When to teach children about violent extremism

March 6 2014, by Morgan Squires

The rise of homegrown terrorism and foreign fighters in conflicts such as the Syrian civil war has prompted governments to consider various policy responses to combat such threats. Credit: EPA/Stringer

Dealing with the rise of homegrown terrorism has prompted governments to take novel approaches in combating such threats. The UK government, for example, has recently pushed for schools to teach children as young as four about the dangers of violent extremism.

The UK's approach to dealing with violent extremism differs largely from Australia's. In Australia, initiatives are largely not publicised, but there is a distinct emphasis on partnerships within the community.

The federal Attorney-General's department in particular [focuses on grants](#) to support local communities to counter homegrown extremism. Since 2011, it has awarded approximately A$4.2 million in funding for 50 projects across the country through the Building Community Resilience grants program.

So, what's the most effective strategy for combating homegrown terrorism? And how young is too young for kids to learn about the horrors of violent extremism?

Countering extremism

Having been the focus of violent extremism in recent years – including the [London tube bombings](#) in 2005 and public murder of military drummer Lee Rigby last year – the UK government now puts a high price on counter-terrorism strategies.

One such strategy is [Prevent](#), which has been used effectively in British secondary schools.

Prevent focuses on stopping people becoming radicalised (including far-right or Islamic extremism) and ideally prevents them from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. It aims to provide practical help to dissuade people from being drawn into terrorist movements and ensures they are given appropriate advice and support, as well as responding to the challenges of ideology surrounding terrorism and aspects of extremism.

Importantly, Prevent also focuses on the potential threat to society from

those who promote extremist views. It works with a wide range of institutions (including those in education, criminal justice, faith, charities and health) where risks of radicalisation exist.

However, the question remains as to whether educating [children](#) on the pitfalls of extremism and radicalisation is a worthwhile exercise. The problems and criticisms that arise out of such a proposal usually emanate from the fact that Prevent has in the past been [viewed with suspicion](#), particularly by British Muslim communities, as Prevent funding has previously been tied directly to the number of Muslim schools in an area.

Because of the focus on a single group, Prevent arguably undermines many progressive elements within the overall community cohesion agenda, focusing only those parts which are problematic.

Despite the criticisms, there are undoubted merits to educating school-aged children. British police [have warned](#) of children radicalising from as young as four, and monitored children who have shown signs of radicalisation.

Radicalism in Australia

Radicalisation is not unique to Britain. Security experts in Australia [have warned](#) of children becoming radicalised here as well.

Studies show that the characteristics of Australians arrested in connection with jihadism [tend to be young](#), with two-thirds under the age of 30 and 62% having not completed high school.

Despite the relative youth of many extremists creating a strong argument for educating children about radicalisation in primary school, any occasion that children are mentioned in the same breath as violent extremists will undoubtedly cause some controversy. However, it is vital

to understand the importance of education in preventing violent extremism.

With so many children having access to the internet from a young age, it is entirely plausible for children and young adolescents to be susceptible to images and messages of violent extremism.

In the UK, one study found that three-quarters of Muslim mothers surveyed had seen or heard their children accessing Islamic lectures. However, 90% were unaware of the lecture's content, and 92% did not understand the term "online radicalisation", nor that their children could be radicalised online.

In a more specific example, a British man convicted on terrorism charges was heard on tape indoctrinating his five-year-old son.

When taking examples like this into consideration, any attempt to educate children on the pitfalls and challenges of extremism should be encouraged. Other challenges that children face, including bullying, racism and drugs, are issues that they are taught about.

Educating children – as well as teachers – on issues such as radicalisation and violent extremism provides a first step for the referral and support of children susceptible to extremist messages. If teachers become more aware of the role they can play in helping children susceptible to such messages, this may in fact lead to fewer people becoming radicalised in the long-run.

What Australia can learn from the British example is ensuring that certain communities do not feel alienated. Instead, any attempts at education should focus on the problem of radicalisation as a whole.

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