Educate Against Hate



Social Media Algorithms

An Educate Against Hate Explainer

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Who is this explainer for?

This explainer is part of a suite of documents designed to help you understand and identify a range of issue affecting young people. It is complementary to our explainers on:

- Incels
- The Manosphere

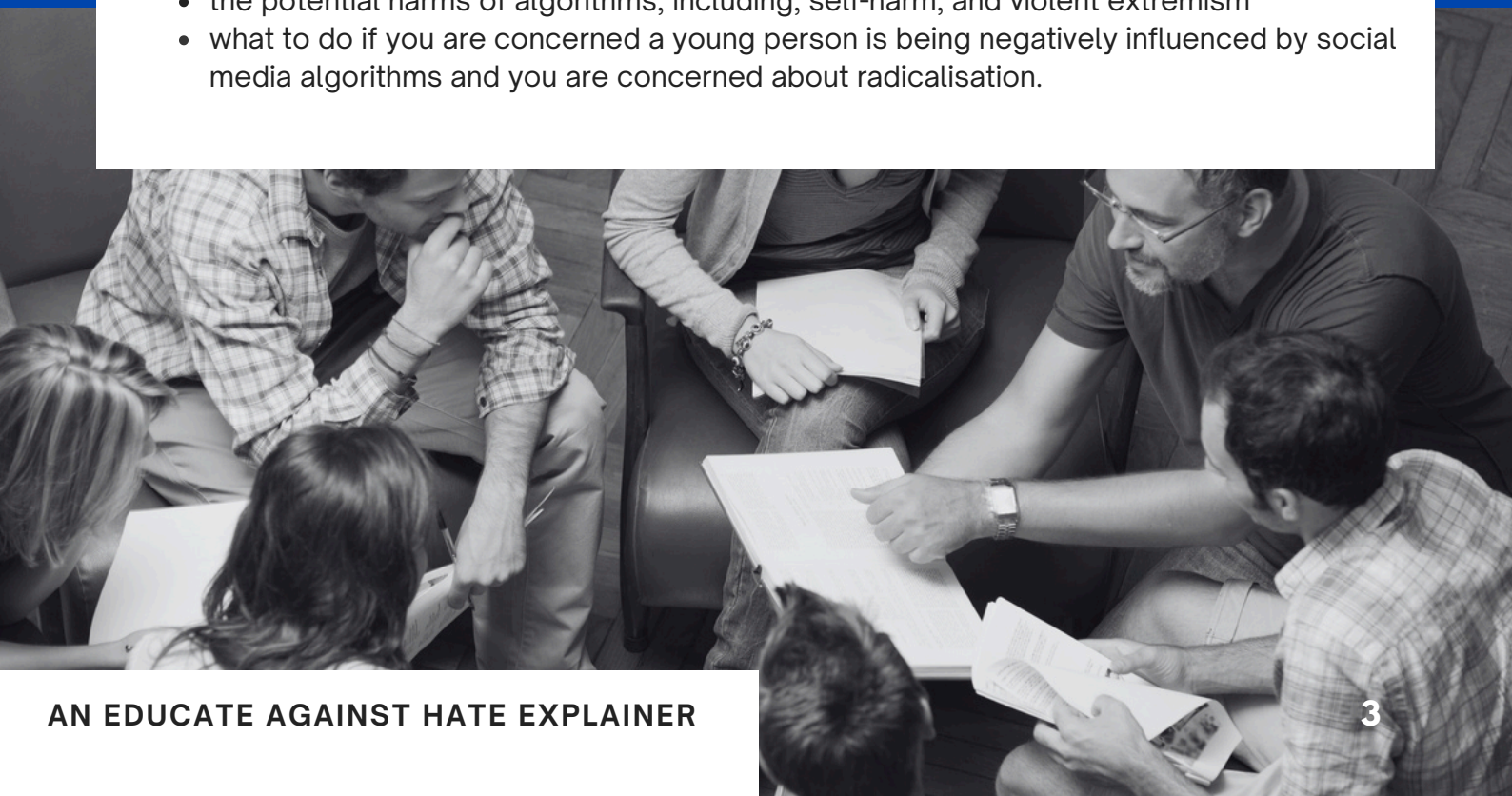
Who is this explainer is for?

This explainer sets out what social media algorithms are and the signs that a young person may be influenced by algorithms online. It will be useful for:

- secondary school teachers
- older students
- school leaders
- designated safeguarding persons
- all those working in education settings subject to the Prevent duty

This explainer will help to understand:

- what social media algorithms are
- how they affect what is viewed online
- the potential harms of algorithms, including, self-harm, and violent extremism
- what to do if you are concerned a young person is being negatively influenced by social media algorithms and you are concerned about radicalisation.



