



# Extreme Measures

## How to Help Young People Counter Extremist Recruitment

A Toolkit for Educators, Parents and Families

## About ADL Education

ADL's Education Department provides educational programs, training and resources. Our anti-bias and bullying prevention programs for grades Pre-K–12 assist educators and students in understanding and challenging bias and building ally behaviors. Our work in confronting antisemitism empowers middle school, high school and college students with constructive responses to combat antisemitism. We also have programs to help students explore and critically reflect on the lessons of the Holocaust.

The overarching goal of ADL Education is to inspire people of all ages to challenge bias in themselves, others and society.

## About ADL

ADL is a leading anti-hate organization. Founded in 1913 in response to an escalating climate of antisemitism and bigotry, its timeless mission is to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all. Today, ADL continues to fight all forms of hate with the same vigor and passion. ADL is the first call when acts of antisemitism occur. A global leader in exposing extremism, delivering anti-bias education and fighting hate online, ADL's ultimate goal is a world in which no group or individual suffers from bias, discrimination or hate.

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## What is this Toolkit?

The purpose of this toolkit is to help educators, parents and families support young people in understanding and resisting domestic extremist recruitment efforts. Our approach is to provide educational information and put tools into the hands of the adults in young people's lives.

**In my case, the alt-right did what it does best. It slowly hammered hatred into my mind like a railroad spike into limestone. The inflammatory language and radical viewpoints used by the alt-right worked to YouTube and Google's favor—the more videos and links I clicked on, the more ads I saw, and in turn, the more ad revenue they generated (FastCompany 2019, "I became part of the alt-right at age 13, thanks to Reddit and Google").**

This thirteen-year-old was recruited online into the alt-right, a sub-movement of the white supremacist extremism ideology. When this young teenager started at a new school and felt lonely, friendless and in need of validation, the alt-right became the community that welcomed him. Later, when he attended a rally in September 2017 (a month after the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville) to meet

some members of his new extremist "community," he was disappointed by who they actually were. That turned things around for him, but it doesn't happen that way for everyone.

If you know a young person who you fear may be heading down this road or who perhaps may already be well along it, this toolkit is for you. This toolkit is also for you if you are concerned about the presence and power of white supremacist extremism in the U.S. and how young people are being recruited in these efforts. Recruitment of youth into white supremacist extremist groups is not only a threat to individual young people and their families but also a threat and danger to society and our ability to create a just and equitable world.

This toolkit includes background information, terminology, examples, approaches, responses and strategies that adults can use to support young people in resisting the temptation to get involved with hateful groups and ideologies and instead contribute to a more safe and equitable society.



# Why This, Why Now, Why ADL?

## Young People and Extremism

Extremism is a concept used to describe religious, social or political belief systems that exist substantially outside of those belief systems more broadly accepted in society (i.e., “mainstream” beliefs). Extreme ideologies often seek radical changes in the nature of government, religion or society (see “Defining Terms” section for full definitions). Extremists, both those who are



formally organized and those who are independent and unaffiliated, rely on attracting and recruiting new believers in order to survive. Teens and tweens are a key target of these recruitment efforts. Young people are susceptible to propaganda and are witnessing the very public extremist activities like [Charlottesville](#) and the January 6 attack on the Capitol happen in real time—and then on a continuous media loop. Recruiters can find tweens and teens in digital spaces because young people are online [almost constantly](#).

Myriad evidence and anecdotal accounts point to the fact that young people—especially white tween and teenage boys—are being sought after by white supremacist extremists who are attempting to recruit and radicalize them, especially in digital spaces. Using gaming, social media, streaming and other platforms, they use humor, memes, sarcasm, “edgy” imagery, jokes and live chats to

lure young people to their point of view, spreading hate, propaganda and disinformation. This is what recruitment looks like.

While there is no specific data on the extent to which white supremacist extremists are recruiting young people online across the U.S., the volume of educators who have been contacting ADL to ask for help has increased substantially. We understand from their accounts that the language and symbols of white supremacy are showing up at home and in school in alarming ways. We also see a steady stream of articles and social media posts about white supremacist online recruitment of teenagers. In ADL’s [2021 gaming survey](#), 10% of young people ages 13–17 reported being exposed to discussions in online multiplayer games around white supremacist ideology.

We know that in countries outside the U.S., there is also a history of children and young people being recruited, radicalized and exploited by terrorist groups such as [Boko Haram](#), [ISIL among others](#).

## January 6 Insurrection

If it wasn’t already on people’s radar, chances are that it was after the violent insurrection and attempted coup that took place on January 6, 2021. A mob of right wing extremists, white supremacists and others put domestic extremism on full display when they came to Washington, D.C. to disrupt and overturn the results of the presidential election. Over the following weeks and months, detailed information, video, and images would continue to shed light on the full extent of right wing and white supremacist extremism — waving confederate flags, wearing and carrying white supremacist hate symbols, racial violence, threats, racial epithets and more.

The FBI is sounding the alarm. In testimony given before the Senate Judiciary Committee in March 2021, FBI director Christopher Wray said, “Jan. 6 was not an isolated event. The problem of domestic terrorism has been metastasizing across the country for a long time now and it’s not going away anytime soon. At the FBI, we’ve been sounding the alarm on it for a number of years now.” He said the

number of domestic terrorism investigations has increased from around 1,000 when he became director in 2017 to roughly 1,400 at the end of last year to about 2,000 now. The number of arrests of white supremacists and other “racially motivated extremists”<sup>1</sup> has almost tripled.

## Domestic Extremism

Domestic extremism is on the rise. According to a [Washington Post analysis of data](#) compiled by the Center for Strategic and Internal Studies (CSIS), domestic terrorism incidents have soared to new highs in the U.S. and are largely driven by white supremacist, anti-Muslim, and right-wing anti-government extremists. According to the report, this steep increase reflects a growing threat from homegrown terrorism that has not been seen in a quarter-century, with right-wing extremist attacks and plots greatly outweighing and causing more deaths than others. The number of domestic terrorist incidents in the data peaked in 2020. According to ADL’s [Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2020 report](#), white supremacist extremists typically commit the majority of all extremist-related murders; in 2020, they committed nine of the 17 documented killings (53%). Over the past 10 years, white supremacist extremists have been responsible for 248 of the 429 extremist-related murders (58%).

