

How do we prevent the radicalisation of boys?

When we think about the harms of social media, we tend to focus on the issues of cyberbullying, body image, sexting and the threat of online predators. But with the proliferation of extremist subcultures and echo chambers online, schools are seeing a rise in the number of pupils falling victim to radicalisation.

In particular, there is a growing trend of online communities promoting hatred and violence against women. From pick-up artists to incels and men's rights activists, these groups prey upon the vulnerabilities of impressionable young men and fuel misogynistic resentment.

As a result, teachers are reporting a rise of misogyny in schools, as pupils are heard defending misogynistic ideas, intimidating female staff, and displaying harmful sexual behaviours towards girls.

Watching this phenomenon unfold can be incredibly disturbing and difficult to comprehend. But it's important to recognise that these online movements have emerged alongside the crisis of male loneliness.

- In 2019, [a study](#) by YouGov showed that one in five men have no close friends. One third don't have any best friends.
- [Further statistics](#) show that 43% of men aged twenty-five are still living with their parents, compared to just 25% of women.
- [Boys are also falling behind girls academically](#). Beyond school, [data shows](#) they are less likely to enter higher education, more likely to drop out, and less likely to secure a top degree than women.
- And most alarmingly, in the UK, suicide is the [leading cause of death](#) for men under the age of 50.

Of course, this isn't to say that women don't have their own challenges, or that men have it worse. But it's important to acknowledge that many boys and young men are struggling and feel their concerns are not being heard.

Often, these online communities don't just offer a platform for men to speak about the challenges they are dealing with – they also try to provide solutions, giving their followers hope for a better future. The problem is that these solutions generally seek to reassert men's power at the expense of equality for others. In this way, male supremacy movements can act as slip roads to more extreme parts of the far-right.

As educators, it is our duty to promote the welfare of children and protect them from harm. If we don't take action to respond to the growing issue of male disillusionment, boys will continue to be exposed to radicalisation and polarisation, putting themselves and others at risk.

How can we solve it?

Pupils' susceptibility to misogynistic rhetoric likely comes from a place of anxiety about their own prospects and capabilities. It is important, then, to remind your

students that boys can achieve success by their own merit; they don't have to put girls down in order to do so.

But we also need to be proactive in our approach to pupil wellbeing. By creating an environment in which everyone feels valued, respected and included, we can help boys to achieve a more positive outlook on life, ensure they have access to support when they need it, and mitigate the risk of radicalisation.

- **Talk things through**

When a boy comes into class and espouses harmful views, the natural instinct – and perhaps even the policy of the school – can be to isolate and punish him. In some cases, this may be necessary for the wellbeing of other pupils. But it's unlikely to change that pupils' opinion, or tackle the problem of how he came to believe in it.

When you hear pupils discussing misogynistic ideas, try not to automatically shut down the conversation. This will only compound the feeling that boys are being silenced. Instead, take the opportunity to listen to pupils' opinions and challenge any misconceptions.

It is by building a culture of open dialogue and trust that schools can encourage pupils to really interrogate the information they've been given and seek out alternative perspectives. By giving pupils the opportunity to share their concerns and discuss potential solutions, we can equip them with the resilience, critical thinking skills and empathy that can prevent them from falling prey to harmful ideologies in the first place.

- **Positive role models**

Leading voices of the anti-feminist movement often complain about the lack of role models for young men, and perhaps they have a point. There are plenty of male celebrities, but they don't always promote a healthy lifestyle, or speak to men's issues. Rather than letting online extremists occupy that space, show your pupils that there are many successful men that they can look up to.

There are inspirational athletes like Gabriel Jesus, who grew up in poverty in Sao Paulo, where he was photographed painting the streets in preparation for the 2014 World Cup, and now scores goals for Arsenal. There are businessmen like Ben Francis, who launched Gymshark from his parents' garage and became a multi-millionaire before the age of 30. Or there are those who have quite literally conquered new heights, like Nimsdai Purja, the mountaineering legend who took on the 14 Peaks Challenge.