Content warning

This explainer includes:

- references to content intended to incite violence and self-harm
- references to extreme content

We would encourage you to seek support if you are affected by any of the content.

Page 10 of this document explains what to do if you have concerns about a young person.

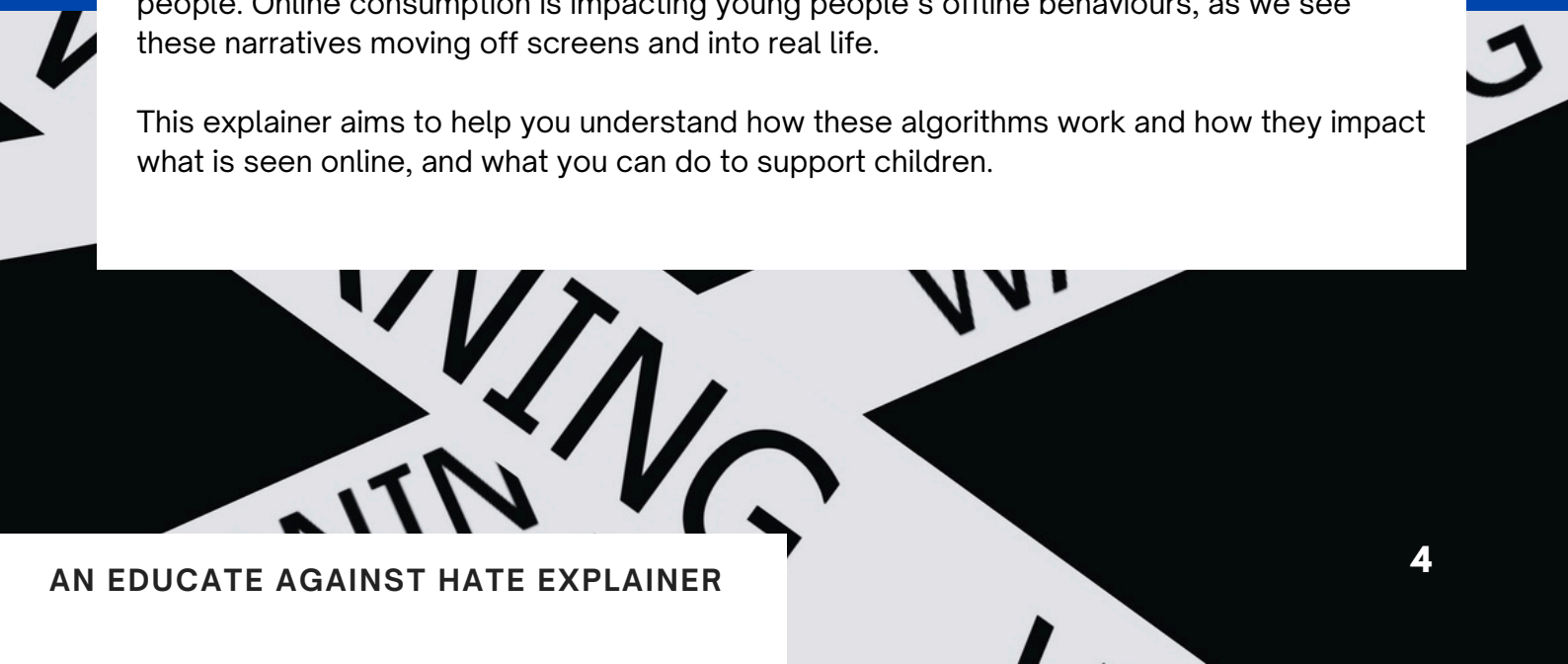
A note about this document

This explainer provides an overview of the algorithms, their influence and how deliberate or inadvertent viewing can impact young people's views, attitudes, and behaviours.

Algorithmic processes on social media sites target people's vulnerabilities – such as loneliness or feelings of loss of control – and gamify harmful content. Algorithmic bias on social media platforms can prioritise sensational, polarising, or controversial posts – often amplifying misogynistic or extreme content and voices.

As young people microdose on topics like self-harm or extremism, to them, it feels like entertainment. Harmful views and tropes are now becoming normalised among young people. Online consumption is impacting young people's offline behaviours, as we see these narratives moving off screens and into real life.