Wray also referenced online hate by saying, “The amount of angry, hateful, unspeakable, combative, violent even, rhetoric on social media exceeds what anybody in their worst imagination [thinks] is out there.” ADL’s [2021 survey of online hate and harassment](#) reveals that 41% of Americans who responded to the survey said they had experienced online harassment, and specific groups of people (Black, Jewish, LGBTQ+, Muslim, and Asian American) reported disturbing levels of online hate.

In addition to incidents, murders and online hate, propaganda is also an important factor in where this extremism lives, promulgates and is perpetuated. ADL’s Center on Extremism (COE) [tracked a near-doubling of white supremacist propaganda efforts in 2020](#), which included the distribution of

racist, antisemitic and anti-LGBTQ+ fliers, stickers, banners and posters. The 2020 data shows a huge increase of incidents from the previous year, with a total of 5,125 cases reported (averaging more than 14 incidents per day) compared to 2,724 in 2019. According to the Center on Extremism:

**Propaganda gives white supremacists the ability to maximize media and online attention, while limiting the risk of individual exposure, negative media coverage, arrests and public backlash that often accompanies more public events. The barrage of propaganda, which overwhelmingly features veiled white supremacist language with a patriotic slant, is an effort to normalize white supremacists’ message and bolster recruitment efforts while targeting minority groups including Jews, Blacks, Muslims, non-white immigrants, and the LGBTQ community.**

It is important to acknowledge that all this is happening within the larger context of bias and hate in our society. In 2020, [hate crimes](#) surged to their highest level in twelve years and [online hate and harassment](#) continued to be experienced by more than four in 10 Americans and especially targeted to marginalized groups. We regularly hear about bias-based incidents in K-12 schools. Every day, from the schoolyard to college campuses, in digital spaces and the grocery store, and in the halls of Congress, we hear and experience biased and offensive language. Racist “jokes,” slurs and stereotypes spew racist, sexist, antisemitic, heterosexist, anti-immigrant and other forms of biased language. This language and behavior are harmful, and they contribute to and perpetuate the climate and culture of bias and hate. Their impact has ripple effects and long-term consequences

## Why ADL?

With the combined expertise in our Center on Extremism and Education department, ADL is uniquely positioned to provide information, guidance and resources on this topic. ADL’s Center on Extremism is one of the world’s foremost authorities on extremism, terrorism and

1. The FBI’s definition of “racially motivated extremists” is controversial because it includes those who use political reasons—including racism or injustice in U.S. society—to justify violence. This can include people who identify as activists.

hate, both foreign and domestic. Our staff of investigators, analysts, researchers and technical experts strategically monitors, exposes and disrupts extremist threats—on the internet and on the ground. ADL Education provides anti-bias and bullying prevention programs, training and resources to schools and communities across the country. We inspire young people and those who

support them to challenge bias in themselves, others and society. We also recognize that while anti-bias education can be a powerful tool, it is necessary to take a targeted approach with young people who are vulnerable and susceptible to extremist recruitment and radicalization.

## How Can Adolescent Development Help Me Understand the Risks and Warning Signs?

### Adolescent Development

In order to understand why young people are compelled by and lured into white supremacist extremism, it is helpful to reflect on certain aspects of [adolescent development](#).

The adolescent years (ages 10–21) are an often-turbulent time during which young people experience more change than at any other period in their lives except infancy. Biological and emotional changes paired with increasing responsibilities and expectations create challenges for tweens and teens. There are also challenges for the adults in their lives.

Adolescents experience cognitive changes that improve their capacity to manage their emotions and relate to others. Tween and teens become increasingly aware of and able to assess how they feel, how others feel and how to deal with their relationships. However, they may still struggle to accurately interpret other people's emotions and are likely to misunderstand facial expressions and body language.

To develop a healthy identity, young people need to learn to trust their capacity to make appropriate choices for themselves. However, in trying on new identities and ways of thinking, adolescents may engage in risky behaviors. This is when the part of the brain that perceives rewards from risk is more easily stimulated, while the part of the brain that helps control one's impulses is still developing. Cognitive changes may promote the adrenaline rush of thrill-seeking and testing of boundaries. This means that tweens and teens may be drawn

to risk, which is a typical and seemingly necessary part of their development during these years.

Peer groups help adolescents foster their social skills and have a significant impact on their values, attitudes, beliefs, interests, and emerging identities. Young people's motivation and need for belonging influence how readily they will give in to peer pressure and how much influence the group will have in their lives. Social acceptance by peers triggers a stronger positive response in the teenage brain than it does in adults, so there is a stronger impulse for teens to join groups. For example, some teenagers are drawn to gangs because they provide feelings of safety, companionship, excitement and risk.



The rapid changes that occur during adolescence can create a very stressful time for adolescents. The physical manifestations of stress affect them more than adults. This is because the part of the brain that calmly assesses danger and calls off the stress response (the prefrontal cortex) is not fully developed. Long-term stress can lead to lasting physical and emotional impacts on teens. Developing these cognitive and emotional skills is not inevitable—it requires nurturing through positive relationships with both peers and adults.

However difficult it may be to navigate the cognitive and emotional changes that take place during adolescence, they are instrumental in helping young people develop their individual identities and self-worth. Adolescence is the period when they build and strengthen their cognitive skills, including advanced reasoning, abstract thinking and meta-cognition (i.e., the capacity to think about thinking). This new capacity for abstract thinking may motivate teens to seek out and become involved with ideologies, groups, movements and causes in their search for deeper meaning.

## Why Young People are Vulnerable to Recruitment

What does all this mean when it comes to a young person's vulnerability to online recruitment by white supremacist extremists and groups?



While there is no one adolescent “profile” or precursor to engagement with white supremacist extremism, some of the attributes of adolescence align almost perfectly with what recruiters look for. Adolescence is a time of vulnerability and stress when young people are exploring their identity, when their values and beliefs are not yet fully formed. The adolescent years can be a time of great loneliness, isolation and alienation. It's also a time when tweens and teens desperately want to be treated with respect. They are in between childhood and adulthood and don't want to be belittled, looked down upon or treated like children.