If boys are looking for words of encouragement, there is no shortage of motivational speakers who offer just that. People like Mark Ormrod, a former Royal Marine whose life changed forever when he became the UK's first triple amputee; Inky Johnson, an American footballer whose career was cut short after a paralysing injury; and Jonny Benjamin, a mental health campaigner who raises suicide awareness and speaks openly about his own struggle with schizoaffective disorder. All these men encourage their listeners to embrace the challenges of life, proving that it's possible to achieve success against the odds.

- **Career talks**

Speaking of motivational speakers, why not bring in members of the local community to speak about their own experience of life after school? [Research](#) suggests that boys are more extrinsically motivated than girls, meaning that they are driven by external factors such as achieving high grades, peer acceptance, and obtaining future career goals. Whilst it can be counterproductive for teachers to rely too much on extrinsic motivation, it might be helpful to show learners that working hard in school really can transform their life chances.

Introduce pupils to people from all walks of life, from police and plumbers to doctors and business leaders. You can even help to break stereotypes by hosting men who work in traditionally feminine roles, such as psychologists and social workers – and vice versa, by hosting women who work in traditionally male industries, such as engineering and architecture.

It is important for pupils to see that successful people have often struggled in the past, yet it is by learning from their failures they were able to move forward and fulfil their potential. Whilst telling their story, speakers can also share key insights about their field, discussing the subjects they studied in school, the essential skills they gained, and how they continue to be relevant in their role. This can help pupils to contextualise their learning and make better-informed decisions about the future.

- **Positive relationships**

Research shows that boys are relational learners, meaning that they learn best in the context of strong, supportive relationships. In a [study](#) of 1,200 pupils from six countries, boys said that they were more likely to engage in lessons where the teacher responded to their needs, talents and interests; shared a common characteristic or hobby; showed passion for their subject and maintained high standards in the classroom. The boys explained that these relationships helped them to believe in themselves, develop habits of work and self-discipline, and nurture a love for the subject.

With this in mind, take the time to get to know your pupils as individuals. Talk to them about their home life, hobbies and interests; discuss their aspirations and the struggles that might be holding them back. This can help to inform your teaching, ensuring that lessons are relevant and compelling. And importantly, create a safe, positive learning environment where boys are not only aware of the standards that are expected of them, but believe they can succeed in meeting them.

By building positive relationships with boys, teachers can play a key role in improving their confidence and self-esteem as well as their academic outcomes. This can help to give pupils more hope for the future, whilst ensuring that anyone who suffers with poor mental health, or problems in the home environment, knows they have someone to confide in.

- **Mental health**

We have come a long way in raising mental health awareness in schools, but stigma and shame continue to act as barriers that make it difficult for boys to seek help. For

example, one recent [study](#) revealed that boys were reluctant to take part in school-based mental health workshops due to fear of judgement from their peers and feeling embarrassed that they needed support. Schools must continue to build a culture of wellbeing where all pupils, staff and parents can communicate openly about mental health, placing it on equal status with physical wellbeing.

There are lots of strategies that schools can use to support boys' mental health. A [report](#) by Youth Sport Trust recommends peer-mentoring schemes to effectively engage boys and inspire them to speak out about their mental health concerns. It also says that activity-based interventions, where mental health support is framed within the context of sport, music, art, or adventure-weekends, can also have a positive impact on boys' wellbeing.

By taking a proactive approach to wellbeing, we can equip pupils with the resilience to navigate the complexities of everyday life, whilst ensuring there are clear pathways available for whenever they need help. In particular, this will help boys manage their emotions in healthy and positive ways, rather than turning to potentially harmful online communities for a sense of recognition and support.

When boys feel lonely, insecure, and misunderstood, they become easy targets for extremist groups to prey upon, which only exacerbates the problems they're dealing with. Working in schools, it is our responsibility to educate all pupils with the knowledge and skills that will help them to cope with the pressures of the modern world.

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Our experts in [Education Welfare & Safeguarding](#) can also support you to improve the policies and practices in your school, working together to promote the welfare of all children and protect them from harm.

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