This explainer aims to help you understand how these algorithms work and how they impact what is seen online, and what you can do to support children.



What are algorithms?

Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly known as Twitter) have become integral parts of our daily lives. They connect us with friends and family, provide news updates, and entertain us. But have you ever wondered how these platforms decide what content to show you? The answer lies in social media algorithms.

Algorithms are digital tools used by social media companies to analyse what people like and push more of those things to the people who interact with them. They use 'reinforcement learning' to predict or propose user interest. When the content is tame – cooking videos or cats – where's the harm? But the algorithm does not differentiate between positive and negative content – it looks for engagement and an interest being shown.

Key Factors Influencing Algorithms

- User Engagement: Algorithms prioritise content that receives high engagement, such as likes, comments, shares, and views. If a post is popular among users, it is more likely to appear in your feed.
- Relevance: Platforms analyse your past behaviour, including the types of posts you interact with, to predict what you might find interesting. For example, if you often watch cooking videos, you'll likely see more of them.
- Timeliness: Recent posts are given priority over older ones. This ensures that your feed is up-to-date with the latest content.
- Relationships: Content from friends, family, and accounts you frequently interact with is more likely to appear in your feed. Social media platforms aim to strengthen connections by showing you posts from people you care about.
- Content Type: Different types of content (videos, images, text) may be prioritised differently based on your preferences and engagement history.

How Algorithms Impact Your Experience

- **Personalised content:** Algorithms tailor your feed to show content that matches your interests, making your social media experience unique to you.
- **Echo chambers**: By showing you content similar to what you've engaged with before, algorithms can create echo chambers where you see only one perspective on issues.
- **Advertising**: Algorithms also play a significant role in targeted advertising. They analyse your behaviours to show adverts that are more attractive to you.

Why is this relevant to parents, schools, colleges and training providers?

When a child or young person views unsuitable content – either by stumbling across it, having it suggested by friends, or watching something that isn't what it pretends to be – the algorithm kicks in. Algorithms are escalatory in nature and are designed to provide more and more similar content. The more that is seen, the higher the chance of that content being violent, extreme, or dangerous. If that is the only content being viewed, a relentless stream of inappropriate views, posts, and videos, it can skew what the user sees as acceptable or attractive.

Social media algorithms may inadvertently target people's vulnerabilities, resulting in children and young people seeing inappropriate content. This could include content related to self-harm, eating disorders, or extremism. The consumption of such content online could then influence behaviour offline, increasingly appearing at home and in educational environments.



How do I talk to young people about algorithms?

Understanding how social media algorithms shape online experiences is essential for educators guiding students in the digital world. Whilst you don't need to know every platform or influencer, fostering open conversations and complex thinking is key.

- **Foster open dialogue:** You don't need to know all the names or trends, sometimes not knowing something can be a way to open a conversation. Focus on encouraging students to talk about what they see online. Create space for critical conversations about how content is selected, promoted, and personalised by algorithms. Use current events or viral trends as teachable moments to explore bias, influence, and digital citizenship.

- **Ask what they already know:** Encourage students to discuss what they see. Ask them if they notice a trend in what they choose to watch, and what is then offered as a suggestion. Why do they think that happens?

- **Promote complex thinking:** Encourage students to question what they see online. Who created this? Why was it shown to me? Highlight the difference between popularity and credibility.