That vulnerability, loneliness and struggle for respect and acceptance is fertile ground for recruitment by extremists. They invite young people to a world of adults and provide a sense of community, respect and an opportunity to experiment with different ways of thinking. Extremists also encourage young people to air grievances in those spaces, especially about the adults closest to them. In these digital spaces, extremists freely share views that may contradict beliefs that young people grew up with or confirm thoughts and opinions they are questioning. For example, [in an essay](#) by the parent of the thirteen-year-old referenced above, they describe how their son, in the aftermath of being accused of sexual harassment at school, found people to talk to on Reddit and 4chan. These extremists were all too happy to seize on his vulnerabilities, explaining that all girls lie, Islam is inherently violent, the gender wage gap is a fallacy and other distortions rooted in bias and hate.

Some tweens and teens are particularly drawn to white supremacist extremism because it runs contrary to their family's belief system. It may seem counterintuitive, but adolescents have a developmental need to take risks, experiment with different modes of thinking, challenge authority and establish an identity separate from their parents/families. They are breaking away from their parents/caregivers for the first time and are in search of meaning and a sense of their true beliefs and passions. Adolescence is a time in life when young people are trying to develop that sense of community and purpose.

White supremacist online recruitment takes advantage of young people's openness and

susceptibility to different ways of thinking. Teens may not agree with all of their parents' and family's beliefs and values but find it difficult to express that or fear being judged. In trying to make sense of the world, young people may look elsewhere for answers and find them among people or groups with very different beliefs, like white supremacist extremists.

Extremist organizations use different tactics to reach young people. Historically, high schools and colleges have been the sites of political and ideological movements that extremist organizations have infiltrated. We have seen white supremacist groups engage in [outreach efforts to colleges and universities](#) with pamphleteering and other activities.

However, the single most potent force in the recruitment of young people is the internet, social media, and encrypted peer-to-peer mobile phones and apps. These tools enable recruiters to easily reach out to young people whom they would not be able to connect with otherwise. Using propaganda, literature, videos and even short one-on-one video chats like [Omegle](#), these recruiters connect, draw young people in and radicalize them over time. Another outcome of living in a digital world is the emergence of self-radicalization as people find online propaganda on their own.

## Warning Signs

There is not one profile for the person who is most at risk and not one list of warning signs to neatly check off. Because of what all adolescents go through as part of their normal development process, you could argue that all of them are potentially at risk: those who are lonely and those who are not, those who are steadfast in their opinions and those who may be confused, those who have loving families and those who feel disconnected from family. While many who have been recruited tend to fit the profile of teenage white boys, young women and others have been recruited and radicalized as well. There are also situations where a young person is drawn to violence and will find it no matter what. There are other teens whose entry point was a friend who was already involved.



The [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children](#) (NSPCC) was established to help protect children from crimes, abuse and terrorism, with the motto "every childhood is worth fighting for." The NSPCC provides tips for spotting signs that a child has been radicalized, emphasizing that it can be difficult to spot the signs. They identify some of these signs as:

- Isolating themselves from family and friends.
- Talking as if from a scripted speech.
- Unwilling or unable to discuss their views.
- Suddenly displaying a disrespectful attitude toward others.
- Showing increased levels of anger.
- Becoming increasingly secretive, especially regarding internet use.

In addition to spotting these personality changes, you can also take note of specific kinds of behavioral changes and interests such as:

- Political or ideological language that is not typical for that young person, especially about disparaging people from marginalized identity groups (e.g., people who are Black, Jewish, disabled, LGBTQ+, etc.).
- Using sarcastic humor to talk about race or identity in derogatory and offensive ways.

- Using drawings, doodles, clothing and websites that have symbols you don't recognize or symbols that represent white supremacy, racism, sexism, anti-immigrant and other forms of bias (see below for examples).
- Expressing views and fears of a "great replacement" in which white people are viewed as oppressed and are replaced by people of color.
- Expressing violent anger and loathing toward women and a belief that white men are victims who are falling prey to feminism and changing social norms.

These lists are not exhaustive or definitive. They may signal that a young person is being exposed to white supremacist content and can serve as a warning sign to pay closer attention.

## What Does Recruitment and Radicalization Look Like?

Every act of extremist recruitment and radicalization looks different. Attempts at recruitment can be made by individuals or groups and can include a combination of online and in-person interactions as well as public incidents that bring attention to extremist ideology. It can start with a friend telling another friend about websites and people they're getting to know. However, in recent years, most recruitment takes place primarily in digital spaces. The process of recruitment typically includes identifying candidates or targets, establishing ways to connect and then drawing targets in, building rapport, advancing the friendship and building trust, engaging in indoctrination and slowly pulling the recruit into either the organization/group or to the extremist ideology.

Extremist group events and acts of violence can also serve to recruit new members. Terrorist attacks can send a message that the extremist group and/or ideology is powerful, important and relevant. These events typically dominate media coverage for days, weeks or months and help to sensationalize and spread the extremist ideology and imagery in the aftermath of an attack. However, if the result of a terrorist or extremist attack ends badly with serious consequences for the perpetrators, including showing the extremists being arrested and prosecuted (e.g., what's happening with the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol), the impact can potentially counter recruitment efforts.

### Recruitment Strategies

Recruitment, especially online recruitment, is a fluid process. Because most recruiters are

unaffiliated (i.e., not part of specific extremist groups), their tactics can be subtle, nuanced and change rapidly.

You might notice a young person drawing or scribbling signs and symbols or wearing clothes with imagery that you don't recognize. These signs and symbols may be familiar but have different meanings in white supremacist ideology that aren't obvious and may differ from what they appear to be. Typical symbols like the swastika or terminology like "white power" are too obvious for recruiters to use, although those are certainly in their arsenal of tools. As is the case with any symbols, codes, language and acronyms, **context is key**. You need to consider the context in which they are used to determine if there is an extremist meaning behind them. Several symbols and codes, including the swastika, also have innocuous meanings behind them.

