

# PRACTICE GUIDE

## Extremism and child protection

This practice guide explains the complexities of extremism and violent extremism in the context of child protection and guides responses to situations where a parent, family member, or child is engaged in such behaviours or at risk of radicalisation. It aims to ensure the safety of the child, mitigate risks, and support collaboration with relevant agencies to promote family and community wellbeing.

### Key Terms

**Extremism** is generally understood as a belief system underpinned by rigid and uncompromising beliefs outside the norms of community and society<sup>1</sup>.

**Violent extremism** refers to acts of, or support for, violence to achieve social, political or legal outcomes or in response to specific political or social grievances<sup>2</sup>.

**Radicalisation** refers to the process by which a person's thinking and behaviour become significantly different from how most of the members of their society and community view social issues and participate politically<sup>2</sup>. If you suspect a parent, family or child has radicalised to the point of supporting or threatening violence, consult with a Senior Team Leader.

Extremism can be:

- ideologically motivated, including nationalist, racist and misogynist motivations
  - for example, 'neo-Nazis', 'incels'

or

- religiously motivated, relating to a religious interpretation
  - for example, Islamic or Christian extremism.

Extremists may also adopt mixed, unstable or unclear ideologies incorporating elements of multiple beliefs, which may be fluid, incoherent or hybridised for example, 'Sovereign Citizens'<sup>2</sup>.

**If you are concerned that an adult or child poses a risk of imminent violence, contact the Queensland Police Service on 000.**

For nonurgent matters, contact Policelink on 131 444 or Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000.

## Risk factors for radicalisation

The table below shows three key vulnerabilities commonly observed in individuals who hold extremist views, linked to several risk factors<sup>3,4,5</sup>. Note that families coming to the attention of child protection authorities are often experiencing several social and individual vulnerabilities. While the factors in the table may contribute to radicalisation, their presence alone does not indicate an individual is on the path to extremism or violent extremism.

Many children and young people in care arrangements have trauma experiences impacting their identity, sense of belonging and connection. These children are more vulnerable to radicalisation by extremist groups.

| A need for personal meaning and identity                                                                                                                       | A need for belonging                                                                                                                                                                  | Perceived injustice or humiliation                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disengagement from employment or education</li> <li>Low self-esteem</li> <li>Previous engagement in activism</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceived or actual social isolation/loneliness</li> <li>Peers or family members with extremist views</li> <li>Negative peer groups</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Marginalisation or discrimination</li> <li>Experiences of bullying</li> <li>Perceived in-group superiority</li> </ul> |

## Extremism and social cohesion

Social cohesion refers to the connection between people who share common values, fostering a sense of belonging and social unity<sup>6</sup>. However, more young people today report feeling constantly or frequently lonely and are less connected to society compared to previous generations<sup>7,8</sup>. This loneliness and social isolation can increase the risk of prejudice, radicalisation, and extreme beliefs or actions,<sup>9,10</sup> as extremist groups often exploit these feelings to fulfil individuals' needs for connection, safety, and belonging.

**Social isolation can be perceived or actual; a person may still experience loneliness without physical isolation, while someone with few connections may not feel lonely.**

## Extremism and the online environment

The radicalisation of youth via social media has significantly increased<sup>11</sup>. For young people experiencing social isolation, online environments provide a sense of community and belonging that can be leveraged by extremist groups. Online communities have been described as the 'the world's single most potent and powerful incubator of extremism'<sup>12</sup>.

Parents and carers may have limited knowledge of these environments and their child's online activities, with extremist content made increasingly accessible. Exposure to violent extremist material can occur through seemingly innocuous platforms including Roblox, TikTok and Instagram<sup>11</sup>. The presence of extremist content on mainstream platforms increasingly normalises extremist ideologies and behaviours, including those that advocate violence.

If you become aware a child is accessing extremist content online, connect with the parent or carer to explore what appeals to them about this content. Do they have an emotional or social health need that is not being addressed? Are they worried about a cause and don't know how to enact change?(Refer to [Helpful online resources on violent extremism and online safety](#).)

If an adult or child is accessing violent extremist material, consider making a referral to a dedicated countering violent extremism support service and report the content to the eSafety Commissioner: [Report forms | eSafety Commissioner](#).

Be wary of limiting a child's access to online content as this may inadvertently disconnect them further from positive connections or supports. Instead, use this opportunity to introduce the child to different sources and perspectives on their ideology. This can include media from positive, non-violent advocates.

## Extremism and mental health

Mental illness is often portrayed by mass media as responsible for violent extremist behaviour. Although symptoms of poor mental health may increase an individual's vulnerability to radicalisation, mental health diagnoses are not predictive of extremist behaviour<sup>13</sup>. In addition, while people who feel isolated are more likely to experience mental illness, there has not yet been enough research to identify any relationship between mental illness alone and risk of being radicalised<sup>14</sup>.

## Early indicators of radicalisation to extremism

The following indicators may describe a parent or child on the path to extremism or violent extremism<sup>15</sup>:

- showing intense ideological, political or religious interest
- adopting an 'us vs them' mentality
- increased time spent online and the viewing of extremist or violent material
- advocating for violent or aggressive behaviour to achieve change
- isolating from friends or family
- appearing more detached or withdrawn than usual
- change in appearance
- arguing or using confrontational language based on new ideas or behaviour.

