For example, a school once referred a student named Tom to the **Channel programme** because he was showing a strong interest in Nazi symbols and far-right content. He also struggled with anxiety and had poor school attendance. Through Channel, Tom and his family received support from a specialist mentor who helped him explore healthier interests and build confidence. Tom discovered a love for chess and has since gone on to win several tournaments.

Reporting early means your child can get help before things go too far – and it can lead to really positive outcomes.



Q: Only I understand how to deal with the needs of my child – how can others help?

A: You're absolutely right. As a parent or carer, you know your child better than anyone. You understand their personality, their triggers, and what helps them feel safe and supported. Your insight is essential, and you'll always play a central role in any support your child receives.

At the same time, it's okay to accept help from others. Autism is a spectrum, and every young person's experience is different. That's why we work with a range of professionals who can offer tailored support based on your child's unique needs. For example, we might involve an autism specialist to mentor your child and help them explore new interests or build confidence in social settings.

The goal is to work *with* you, not instead of you, to create a team around your child. Together, we can help them develop healthy ways of thinking, build resilience, and feel more connected to the world around them.

Q: My child struggles to apply what they've learned in one situation to another. How can I help reinforce safety messages?

A: This is a common challenge, especially for young people with autism or learning differences. The key is **repetition and consistency**.

Try to:

- Revisit important topics regularly in everyday situations (e.g. talk about password safety each time they log in).
- Use real-life examples to make abstract ideas more relatable.
- Introduce key terms like “extremism” or “online safety” in different conversations to help them stick.

Most importantly, keep communication open and honest. Let your child know they can always come to you with questions or worries. The **Parent Toolkit** includes helpful tips and conversation starters to support you in these discussions.

Q: My child knows so much more about the digital space than me – I can't keep up. How can I ensure they stay safe?

A: You're not alone. Many parents feel overwhelmed by how quickly technology changes. The good news is, you don't need to be a tech expert to help keep your child safe online.

What matters most is understanding the **core principles of online safety** – things like encouraging open conversations, setting healthy boundaries, and knowing where to go for help. You'll find practical tips in the **Online Safety** section of this booklet, along with extra tools in the **Toolkit**.

To stay up to date with new apps, games, and online risks, we recommend:

- **Staying Safe Online newsletter** – a free monthly update with tips, resources, and training opportunities designed specifically for parents and carers.

Remember, your relationship with your child is your biggest strength – staying connected and curious about their online world goes a long way.

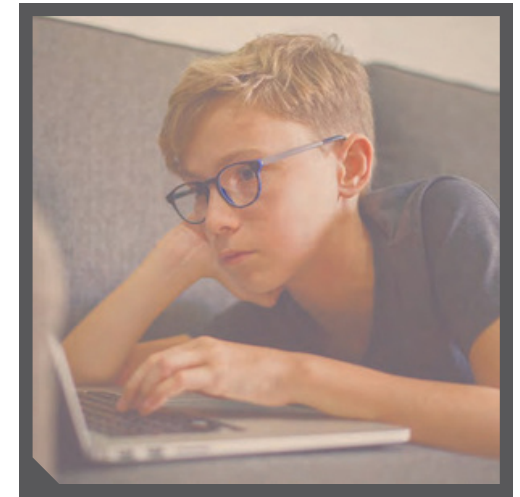
Q: My child gets fixated on certain topics – won't it be impossible to change their mind?

A: It's very common for autistic young people to develop deep interests in specific topics and this can be a real strength. These focused interests often lead to impressive knowledge and skills.

However, if the topic becomes linked to harmful or extreme content, it can be concerning. The goal isn't to force them to stop being interested in something, but to **gently broaden their focus** and introduce other, more positive and fulfilling interests.

With the right support, such as mentoring, structured activities, and encouragement from trusted adults, young people can discover new passions that are just as engaging but much healthier for their wellbeing and future.

It's not about changing who they are but about helping them grow in a safe and supported way.



Q: Isn't it the school's job to safeguard against this? What can I do?

A: You're absolutely right. Schools and colleges play a vital role in safeguarding young people and protecting them from extremism is part of their legal responsibility. They work hard to create safe environments and educate students about online risks and harmful influences.

However, as a parent or carer, **you are your child's first line of support**. You know them best: their routines, moods, and what's normal for them. That means you're often the first to notice if something seems off, like:

- Sudden changes in behaviour or appearance
- Spending excessive time online
- Expressing unusual or concerning views

Safeguarding is a shared responsibility. By staying alert and speaking up if you're worried, you're playing a crucial role in keeping your child safe.



Background

K is a young autistic individual with a strong interest in technology and exceptional IT skills. He spends a significant amount of time online, often alone, and has limited social interaction or outside interests.

At one point, K shared with colleagues that he had been watching extremist videos online, including content from Daesh (ISIS). He admitted that although he found the content disturbing, he felt compelled to keep watching. He also expressed thoughts that suggested he was beginning to sympathize with the group and even considered reaching out to them.