### Propaganda



The propaganda pictured here, overwhelmingly features veiled white supremacist language with a patriotic slant. This is part of an intentional effort to normalize white supremacist messaging and bolster recruitment efforts while targeting

marginalized groups (e.g., people who are Black, Muslim, Jewish, LGBTQ+, immigrants, etc.). These pictures are examples that have the patriotic feel to them (red, white and blue); the first one is directed at teens, using an anti-drug theme.

## Websites and Apps

Recruitment can take place on mainstream platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. It can also occur on more fringe or obscure platforms, which young people are likely to learn about before parents and other adults. These platforms include Gab, Minds, MeWe, Parler and others. White supremacist extremists are always looking out for the latest and most popular apps being used by tweens and teens. That means they are following behind young people on TikTok, WhatsApp, Snapchat and others, but as young people move into new apps, so does the recruitment activity. Therefore, the websites that extremists use to recruit are constantly changing.

## Symbols, Numeric Codes, Acronyms and Memes

Extremists spread biased, offensive and hateful ideas through propaganda (memes, infographics, videos, symbols) often packaged as humor, sarcasm and irony, which is a seemingly subtle but powerful way of luring young people in. In general, memes are a very significant and substantial part of young people's humor, and because they are used by extremists, it's important not to downplay them as simply "dark humor." This online communication takes place on social media, gaming platforms, and in encrypted spaces, and uses propaganda and misinformation to bring young people into their way of thinking that eventually leads to the young person's radicalization.

Below are examples of frequently used symbols, numeric codes, acronyms and memes used by white supremacist extremists and groups. The examples illustrate that some of the items may not seem to be extremist when taken at face value but hide a contextual meaning as a sort of "dog whistle" to those who understand them. A more robust collection of symbols and codes, etc. can

be found on ADL's [Hate Symbols Database](#) with detailed explanations of their meanings and uses.

It is important to keep in mind that these memes, symbols, codes and acronyms, as well as the platforms where they are used, are always changing and evolving. This is because digital spaces and products are constantly morphing and extremists try to avoid being found or identified by moving around. Use or subscribe to ADL's [blog on extremism](#) to learn about the most current and updated recruitment strategies.

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Please note: The following images are offensive, biased and hateful and could be upsetting to view.

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## Symbols

### OK Hand Gesture

(general white supremacist hand gesture)



<https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/okay-hand-gesture>

### Moon Man

(general white supremacist symbol)

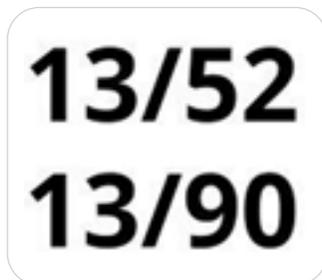


<https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/moon-man>

## Numeric Codes

### 13/52

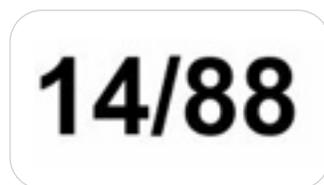
Purported percentage of population that is Black/Purported percentage of murders they commit



<https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/1352-1390>

**14/88**

14 Words/Heil Hitler



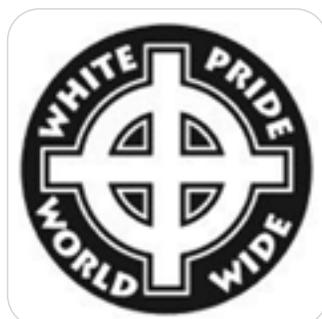
<https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/1488>

**Memes**

Many extremist memes are original content, including the messages, artwork and imagery. However, white supremacist extremists will also recognize the popularity of many mainstream memes and then modify and incorporate them into their extremist messaging. This is a strategy that helps to lure targets in. Here are three examples of memes:

**“Pepe the Frog” meme****“Smokey the Bear” meme****“Keep Calm & Carry On” meme**

The original was a motivational poster produced by the British government in 1939 in preparation for World War II.

**Acronyms****White Pride World Wide**

<https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/wpww>

## Radicalization Spectrum

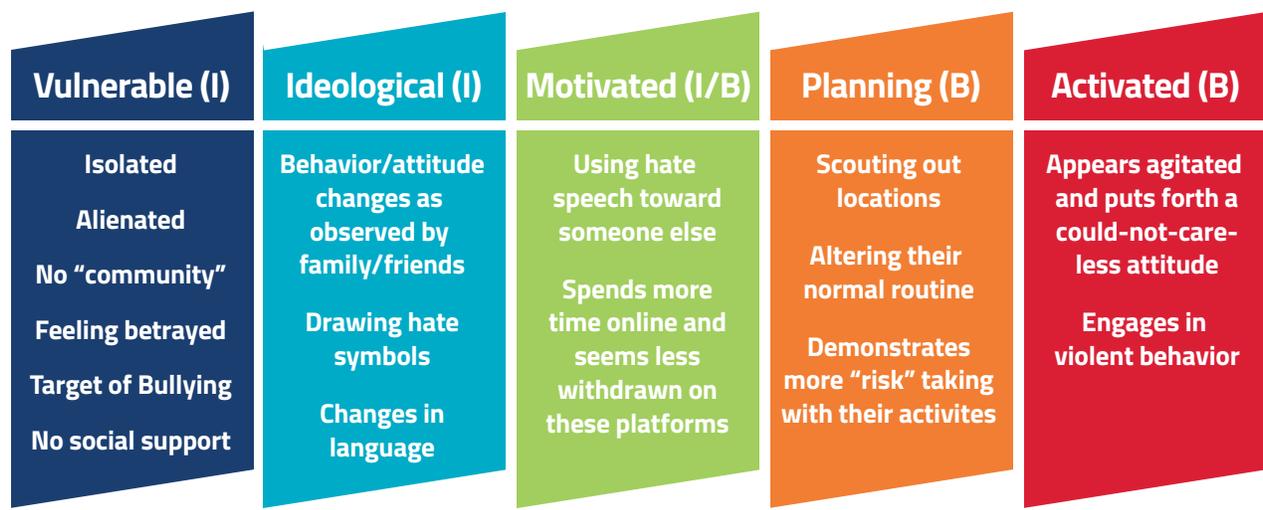
Radicalization can be understood as an increase in the level of extremism an individual demonstrates. This can include shifts in beliefs, behaviors or both. The radicalization process looks different for everyone. It may occur impulsively or may happen with gradual exposure to extremist ideas. Additionally, radicalization will not always culminate in a violent attack. Some will radicalize to one stage and never move on to another.