Consider if changes in identity and behaviour may be developmentally appropriate, related to mental health or the product of a proximate life change.

For children, their families, parents and carers are usually the first to notice these signs and changes. Speak with these people about their observations to explore if there are concerns for radicalisation or engagement in extremism.

## Risk assessment involving extremism

Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief. When assessing risk to a child, ensure undue or unreasonable limits are not placed on families' freedoms under the *Human Rights Act 2019*. However, when extremist ideologies impinge on a child's safety and wellbeing, intervention may be required to protect these rights.

Consider the extent to which a parent, carer or family's beliefs and associated activities are impacting the child's physical, emotional or psychological wellbeing (Refer to the practice guide [Assess harm and risk of harm](#)).

In cases relating to extremism, consider the child's:

- exposure to violence, violent materials or ideologies
- access to necessary care, including education and healthcare
- opportunity for development
- access to emotional and psychological safety.

Holding extremist beliefs does not necessarily cause harm, however, consider how these beliefs may influence a person's behaviour in the context of abuse or neglect. Examine if action or inaction stemming from the beliefs is detrimental to someone's parenting capacity, the parent-child relationship, the home environment and the child's experiences.

Extremist ideology in Australia is becoming increasingly dynamic and diverse<sup>16</sup>, with individuals adopting aspects of multiple ideologies to form unique beliefs. Beliefs and behaviours that may be associated with common ideologies are included in the table below:

| <b>Ideology</b>                                                        | <b>Common beliefs</b>                                                                                                                               | <b>Potential behaviours</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Antifeminist ideologies ('Incels', 'red pill', 'manosphere')           | Men are victimised by women and society<br>Male entitlement and belief in male superiority<br>Extreme belief in stereotypical gender roles          | Acts of domestic and family violence including coercive control<br>Misogynistic language<br>Support for or acceptance of sexual violence                                                                                                                                                    |
| Violent jihadist movements                                             | Sanctioning war in defence of the Islamic faith<br>Sovereignty in the advancement of Islam                                                          | Planning or undertaking dangerous travel i.e. warzones<br>Participation in or support for acts of violence or attacks<br>Intimidation or marginalization of other faiths or religious sects                                                                                                 |
| Anti-government movements ('Sovereign Citizens', conspiracy theorists) | Dissociation from societal structure<br>Belief they are morally and legally correct and not subject to law<br>Government authority is delegitimised | Criminality e.g. refusal to pay taxes, driving unlicensed, unregistered weapons<br>Establishment of "micro-nations" disconnected from society<br>Unregulated homeschooling and unregistered births<br>Refusal to acknowledge statutory authority or legal directions i.e. "I don't consent" |
| Extreme religious ideologies                                           | Complete commitment to religious doctrine, generally outside of established religion<br>Extreme and/or violent interpretations of scripture         | Isolation<br>Maliciousness or evangelising of non-members<br>Rigid adherence to rituals and customs, often prioritised over individual rights and needs                                                                                                                                     |

Speak to family members with curiosity to understand the nature of their beliefs, analyse if these increase risk factors for harm to the child, and identify behaviour patterns or escalations to determine if the child requires intervention or support. When a child is unsafe in the home and a child protection

order is required, consider how the parent's beliefs may influence their decision-making when assessing whether custody or guardianship of the child is required.

## Physical harm

Particularly in cases of violent extremism, children may be at risk of physical injury or even death as a result of their exposure to acts of violence, or their own perpetration of these acts if radicalised.

Non-violent extremism also increases risks of physical harm as extremist beliefs may justify physical abuse under perceived ideological or religious principles or avoiding access to necessary resources such as appropriate nutrition, shelter and healthcare.

## Emotional harm

Emotional harm may be caused through a child's exposure to violent extremist acts, material or rhetoric, or as a result of the radicalisation process. This can include exposure to graphic or gory material, propaganda, hate speech, witnessing physical or verbal abuse either online or in person, or experiencing it themselves. Parents preoccupied with extremist views may provide children with inconsistent or inappropriate responses that impact upon their attachment.

Within groups that have adopted extremist views as the norm, dissenting ideas or opinions may be met with ridicule, threats or ostracism as a means to radicalise non-extremist group members or maintain compliance with extremist beliefs.

## Psychological harm

The radicalisation process and exposure to extreme behaviours can have significant impacts on psychological wellbeing including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, sleep disorders, severe stress and anxiety. Where children are not provided education or suitable socialisation, they may experience learning or developmental delays. Psychological harm often takes the form of a diagnosable psychological disorder and therefore requires expert assessment or opinion.

Explore the child's education and developmental status and consider this alongside their age and expected developmental milestones. (Refer to the practice guide [Physical and cognitive developmental milestones](#)). Consider if referral for assessment by a paediatrician or psychologist is warranted.