Support and Intervention

K was quickly provided with one-to-one support from a specialist experienced in working with young people at risk of online radicalisation. This expert helped K:

- Understand how extremist groups like Daesh use the internet to recruit and manipulate vulnerable individuals.
- Reflect on the serious consequences of engaging with such content or groups.
- Develop critical thinking skills to question and challenge harmful narratives.

Recognising that K's isolation and lack of social activities contributed to his vulnerability, additional support was put in place to help him:

- Explore new hobbies and interests, especially those that involved social interaction.
- Build confidence in job searching, including writing applications and preparing for interviews.

Positive Outcomes

K has made significant progress. He no longer watches extremist content and has no desire to contact anyone involved in such groups. In fact, he now actively warns others about the dangers of online radicalisation.

K has also discovered a new passion for astronomy, inspired by a family member, and is currently learning to drive to increase his independence and job opportunities.

Key Takeaways for Parents

- Online safety is crucial – even highly intelligent and tech-savvy young people can be vulnerable to harmful content.
- Isolation can increase risk – encouraging social activities and interests outside the home can make a big difference.
- Specialist support works – with the right guidance, young people can understand risks and make positive changes.
- Stay engaged – open conversations about online activity and emotional wellbeing are essential.



Case Study

Supporting K, an autistic young person

Definitions of key terms

Radicalisation

The action or process of causing someone to adopt radical positions on political or social issues. This is no bad thing. However, this is a problem if someone uses **fear, terror or violence** to achieve their aim (whether ideological, political or social) and begins to support and engage with extremist ideologies associated with terrorist organisations.

Online radicalisation

This refers to being exposed to or influenced by extreme beliefs through the internet. This can happen in various ways, such as through conversations with individuals on gaming platforms or social media apps, or by viewing violent or extremist content shared online. These interactions can gradually shape a young person’s thinking, making it important to stay aware of what they’re engaging with and to encourage open conversations about what they see and hear online.

Extremism

The Crown Prosecution Service defines this as: “The demonstration of unacceptable behaviour by using any means or medium to express views, which:

- Encourage, justify or glorify terrorist violence in furtherance of particular beliefs;
- Seek to provoke others to terrorist acts;
- Foster hatred which might lead to inter-community violence in the UK.”

Prevent duty

Places such as schools and colleges are legally required to help stop people from being drawn into terrorism. They should safeguard children from radicalisation and support them to make safe and positive choices..

Channel A non-criminal, voluntary, confidential multi- agency panel that provides support and advice to vulnerable individuals who may be at risk of being drawn into extremist activity that involves supporting, glorifying or committing acts of harm.

Ideology A set of beliefs. In this case it often encompasses views which are extreme in their ideas and may be linked to harmful behaviour and extremist organisations.

Opinions

Feelings or beliefs that are not necessarily based on fact or knowledge. Can sometimes be used to mislead others by being presented as facts.

Propaganda

Dissemination of information in a biased or misleading way in order to promote a particular cause or point of view.

Fake news

Information that is false, fabricated or deliberately misleading. It can come in many forms and AI generated content is making it harder to determine if something is genuine.

Identity

What makes up a person. A set of facts and characteristics about who a person is that distinguishes them from or connects them to other individuals.

Group identity

A person's sense of belonging to a particular group such as being from a certain region or area, being a supporter of a particular football team, fandoms (e.g. Marvel, Harry Potter), subcultures (e.g. goth, punk). Online communities also exist which provide group identity.

Fake friend

May seem trustworthy, but it could be that they have another motive. Not all fake friends are online and not all real friends are in person. But it can be harder to determine the intentions of someone you have met only online.

Social media

Websites or apps which enable users to create and share text, images and videos or participate in social networking. Some of the most popular with young people include: Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp, X, Reddit, Discord, Threads, Signal... there is a lot of choice.

Multiplayer function

This is a mode of play for online games where two or more gamers can play in the same game at the same time and communicate via the platform from devices which could be anywhere – even in a different country. Games that have this function include Roblox, Fortnite, Minecraft, Counter-Strike, League of Legends and others.

Memes

An image, video or piece of text which is copied, shared and which then spreads rapidly on the internet. Can be used for humorous purposes but can also be used by extreme groups to encourage action or a sense of belonging to a particular ideology.

Disinformation

False information that is spread on purpose to trick or mislead people. Unlike misinformation, which can be a mistake, disinformation is shared knowing it’s wrong.

Misinformation

False or inaccurate information that is spread, regardless of intent to deceive. It can result from misunderstandings, mistakes, or assumptions.

Malinformation

Truthful information that is shared with the intent to cause harm, such as damaging someone's reputation, inciting conflict, or violating privacy.

Conspiracy theory

A belief that events are secretly controlled by powerful groups, often without solid evidence and contrary to official explanations.

Theory of mind

The ability to understand the intentions, motives, beliefs and feelings of others and that they may differ from your own. Children usually develop this by the age of four or five and it plays an important role in social interactions.