The radicalization spectrum below illustrates the different stages a radicalized person may go through. You may encounter or know people are vulnerable to radicalization and are somewhere along this spectrum and yet, it may or may not be obvious where on the spectrum that person is. It is important to reiterate that every individual will experience radicalization differently. Many

may adopt extreme beliefs and eventually grow to accept violence as a legitimate means to pursue them and seek out likeminded individuals. Others may join a group and participate in violent activities and only adopt the group's extreme belief system later.

In the diagram below, the order is less important than the contrast between the different stages. The "ideology" (I) stage of radicalization primarily involves thoughts, attitudes and feelings that are shifting. This may include vocalizing a belief in racial supremacy or support for extremist goals. The "behavior" (B) stage is when the person is taking on actions and behaviors that align with the extremist ideology. This can include participating in riots, joining a group, and distributing extremist propaganda. Knowing where a young person is on this spectrum may help you identify the best way to approach them or to seek additional assistance.

## Radicalization Spectrum





## What are Guiding Principles and Effective Approaches for Talking with Young People?

If you suspect a young person in your life is vulnerable to or is already being influenced by domestic extremist recruitment, there are ways you can try to intervene. You can prepare yourself by learning more about extremism and online recruitment and open lines of communication with the young person you are concerned about. Understandably, your first impulse may be to act on your adult fear that this young person is in danger, but it is vitally important to avoid judgment or punishment when talking with young people about their digital lives and whether they are in communication with extremist people or groups. Instead, listen and help to expand the young person's thinking. Try to understand the possible underlying reasons they may have been lured into the spectrum of radicalization in the first place. It is important to keep in mind that the more you know, the better you will be able to approach them and intervene.

### Learn as much as you can.

Information is power. The more you know about extremist groups and their ideology, history, social media outreach, recruitment tactics and “hot spots” online and in person, the better position you'll be in to have these discussions with young people. Learn to identify hate symbols, which are typically images but can also include haircuts and hand gestures. Be aware of some of the meme-sharing websites, videos, games and jokes young people are

seeing online and offline. Learn about the [history and current-day examples of white supremacy](#) so that you can help young people understand that white supremacy is a belief system based on white dominance, superiority and oppression. You may find that even if young people let you see their favorite apps and websites, it can be difficult to find any indicators in their social media feeds and gaming messages. Effective strategies for keeping the lines of communication open and engaging young people in discussion include being knowledgeable and attuned to the subtle ways recruitment works, asking questions and listening closely.

### Be curious and ask questions.

Expressing nonjudgmental curiosity about a young person's digital life can send the message that you are interested in what's going on in their lives, which in turn can open communication. Try exploring the ways they are engaging online and in social media—what they like about it, what's scary, what's exciting, what's concerning, what is energizing or motivating. You can ask open-ended questions such as “What do you like about that app?” and “What's exciting to you about it?” or “Do you ever see or hear things that bother you?” These kinds of questions do not judge, criticize or belittle and will keep the conversation going rather than shut it down.

## Don't judge.

Young people in this age group are on the cusp of adulthood and have a developmental need to seek acceptance and respect from adults. Hearing them out will deepen your understanding of their points of view, needs and thought patterns. Acknowledge a young person's curiosity and interest and let them know you care rather than blaming, belittling or judging them. Conveying shame, judgment and disrespect can close off communication, making it difficult for you to inform, educate or help them when you really need to. Knowing that you are not going to judge them, young people will find you more approachable and be more likely to talk with you when something concerning or upsetting happens.

## Share your concerns.

Many adults know very little about the digital lives of young people. And in some cases, adults may think they know what's going on, but in actuality, they have no idea. You can start from a place of caring by letting a young person know that while you want them to engage in online platforms to make friends, learn and have fun, it is essential for them to be safe. Some parents do not "allow" their children to register for certain sites, while others attempt to monitor their children's social media activity as a means of protection for them—but this is a nearly impossible endeavor. Young people are often skilled at hiding what they say and do online. Judging and conveying mistrust are likely to drive young people to become more secretive and guarded about what's going on in their lives—both online and offline.

If you suspect young people are visiting sites where extremists try to bait them, open the conversation by sharing your concerns about messages of hate and extremist tactics. Make it clear that if they find themselves in an uncomfortable or unsafe situation, or one that gives them "a bad feeling," they can talk with you about it and you will listen. Letting young people know you are available no matter what may keep them from worrying about being judged or punished especially if something happens on a site they were told not to visit. A simple open-ended question like "How can I help?" can be effective.

## Discuss misinformation and propaganda and teach media literacy.

Misinformation and propaganda (see [Glossary of Terms](#)) are all around us—and they thrive on social media. It is rampant online and extremists use it to their advantage.

Starting at a young age, encourage young people to ask questions and think critically about the media they consume. You can start early with TV and online games. As you watch and play, ask questions that get children thinking beyond what they are seeing. Encourage and teach them how to dig deeper to understand whether they are hearing facts or opinions. Share the idea that individuals may interpret the same piece of media differently depending on their perspectives and the knowledge or experiences they bring to it. You can also make young people aware that while media sends explicit messages, media also has implicit or embedded points of view conveyed by images, quotes and the amount of time devoted to the topic, among other techniques. It is key for young people to understand that this is a form of news bias and that all news has bias. News bias is evident in what is reported, how it's discussed, who is interviewed, how much time is allocated to each topic and the emphasis on certain topics instead of others. It is also important to provide guidance to young people on how to find credible sources or substantiate the information they may read from a non-credible source.

