

A study on the transmission of extremism within a family context

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What happens to children of extremist parents? Commissioned by the Scientific Research and Documentation Center (WODC) of the Ministry of Justice and Security, four ISGA researchers, Layla van Wieringen, Daan Weggemans, Katharina Krüsselmann and Marieke Liem, wrote a report on the nature and extent of intergenerational transmission of jihadism and other extremist ideas. The report was released this week.

In recent years, there have been growing concerns both at home and abroad about [children](#) growing up in jihadist families. It is estimated that in the Netherlands, there are several hundred jihadist couples and dozens of families of which at least one parent adheres to jihadist ideas (National Coordinator for Terrorism and Security [NCTV], 2019). The NCTV warns that children born from these families will most likely grow up in a jihadist environment and may therefore become a threat to national security later in life. Academic research is also increasingly considering the possible negative effects that extremist [family](#) members can have on their children. However, the ways in which jihadist parents influence their children's ideological development received little attention so far.

Systematic literature study and interviews

This report focuses on the prevalence and processes associated with the intergenerational [transmission](#) of extremist ideas. Based on a systematic literature study, in which a selection of 58 studies was made from more than 40,000 publications, and interviews with Dutch and international experts and practitioners, ISGA researchers looked at the current academic knowledge on this topic. Important insights were gained into the various mechanisms by which extremist parents try to influence their children and the factors that can strengthen or weaken this influence. Moreover, new perspectives on possible interventions to counter the transmission of extremism within family contexts were discussed.

Results of the study

In the first place, this study shows that still much is unclear about the extent to which intergenerational transmission of jihadist or other extremist ideas takes place. There are also still many questions about the situation in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, the report suggests that

intergenerational transmission of extremist ideas does in fact occur. It arises from a complex interplay of reinforcing factors and mechanisms within and outside the family sphere. The ways in which parents feed their children with extremist beliefs are sometimes explicit and direct (such as parents taking their children to ideological meetings), but can also be indirect in nature (such as children mirroring their parents' example). Liem: "Our research shows that intergenerational transmission has no single pattern—and that it can manifest itself in many different family systems."

Further, families where transmission occurs are not by definition unstable or unsafe: warm and loving parents, too, can pass on extremist ideas to their children. Finally, protective factors against intergenerational transmission include, among others, moderate influences outside the family sphere; alternative identity formation; positive trigger events; and exposure to people with different lifestyles or ideas. Liem: "Ultimately, this is probably about a small minority of families in which [parents](#) deliberately push their children toward extremism."

Similarities with transmission in other contexts

The intergenerational transmission of extremist ideologies as a research topic will likely gain in relevance in the upcoming years. Liem: "The research shows that there are valid reasons to continue studying the development of children from extremist families." As such, the question of which interventions are suitable to prevent or counter transmission within the family context deserves more attention. Interviewed experts and practitioners highlight a child protection perspective in countering intergenerational transmission.

Ultimately, interventions should not be imposed as an effort to enhance social cohesion, nor to protect national security—but rather, with the

objective to safeguard the well-being of children at hand. Also, from a governmental perspective, the focus should not only be on jihadism, but also on other ideologies that are potentially harmful to children. Firstly because a focus on Islamic-inspired extremism could possibly be counterproductive—but also because of the similarities regarding transmission processes in various radical and extremist contexts. Both the literature and the interviews suggested that the ways in which ideas are passed on from parent to child within different ideological contexts may be very similar. Going forward, the ISGA researchers will build on existing knowledge on (interventions in) other contexts—such as families in sects or criminal milieus—to better understand transmission processes in jihadist families.

More information: The report 'Van ouder op kind' [Dutch]:
[www.universiteitleiden.nl/bina ... -kind_definitief.pdf](http://www.universiteitleiden.nl/bina...-kind_definitief.pdf)

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