Propaganda, Extremism and Online Recruitment Tactics

Table Talk: Family Conversations About Current Events

Topic Summary
Terrorism and extremism are always in the news. Among other incidents, within the last year we have seen the recent terrorist attacks in Brussels, Paris and San Bernardino, CA that were inspired by the terrorist groups ISIS and Al Qaeda, and the mass shooting of nine African American parishioners in Charleston, SC by Dylann Roof, a man who espoused white supremacist ideology. Terrorist and extremist groups actively try to recruit new members to join their causes in a variety of ways. They use websites and social media platforms to share
propaganda (information that is shared and spread in order to influence public opinion and to manipulate other people’s beliefs, often to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view) and to foster a sense of community for supporters, especially when trying to entice young people to their cause.

Terrorism is usually defined as the use of violence against non-combatants in order to achieve a political goal. By inspiring fear in the population, terrorists hope they can force governments to do what they want. Many different types of ideological movements have attempted to use terrorism to achieve their goals. Some examples include: anti-government (people who do believe there should not be any government), environmental extremists (people/groups who believe that violence should be used, especially against property, against businesses or persons believed to be damaging the environment or hurting plants or animals), religious extremists, white supremacists and some nationalist movements (groups that are fighting for sovereignty over a geographic area).

Many terrorist groups have their own websites and they and their supporters have profiles on different social media sites. They use these to share propaganda and to become friends with people who seem to display some interest in what they are saying. Newcomers might become friends with several different terror-supporters online. As they see their new friends' posts, they grow more and more exposed to terrorist propaganda and also begin to feel like many other people agree with it. They also can talk about it with their new friends online, and sometimes with their in-person friends, too. They come to feel that they are a part of a community with these extremist friends online and to feel like these new online friends are real friends. A few people can forget why terrorism is evil and begin to believe that their new friends have legitimate viewpoints. Over time many come to believe that they have no choice but to use or advocate for violence.

The term extremist refers to someone adhering to an ideology that is considered far outside the acceptable mainstream attitudes of society. Not all extremists are terrorists—some people hold extremist beliefs but do not resort to violence in an
attempt to enact those beliefs. Some extremists hold extreme versions of views that could be considered normal. Religious extremists, for example, claim to believe in the same religions that millions of non-extremist individuals believe in.

**Age**

14 and up

**Questions to Start the Conversation**

- Have you seen any type of propaganda online? What did you notice about it?
- How do you think propaganda is like advertising and how is it different?
- What do you know about terrorism and extremism and what more do you want to know?
- Why do you think members of extremist groups reach out to people online to recruit new members?
- How do you feel about extremist groups trying to recruit young people online?

**Questions to Dig Deeper**

- Have you ever found yourself being susceptible to advertising or propaganda?
- Why do you think extremist groups target young people for recruitment?
- What do you think should be done about it?

(The "Related to this Resource" and Who Will Become a Terrorist? Research Yields Few Clues (*The New York Times*) provide information that address these questions.)

**Ideas for Taking Action**

Ask: What can we do to help? What actions might make a difference?
- Be a conscientious consumer of online materials and information and share
  your findings and insights with others.

- When you see hate speech online, report it so you can bring attention to
  Internet companies. Use ADL's Cyber-Safety Action Guide.

- Educate others about the topic by sharing information on social media,
  having individual conversations with other students or organizing an
  educational forum in school.