# Support young people and families with extremist views

## Strategies for engagement

Extremist beliefs may be confronting, offensive and difficult to navigate. When engaging with a child or family member who holds extremist beliefs or may be at risk of radicalising, consider the following:

- Use non-judgemental responses to promote feelings of acceptance and belonging – denial, disparaging or stigmatising of beliefs may further reinforce their seeking connection with groups that support violence or taking their beliefs 'underground'.
- Revisit the department's [framework for practice](#) – approach discussions with curiosity and learning. Gather information through appreciative inquiry to understand an individual's reasoning. Restate their beliefs to ensure they feel understood and use this exercise to identify common ground before pursuing alternative views collaboratively.
- Engage in discussion to identify what need is driving their beliefs and how these beliefs are being perpetuated e.g. online groups, peers, family.

- Connect them with positive role models such as family, friends and community members who model respectful debate and communication.
- Implement a multi-agency response - involve all stakeholders and ensure consistent language and messaging is used.
- If disengaged, support re-engagement in education or employment.
- Encourage critical thinking and exploration of other points of view.
- Encourage participation in pro-social activities that are non-clinical and non-vocational to increase social connectedness.
- Refer to support services. (Refer to [Support services and programs](#) below, for available support services.)
- Be mindful of any safety issues and, where applicable, implement precautions to ensure staff safety. (Refer to the [Staff safety guide for mindful practice](#).)

The pathway to disengagement from extremist behaviour will be different for each individual, reflective of their unique situation and needs. Gather as much information as possible to determine which needs are currently being met by extremist ideology, and how these needs can be met via safe, pro-social means.

## Cultural considerations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced racism and violence as a result of their culture, the colour of their skin and their beliefs.

Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families must therefore prioritise cultural safety and culturally responsive practice. This may be through:

- the nomination and involvement of an independent person
- referral to a culturally appropriate support service
- consultation with Cultural Practice Advisors, relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals or community figures.

(Refer to the principles outlined in the [Safe Care and Connection Practice Kit](#) when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families.)

Understand the difference between Indigenous sovereignty and Sovereign Citizen beliefs. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have long-standing systems of law, governance and culture that have existed for thousands of years. These systems are based on collective community life and connection to Country. In contrast, Sovereign Citizen movements use invented or misleading legal ideas to promote individual sovereignty. They are not based on real legal systems and often reject all government authority<sup>17</sup>.

## Considerations for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families

Culture plays an important role in influencing beliefs, values and behaviour. Some cultures may hold beliefs that differ significantly from those of the Anglo-Australian culture, often relating to religion, gender and politics. While these views can sit outside of perceived 'typical' societal norms, they may align with another cultural context and therefore not necessarily constitute extremism.

When working with CALD families, seek to improve cultural competence to better understand how beliefs, values or behaviours represent a family's culture and when they may be cause for concern.

Cultural competence involves developing cultural awareness, acquiring knowledge about other cultures and developing cross-cultural skills. (Refer to the principles outlined in the practice guide [Working with people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds](#).)

**The welfare and interests of the child remain paramount and culture should not be used as justification for child abuse or neglect.**

## Support services and programs

Diversion from extremist pathways is most effective when multiple stakeholders work in collaboration. Consider referral to an appropriate service or program to build an individual's network of supports.

| Service                                                        | Contact                                                                                                    | Description                                                                                                                                         | Eligibility                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>QLD Engagement and Diversion Program</b>                    | <a href="#">QLD engagement and diversion program: Referral suitability checklist</a>                       | Voluntary program delivering assessment and case management for individuals displaying concerning behaviors presenting a risk of violent extremism. | All ages, at risk individuals, who are assessed as requiring ongoing support.                                       |
|                                                                | Email: <a href="mailto:edp@police.qld.gov.au">edp@police.qld.gov.au</a>                                    |                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Step Together</b>                                           | Helpline: 1800 875 204                                                                                     | Digital support service providing advice to community members concerned someone they know is vulnerable to violent extremism.                       | Families, friends and community members.                                                                            |
|                                                                | Email: <a href="mailto:contact@stepstogether.gov.au">contact@stepstogether.gov.au</a>                      |                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Social prescribing initiatives - various</b>                | <a href="#">Social prescribing   Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety</a> | Various services connecting people to community-based supports to build connection, confidence and purpose.                                         | All ages.                                                                                                           |
| <b>Forensic Child and Youth Mental Health Services (CYMHS)</b> | Phone: 07 3310 9444                                                                                        | Mental health support for young people with mental health difficulties at risk of offending.                                                        | Young people aged 10-18 years experiencing mental health difficulties who have or are at risk of violent offending. |
|                                                                | Email: <a href="mailto:forensicCYMHS@health.qld.gov.au">forensicCYMHS@health.qld.gov.au</a>                |                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                     |

## Further reading

[Step Together - Countering violent extremism](#)

[Step Together - Youth Hub](#)

[Queensland Engagement and Diversion Program](#)

[Counter-Terrorism and Violent Extremism in Australia: Fact sheet](#)



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## Version history

|                                      |                                  |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>First published:</b>              | August 2026                      |
| <b>Most recent update published:</b> |                                  |
| <b>Owner:</b>                        | Office of the Chief Practitioner |