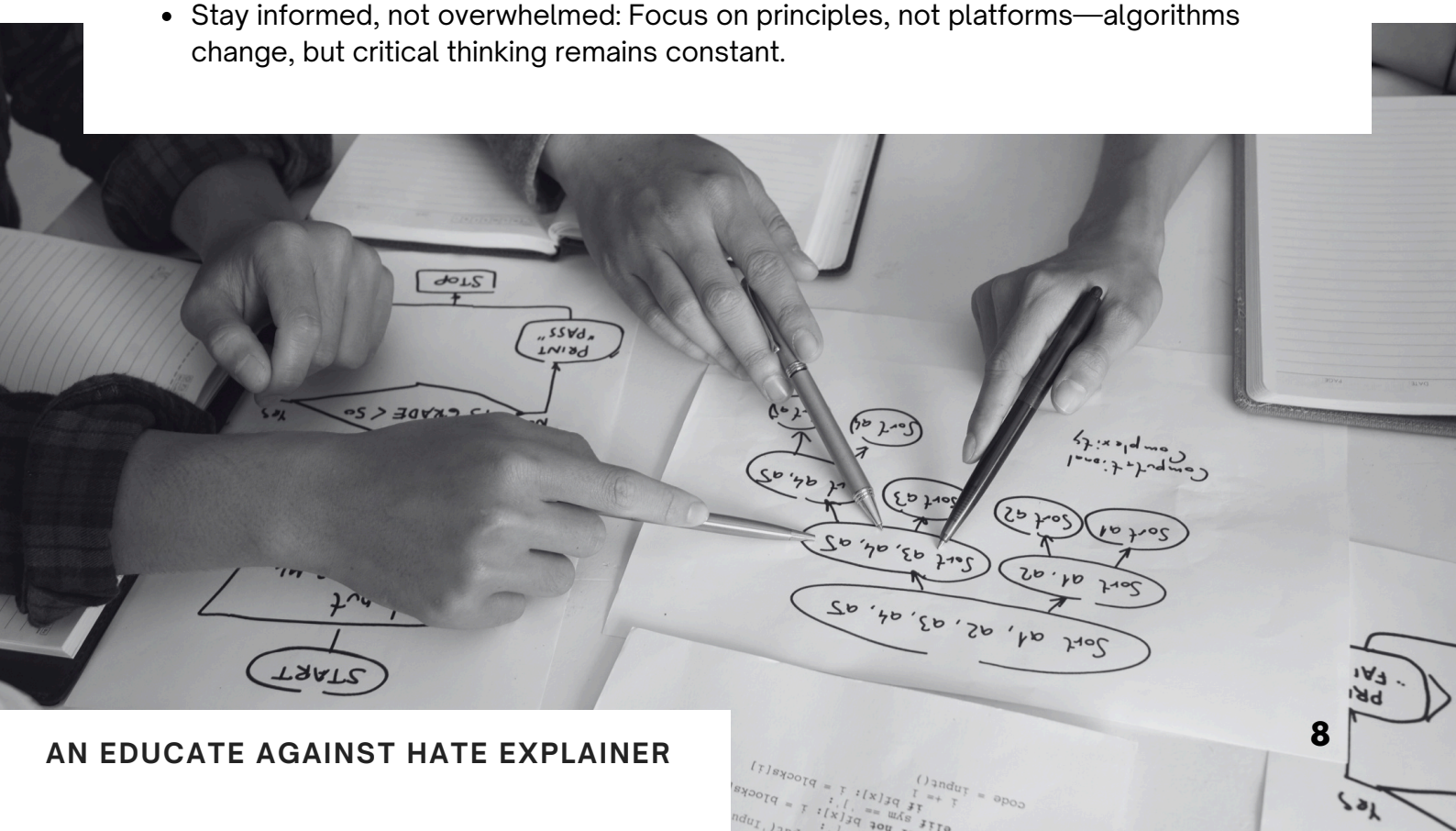
- **Be patient:** Changing attitudes is a process, not a one-off conversation. Celebrating small shifts in thinking is important, as is keeping the door open for future dialogue.



Promoting an understanding of the influence of algorithms in education

Creating an educational environment that promotes healthy online habits and reinforces critical thinking skills across the curricula, and throughout school culture, is an important counter to the influence of algorithms.

- Teach algorithm awareness: Help students understand that algorithms prioritise engagement, not accuracy. Algorithms can create echo chambers and influence their opinions.
- Integration of online safety into the curriculum: Teach students how to evaluate sources, spot misinformation, and protect their privacy.
- Review acceptable use policies: Ensure students understand the school's acceptable use policy and why it exists. Use the policy as a foundation for discussions on responsible technology use, involving students in shaping classroom norms around device use and online conduct.
- Engage with parents: Share insights on algorithmic influence and online safety during parent evenings or newsletters. Encourage consistent messaging between home and school about screen time and digital habits.
- Stay informed, not overwhelmed: Focus on principles, not platforms—algorithms change, but critical thinking remains constant.



Building resilience to the influence of algorithms

Teaching Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and online safety

Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is a mandatory element of the Curriculum for Wales. This mandatory RSE Code supports schools to design their curriculum. The content is set within the context of broad and interlinked learning strands, namely:

- relationships and identity
- sexual health and well-being
- empowerment, safety and respect

This should incorporate the exploration of social influences and align with the mandatory requirements of the What Matters Code within the Curriculum for Wales. This includes, but is not limited to:

- enhancing media literacy and critical thinking
- recognising and challenging harmful ideas, including discrimination in all its forms