Counterfeit deviance

This refers to behaviour that appears inappropriate or concerning but is actually the result of social naivety or a lack of understanding, rather than intentional harm or malice. For example, an autistic child might show interest in dark or sensitive topics without fully grasping the social or moral implications. This behaviour can be misinterpreted as deliberate, when in fact it stems from curiosity, literal thinking, or difficulty understanding social norms.

Special interests

Strong passions and intense interests for specific subjects or activities which can be focused on for long periods.

Sensory processing differences

Autism can make an individual much more or less sensitive to sensory inputs such as visual stimuli, sounds, smell, touch or movement. An autistic child may seek out sensory inputs or feel overwhelmed from too much input.

	Is it true?	Shared on purpose?	Intent to harm?	Example
Misinformation	✗ No	✗ No	✗ No	Sharing a wrong fact by mistake
Disinformation	✗ No	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	Making up a fake story to trick people
Malinformation	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	Leaking someone’s private messages to embarrass them

Further contacts for advice

Useful websites for information about Prevent and Channel:

Educate Against Hate – Contains DfE approved practical advice and resources about protecting children and young people from extremism and radicalisation



www.educateagainsthate.com

West Sussex Safeguarding Children Partnership – Radicalisation:



<https://www.westsussexscp.org.uk/abuse-neglect-container/radicalisation-extremism>

West Sussex Safeguarding Children Partnership – Channel:



<https://www.westsussexscp.org.uk/professionals/risk-outside-the-home/radicalisation/channel>

West Sussex – Preventing extremism and radicalisation:



www.westsussex.gov.uk/fire-emergencies-and-crime/preventing-extremism-and-radicalisation

Let's Talk About It – website designed to provide help and advice as to the signs of radicalisation:



www.ltai.info

Parents: Protecting your children from extremism – booklet with key information about extremism and radicalisation, produced by Educate Against Hate:



www.educateagainsthate.com/resources/parents-protecting-children-extremism-2

CTP ACT, Action Counters Terrorism – Ways to report if you are concerned:



www.act.campaign.gov.uk

ACT Early – Explains what to do if you're worried someone close to you is expressing extreme views or hatred towards others:



www.actearly.uk

Autism specific information:

NAS – Safeguarding young people on the Autistic spectrum. Information on the risk of radicalisation is available on page 16:



www.autism.org.uk/shop/products/books-and-resources/safeguarding-young-people

Helping Learners with Autism understand how to keep safe from radicalisation and extremism – Aimed primarily at teachers, however this resource may be beneficial in giving you additional insight as parents or carers:



<https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/professional-development/safeguarding-prevent/legislation-guidance-resources/safeguarding-send-resources/>

Other useful Autism resources linked to Radicalisation:

Some of these are designed for use in schools, but could be beneficial for you to explore with your young person, nonetheless:

SEND Natspec resources around FBVs:



www.preventforfeandtraining.org.uk/home/practitioners/curriculum-guidance-and-materials

Babcock LDP:



www.babcockldp.co.uk/disadvantaged-vulnerable-learners/send

Think Protect Connect – Aimed at KS3 upwards but could be useful. Challenges myths, misconceptions and stereotypes and deals with topics such as race and racism:



www.educateagainsthate.com/resources/think-protect-connect

Talking to your teenager about radicalisation – An interactive website to support your young person in understanding extremism and radicalisation:



www.concept-training.co.uk

Kidscape – Explores friendships and what makes a good friend:



<https://www.kidscape.org.uk/advice/advice-for-young-people/friendships-and-frenemies>

Safe spaces for young people to socialise and find new friends



www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/community

More general Autism and SEND support

Social stories and comic strip conversations can be particularly helpful when having more challenging conversations with your child or young person.

A **social story** is a personalised, visual narrative that can help autistic children understand and navigate social situations, routines, or expectations. You can find out more about them here:

[Social stories - Resource Library - Sheffield Children's NHS Foundation Trust](#)

A **comic strip conversation** can help a child or young person experiencing misunderstandings and communication breakdowns and help them to communicate their feelings. It can be a particularly useful for children and young people who have difficulties understanding and using spoken language. You can find out more about comic strip conversation here:

[Comic strip conversations - Resource Library - Sheffield Children's NHS Foundation Trust](#)

More general Autism and SEND support:

National Autistic Society website – Positive 'stories from the spectrum':



www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/stories

Ambitious about Autism – Expert information and resources:



www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk

The National Autistic Society:



www.autism.org.uk

Aspens – Operates in the SE of England to provide care and support to those with autism:



www.aspens.org.uk

West Sussex Local Offer – Provides local SEND information for parents/carers.



www.westsussex.local-offer.org

Reaching Families – A parent-carer led charity to support parents and families:



www.reachingfamilies.org.uk

NAS Parent to Parent Emotional Support Helpline:



<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/help-and-support/parent-to-parent-helpline>



Parental Guidance

A young man with short dark hair, wearing a blue and white horizontally striped long-sleeved shirt, is sitting at a desk. He is looking down at a laptop screen, with his right hand resting on the keyboard. The background is a blurred interior space with wooden beams and a bookshelf.

Content by: **Helen Wade, West Sussex County Council**
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