You can help young people understand that not everything they read online is true. In fact, depending on the credibility of the site and source of information, most of it may be untrue. And, similar to the idea of news bias, you can point out that the people they communicate with may have their own agendas or ulterior motives. Encourage them to think about the perspective and point of view of the person they are talking to, and to reflect on whether the information being shared by that person is valid and true or filled with lies and misinformation. Ask them to consider the possibility that the person they are talking to intends to use their conversation for more than entertainment—to lure them into their white supremacy extremist ideology. An effective strategy is to model and share with young people your own curiosity and critical thinking about what you see online.

## Convey values.

Adults have the opportunity to express values to young people every day—by the choices they make, the questions they ask, the articles they read, the discussions they engage in, the media they consume, the people they follow on social media, etc. In trying to make sense of the world, adolescents may look beyond their families' circles and find answers among white supremacist extremists. Given that adolescents have a developmental need to take risks, experiment with different modes of thinking and challenge authority, they may be particularly drawn to white supremacy because it runs contrary to their family's belief system. While being mindful not to shame or judge, it is important to share your thoughts on white supremacy, racism, antisemitism and other forms of hate with the young people in your life.

## Keep the door open.

As Bryan Stevenson, founder and director of the [Equal Justice Initiative](#), says, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done."

Despite your best efforts, it is possible that a young person in your life is being recruited and radicalized. No matter what is happening, whether the young person has "joined," has increased



their communication with an extremist group or individual, or is on the road to becoming radicalized, keep the door open. Threatening tweens and teens with extreme punishment, not being able to "come home," shunning them or expressing strong feelings of anger and disappointment could lead to them not asking for help when they really need it, as well as other unintended consequences. Remember—anyone can get recruited and radicalized by extremists, especially young people, who are among the most vulnerable because they are still defining who they are. As difficult as it might be, try not to communicate in absolutes or take actions with potential long-term consequences. A more effective approach is to express care, compassion and concern.

# How Can I Help Young People Respond to Online Hate?

It is helpful to understand the larger context of online hate that tweens and teens observe and experience. Young people are engaging in digital spaces at earlier ages through gaming, texting, social media, video chatting, online learning and other online activity. According to a [2018 Pew Research Center report](#), close to half of teens ages 13-17 are online "almost constantly" and another 44% are on "several times a day." In the world of digital games, 84% of teens ages 13-17 reported that they have or have access to a gaming console at home, and 90% say they play video games, whether on a computer, game console or cell phone. Further, 97% of boys say they play video games of some kind.

## What is online hate?

Online spaces are compelling, useful and powerful spaces where we can meet new people, understand different perspectives, communicate with others, share ideas and learn new information. Like any form of media, it can be used for productive, fun and positive communication and learning. And, like any form of media, online spaces can also be used in negative ways that have a harmful impact on people and groups.

Online hate (See Glossary of Terms) is pervasive. [Nearly two thirds](#) (64%) of U.S. teenagers have encountered online hate. Among those, 52% report

having seen racist, 52% sexist, 46% religious-based bias and 52% homophobic comments or posts. In the world of multiplayer online video games, an [ADL gaming study](#) revealed that three out of five young people (60%) ages 13-17 have experienced harassment in online multiplayer games, representing nearly 14 million young gamers.

To be responsible and responsive online, young people need to have the ability to discern negative, hateful and harmful content and they need the skills and confidence to do something about it when they see or experience it.

## Strategies



You can help young people feel empowered and skilled to directly address online bias and hate by teaching, sharing and encouraging them to use the following strategies. A critical first step is to help young people assess their safety in terms of the risk of their potential actions. As you discuss different strategies with young people, ask them to ask themselves whether they feel safe, whether they should get help, whether they should confront it online or in person and whether they should do so publicly or privately.

- **Talk to friends, family or another trusted adult.**  
Remind young people that before doing anything, it can be helpful to talk to friends, family members or other trusted adults in their life. It might be helpful to talk about what they have seen with someone, who may have specific suggestions for what to do next.

- **Report It.**  
Most social media and digital platforms have policies about online hate—what’s allowed and what isn’t. You can check on the company’s website or use [ADL’s Cyber Safety Action Guide](#) to quickly find out the company’s policies and a link to make a complaint. Do not engage with the content in any other way, including by replying to it or reposting it, as this will ultimately only amplify the hateful message due to how digital platforms’ algorithms work.
- **Act as an ally to the people targeted.**  
There are many ways you can act as an ally to the person or people who are being targeted. You can share and talk about these [6 ways to act as an ally](#).
- **Respond directly to the person who did it.**  
If you know the person who did it, and it feels safe to do so, tell them why you think what they did was wrong. Always consider whether it feels safe. And decide in advance whether you are going to confront them privately or publicly.
- **Applaud positive content.**  
When you see content online that is about respect, inclusion, equity and standing up to bias—amplify it.
- **Learn more about how bias and hate operate in digital spaces.**  
Read articles, studies and reports about how hate operates in digital spaces and the creative ways people fight it. Self-reflect about how you operate in digital spaces, asking yourself if you use those spaces to do good or to cause harm.

## How Can I Use the Pyramid of Hate to Understand the Impact of Bias?

ADL's [Pyramid of Hate](#) is useful for exploring the prevalence of bias and hate in our society, the relationship between the different levels of bias and injustice, and how systems of oppression operate. From the bottom to top, the Pyramid is organized in escalating complexity of attitudes, behaviors and actions. Like a pyramid, the upper levels are supported by the lower levels. Unlike a pyramid, the levels are not built consecutively or to demonstrate a ranking of each level. Bias at each level reflects a system of oppression that negatively impacts individuals, institutions and society. Unchecked bias can become "normalized" and contribute to a pattern of accepting discrimination, violence and injustice in society. In a society with established and longstanding systems of oppression, bias-based behaviors are only some of the factors that contribute to the harm experienced by marginalized groups, in addition to historical, economic, institutional, political and cultural factors.