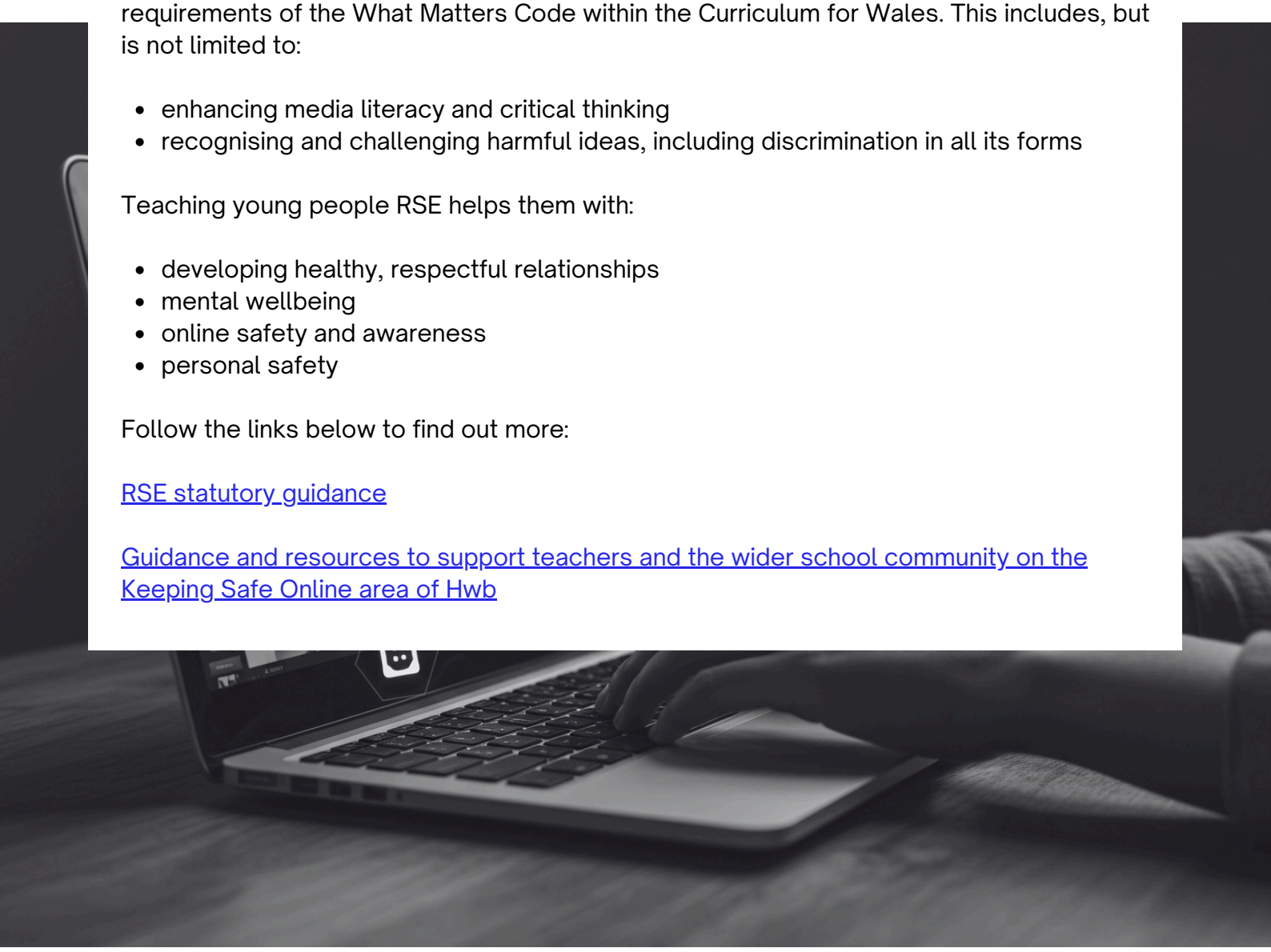
Teaching young people RSE helps them with:

- developing healthy, respectful relationships
- mental wellbeing
- online safety and awareness
- personal safety

Follow the links below to find out more:

RSE statutory guidance

Guidance and resources to support teachers and the wider school community on the Keeping Safe Online area of Hwb



What to do if you have concerns

What to do if you have immediate concerns for safety

If you think someone is in immediate danger, or if you see or hear something that may be terrorist-related, trust your instincts and call 999 or the confidential Anti-terrorist Hotline on 0800 789 321

What to do if you have concerns over radicalisation

The influence of algorithms on social media may result in young people being exposed to extreme rhetoric, with the risk that those who are vulnerable may be radicalised. As such, those individuals can be referred into Prevent. This sometimes is for a specific ideology alone, but it can also fall into conflicted ideology category.

