
WHAT CAUSES VIOLENCE AND EXTREMISM IN CHILDREN, AND WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO HELP.



A Developmental Approach to Violence

Longitudinal studies reveal that the most aggressive age across the lifespan are toddlers, specifically two-year-old male children, which seems preposterous since children are considered pure and innocent. The aggression variables studied include forceful hitting, biting, pushing, or pulling on another person's body. Between the ages of two to four is crucial for parents to model and teach prosocial behavior, delayed gratification, and emotion regulation for the purpose of socialization. If a child can't socially adapt, they are ostracized by others, don't learn to socialize and can become socially and emotionally stunted developmentally. They then become confronted with failure to fit in and that impacts their psychology. Parents ultimately teach children to become socially desirable through socioemotional reciprocity. Through this mechanism, adults and peers are drawn to the child and the child gains all the benefits from this varied social input, norms, moral development, and values.

In adolescence, because of the effects of testosterone, boys between the ages of 16 to 25, can become more aggressive physiologically. These biochemical changes correlate with increased aggression, stimulus seeking, and risk-taking behaviors. If they don't have a healthy outlet, such as athletics, sports, prosocial group activities, these tendencies can manifest into maladaptive externalized behaviors or violence. If they haven't learned prosocial skills during that period of time, it can have a very different impact on the adolescent male and trend them towards conduct problems, oppositional defiant behaviors, which can be precursors for later antisocial personality disorders.

Parent child interactions matter. Rough and tumble play with fathers has shown to mediate the aggression to keep males prosocial. What is the moral responsibility and obligation of a parent? One answer may be to raise prosocial and socioemotionally adaptive children. To raise children to be great socializers, who are in turn, socially desirable.

Extremism Potential in Youth

Youth are a vulnerable and impressionable population. Their ability to reason and appreciate long term consequences and desire for immediate gratification are all impacted by the fact that their brains are still developing, which means executive functioning skills are impeded. Identity is also developing, which is why prioritizing self-agency, individuation, while also balanced with connection belonging and commitment to something greater than oneself is crucial for self-protection.

Radicalization and extremism groups prey upon the natural awkwardness and insecurities of adolescence. Many kids feel out of place, frustrated, and misunderstood which make them vulnerable to the idea that someone else is responsible for their discontent. Parental punitive responses often create a sense of shame that then leads to anger that the Alt-Right or Politically Correct Authoritarians are very eager to exploit. In a world of conspiracy theories and alternative facts, a commonly held theory is that individuals radicalize because they were seduced by fact-distorting misinformation. The solution for this would be to create an equal force of credible sources and community leaders that undercut these radical ideas. But as we have seen, scientific data and legitimate sources have little impact on effecting the mindset of individuals drawn into these ideologies.

Individuals who are attracted to extreme ideologies are often isolated, stressed, emotionally vulnerable, or have failed financially or socioemotionally. But it is a mistake to believe that those who take part suffer from serious mental illness. This usually is not the case. All of us, to a degree are susceptible, and much more vulnerable to radicalized ideologies than into an actual cult.

We know that the boys who are susceptible to this are probably already feeling disenfranchised from their peers and distant from their parents. So, if parents react by shaming them, it's pushing them further away. Instead of humiliating them, try instead to invite them in to explain their views, their perspectives, and beliefs, even if you disagree. Try taking a non-judgmental and curiosity driven approach. Hear what he has to say so that he feels like he can talk things out with you without being shamed, blamed or cast aside.

The most prevalent place one is recruited into a radical ideology is online. Online gamers seem to be especially vulnerable because of the online communications by people who can remain anonymous or conceal their agendas through a bond formed via playing the game. The recruiter may ask questions, and seduce the target through affection, flattery and validation. They do everything they can to make the target feel special, unique and establish a best friend type relationship. They will fake interests, and emotions to connect with the target.



Once a member gains a sense of self-worth from an ideology, even if they are not fully involved in the radicalized part of the movement, any threats to the belief system fails, and in fact often exacerbates the situation.

Confronting the ideology with facts, counter evidence, or opposition can actually produce a more harmful effect by damaging relationships and further alienating the individual who drives further towards to the extremist group for comfort, support, identity, and validation.

The key to providing help is not to counter the narrative head on but to find opportunities for connection with the individual. Help them reconnect with their previous identity, hobbies, interests, self-worth, and activities that brought meaning and joy that were prosocial prior to the extremist trends.

Promote Self-Agency in Youth to Become Agents Of Change

Empower youth in prosocial ways so they feel more in control of their own self determinism rather than enraged by who has oppressed or restricted their freedoms.

1. Gaming and social media can have an addictive potential. Recruiters for radical and extremist organizations are often online searching for vulnerable youth who can be exploited, so monitoring the online activity is a good idea.
2. Research illustrates that gaming activates the dopaminergic pathway, an excitatory response system that releases dopamine and adrenaline. This is activated in all kinds of addictions, such as substance use, gambling, and gaming addictions.
3. Ideologies operate in the same way, in that people continue to do things despite hurting the people they love and themselves without being able to control themselves. These ideologies have an obsessional quality to them and it's difficult to stop once psychologically engaged and invested, which can have the potential to rise towards violence. Both substance use disorders and ideological addictions can be exacerbated by one's desire to fill a void in their lives, a desire to overcome beliefs that their lives are destroyed, insignificant, meaningless, and/or they are powerless to effect any prosocial change.
4. Supportive System: Bolster a support system of people who surround the individual. This could include teachers, psychologists, other family members, spouses, community supports, etc.
5. Don't Alienate Them: Research tells us confronting people who have become addicted to ideologies with facts and counter evidence not only drives them away, it can actually result in more violent outcomes.
6. During times of loss, grief, and trauma, we can be confronted with deep existential questions at various times in our lives, asking, "Who am I? What is my life about? What am I meant to do?" We can find ourselves at different times in our lives feeling insecure, unsure of ourselves and questioning who or what we belong to and our greater life purpose. This process informs identity construction and conversely, can promote dissolution of the self. By engaging in activities that promote meaning and purposes in prosocial ways, youth can strengthen their identity, confidence, and security in who they are.