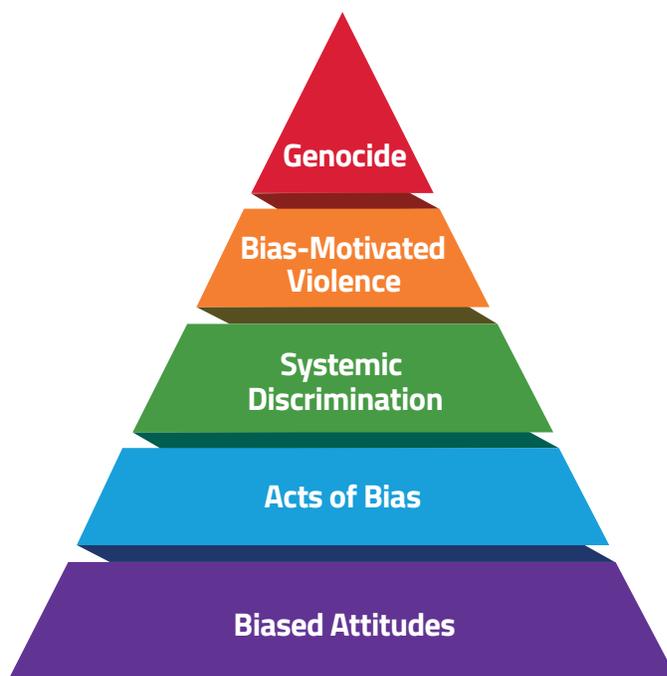
Domestic and white supremacist extremist violence is located toward the top of the Pyramid, in the category of Bias-Motivated Violence. Violent extremism can take the form of assault, threat, desecration, arson, vandalism, murder and terrorism. As we consider extremism through the Pyramid of Hate lens, we see that these actions do not take place in isolation and most extremists do not start off by perpetrating bias-motivated violence. Their biased attitudes and behaviors may have started at the lower levels of the Pyramid. Those behaviors, likely unchecked and in some cases encouraged, applauded and affirmed, continued to escalate up the Pyramid.

A prime example is Dylann Storm Roof. In 2015, Roof, a white supremacist extremist and neo-Nazi who was radicalized almost exclusively online, entered the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., where he shot and killed nine people, all Black, and injured one other person. Dylann was twenty-one years old at the time. He was convicted of all thirty-three federal criminal counts, including hate crimes. According to those who knew him in his younger days, Roof told racist jokes and spewed biased ideology.

A contemporary of Roof's said, "He made a lot of racist jokes, but you don't really take them seriously like that." According to a childhood friend, Roof went on a rant about the killing of Trayvon Martin and the 2015 Black Lives Matter protests in Baltimore, sparked by the death of Freddie Gray who died while in police custody. According to this friend, [Roof often claimed](#) that "Blacks were taking over the world."

A hate crime like the Charleston massacre is complex and multilayered, and Roof's motivation involved a multitude of factors. While it is impossible to know if Roof's trajectory would have been different had his earlier bias and racism been rigorously confronted and challenged, in systems of oppression, the connection between those lower levels of bias and his ultimate hate crime that resulted in the loss of nine lives cannot be ignored nor underestimated.

The Pyramid of Hate compels each of us to challenge those biased attitudes and behaviors in ourselves, others and our communities in order to interrupt the escalation of bias and make it more difficult for discrimination and hate to manifest, grow, worsen and deepen.



## How Can We Foster Safe, Inclusive and Equitable Communities?

In addition to reaching out and supporting young people on an individual basis, it is critical that we work diligently to foster classrooms, schools and communities that are safe, inclusive and strive for equity.

### Students who are feeling isolated or excluded.

Be more aware of and vigilant about students who may be experiencing feelings of isolation, disrespect, and exclusion in school and at home. Make sure your school's bullying, harassment and nondiscrimination policies are current, reflect district and state guidelines and include clear definitions and consequences. Staff, students and families should be made aware of these policies, and they should be followed and enforced. Remember that when students experience bullying, they are unlikely to report it to adults, and the older they get, the more reluctant they are to share with school staff and other adults. That's why it's important to reflect on how [to be more approachable](#), especially when it comes to bullying. When appropriate, work with young people who are targets of bullying (and their families) to help them get the resources, counseling (if needed) and referrals they need.

### Be public about the importance of respect and inclusion.

Just as individual parents and other adults are encouraged to share their values about

diversity, equity and inclusion, so should school communities. Be intentional, purposeful and public in expressing that your school community is a safe place, all are welcome, and that biased words and actions are unacceptable. Some examples for doing so include a clear sign or statement at the entrance to the building; a public letter to the school community; a wall mural featuring the diversity of your student body or language about being inclusive; a mission statement that includes language about respect, inclusion and equity; social media posts, announcements on the public address system, and school-wide events that honor diversity and justice.

### Teach about these concepts.

Finally, as a classroom teacher or school administrator, provide opportunities for students to engage in and learn about bias, extremism, white supremacy (both the system and extremist groups) and how to counter it. You can do this by first engaging students in [creating an anti-bias learning environment](#). In addition, ADL has several [anti-bias education programs](#) including our two signature programs, No Place for Hate® and A World of Difference® Institute, which provide skills, knowledge and awareness to promote and sustain respectful, inclusive and equitable learning environments and help young people understand and challenge bias in themselves, others and society. You can also use ADL's [free online resources](#) that integrate current events, literature, social studies and other subjects to address bias, diversity, bullying and social justice.

## How Can I Stay Informed about Our Changing Digital World?

It can be difficult to stay updated on extremists' recruitment efforts and approaches, the platforms they use, and the signs and symbols of white supremacist extremism. All of it changes rapidly

and sometimes under the radar. As much as is possible, read and stay aware of this changing landscape. Talk to young people in your life and listen when they are talking with each other to pick

up on how things are changing in their digital lives. The following resources can help:

- ADL Center on Extremism’s [Hate on Display: Hate Symbols Database](#), an overview of many of the symbols most frequently used by a variety of white supremacist groups and movements.
- ADL Center on Extremism’s [H.E.A.T. \(Hate, Extremism, Antisemitism, Terrorism\) Map](#), an interactive and customizable map detailing hate, extremist and antisemitic incidents by state and nationwide.
- ADL’s [Extremism blogs](#) provide up-to-date information on the latest extremism activities and incidents.
- ADL Education’s [The “Grown Folks” Guide to Popular Apps in Social Media](#) and [Common Sense Media](#) have information about what’s in, what’s out and what to look out for in the most popular social media apps.