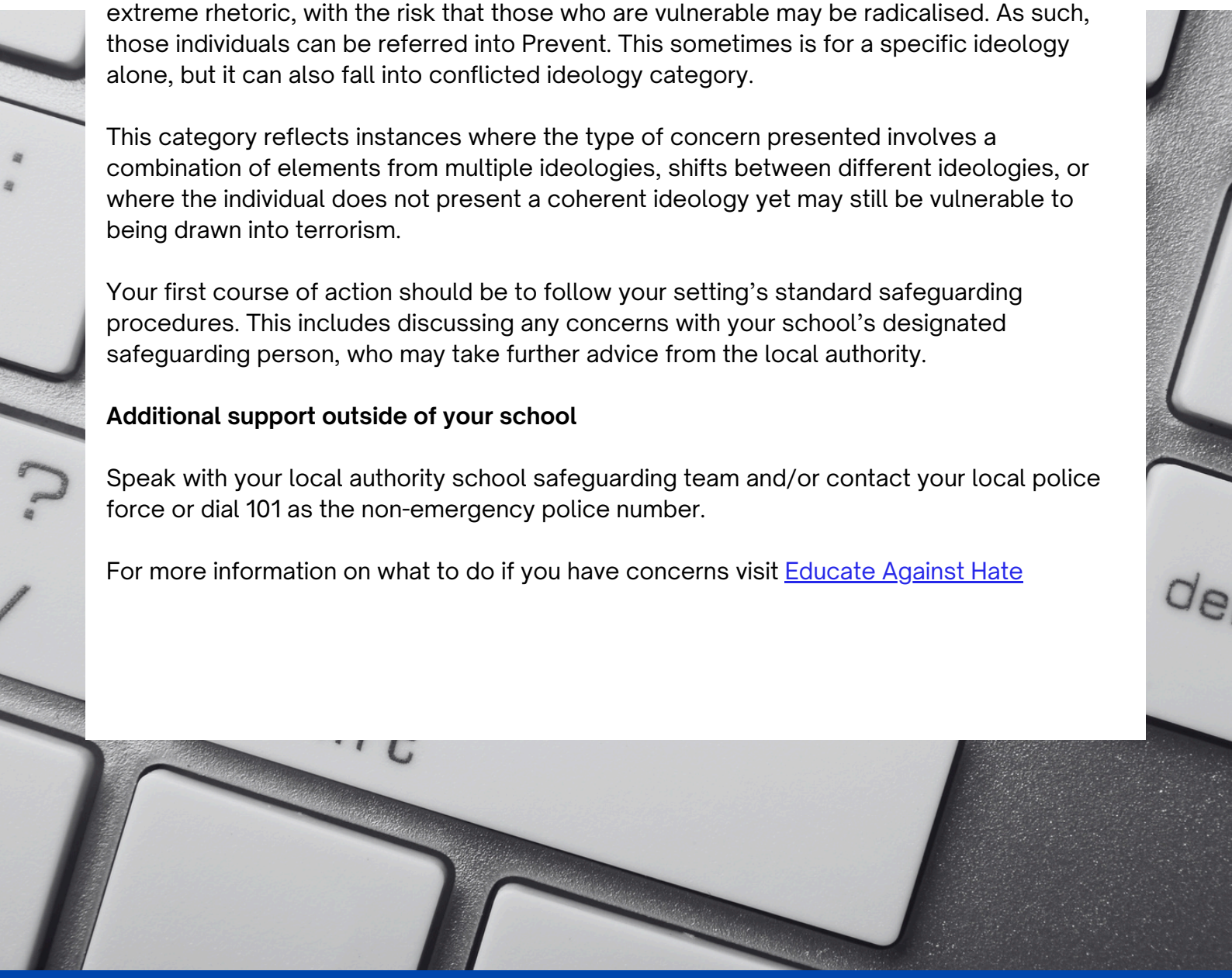
This category reflects instances where the type of concern presented involves a combination of elements from multiple ideologies, shifts between different ideologies, or where the individual does not present a coherent ideology yet may still be vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism.

Your first course of action should be to follow your setting's standard safeguarding procedures. This includes discussing any concerns with your school's designated safeguarding person, who may take further advice from the local authority.

Additional support outside of your school

Speak with your local authority school safeguarding team and/or contact your local police force or dial 101 as the non-emergency police number.

For more information on what to do if you have concerns visit Educate Against Hate



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