# Glossary of Terms

These definitions are for high school age to adults. If you are defining any of these words for students younger than high school, you may need to adapt or simplify some of the definitions. Please also see ADL Education's [Education Glossary Terms](#) and ADL's Center on Extremism's [Defining Extremism: A Glossary of White Supremacist Terms, Movements and Philosophies](#).

**Bias:** An inclination or preference either for or against an individual or group that interferes with impartial judgment.

**Extremism:** A concept used to describe religious, social or political belief systems that exist substantially outside of belief systems more broadly accepted in society (i.e., "mainstream" beliefs). Extreme ideologies often seek radical changes in the nature of government, religion or society. Extremism can also be used to refer to the radical wings of broader movements, such as the anti-abortion movement or the environmental movement.

**Hate:** An extreme dislike for something, someone or a group. Hate that is based on an aspect of someone's identity (e.g., race, religion, sex, gender expression or identity, ability, sexual orientation, etc.) can result in interpersonal bias, discrimination, hate incidents, hate crimes and/or involvement in an organized hate group.

**Hate Crime:** A criminal act against a person or property because of the actual or perceived race, color, religion, national origin, ethnicity, sex, gender, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, or disability of another person or group. Hate speech alone very rarely constitutes a hate crime. In all but very limited circumstances, hate speech is protected speech under the First Amendment.

**Misinformation:** False information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead.

**Misogyny:** Dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women.

**Online Hate:** An attack against people or groups based on their actual or perceived race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, immigration status, etc. that occurs in digital social spaces through the use of technology, such as computers, cell phones and other electronic and digital devices.

**Prevention:** The action of stopping something from happening or arising.

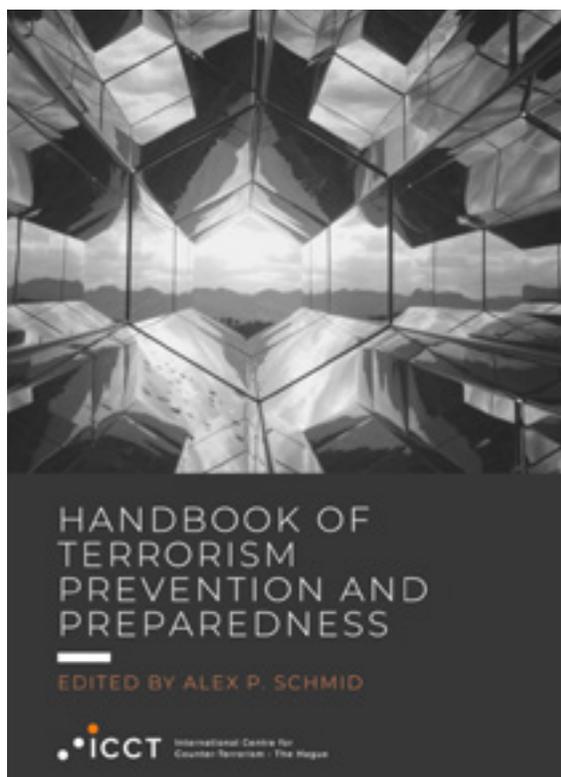
**Propaganda:** Information that is shared and spread in order to influence public opinion and to manipulate other people's beliefs, often to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view.

**Recruitment:** The process by which an extremist or terrorist organization or unaffiliated individual reaches out to potential new "recruits" and tries to persuade them to join their group or movement through a series of well planned, systematic and supervised activities.

**Radicalization:** A set of complex causal processes in which multiple factors work together to produce extremist outcomes, leading to the assumption and acceptance of terrorist ideologies along with the violent activities stemming from these (adapted from Jensen et al. 2018).

**Systemic Racism:** A combination of systems, institutions and factors that advantage white people and, for people of color, cause widespread harm and disadvantages in access and opportunity. One person or even one group of people did not create systemic racism; rather, it (1) is grounded in the history of our laws and institutions that were created on a foundation of white supremacy, (2) exists in the institutions and policies that advantage white people and disadvantage people of color, and (3) exists across culture (e.g., traditions, language, behavioral norms, values and media) to communicate and reinforce racist ideas, tropes and stereotypes.

**White Supremacist Groups:** Movements seeking white-only or white-run societies, including claims of white cultural or racial superiority and/or the need for white separatism or white dominance.



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## ADL Additional Resources

- 11 Ways Schools Can Help Students Feel Safe in Challenging Times, <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/11-ways-schools-can-help-students-feel-safe-in-challenging>
- Addressing Hate Online: Countering Cyberhate with Counterspeech, <https://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/addressing-hate-online-countering-cyberhate-with>
- Are White Supremacists Coming for Your Teens?, <https://www.adl.org/blog/are-white-supremacists-coming-for-your-teens>
- The Dangers of Disinformation, <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/the-dangers-of-disinformation>

- Discussing Political Violence and Extremism with Young People, <https://www.sutori.com/en/story/discussing-political-violence-and-extremism-with-young-people-3tm3oXLqgApFvjqTx32nG5vE>
- Empowering Young People in the Aftermath of Hate, <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/empowering-young-people-in-the-aftermath-of-hate-in>
- A Guide for Responding to School-Based Incidents, <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/a-guide-for-responding-to-school-based-bias-incidents>
- Hate is No Game: Harassment and Positive Social Experiences in Online Games 2021, <https://www.adl.org/hateisnogame>
- Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2020, <https://www.adl.org/murder-and-extremism-2020>.
- Navigating a Digital World: Tips for Youth, <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/navigating-a-digital-world-tips-for-youth-en-espanol>
- Outsmarting Propaganda: Combatting the Lure of Extremist Recruitment Strategies, <https://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/outsmarting-propaganda-combatting-the-lure-of-extremist>
- Propaganda, Extremism and Online Recruitment Tactics, <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/table-talk/propaganda-extremism-online-recruitment>
- Pyramid of Hate, <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/pyramid-of-hate-en-espanol>
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## Other Related Resources

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