HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

This document contains information and links to documents that describe acts of self-harm, the exploitation of children, and mass violence. Reader discretion is advised.

October 2026

Recognizing & Preventing Online Extremism

A Humans Over Hate Initiative in partnership with the Institute of Countering Digital Extremism (ICDE)

Introduction

Children and youth spend significant time online on social media, gaming communities, video platforms, chat applications, and online forums. While these spaces can offer opportunities for creativity, friendship, and learning, they can also expose young users to harmful extremist content and recruitment efforts.

There is overwhelming evidence that extremist groups are increasingly using online platforms to target young people by exploiting loneliness, identity struggles, curiosity, anger, or the desire for belonging. Recruitment and exploitation can happen either rapidly or gradually, and early signs may be easy to miss. The MHRC in collaboration with the Institute for Countering Digital Extremism (ICDE) have created this toolkit to help parents and caregivers with prevention, awareness, communication, and early intervention.

Section 1: Understanding Online Extremism

What Is Online Extremism?

Traditionally, online extremism has referred to the use of digital platforms to promote hateful, violent, or extremist ideologies. Many such groups channel their hate toward individuals based on race, religion, ethnicity, gender, nationality, immigration status, sexual orientation, or political identity. They encompass entities that promote perspectives such as white supremacy, antisemitism, and radical Islam.

These extremist groups often:

- Spread conspiracy theories and misinformation.
- Encourage “us vs. them” thinking.
- Promote fear, anger, or resentment toward certain groups.
- Use memes, jokes, and coded language to normalize hate and violence.
- Engage in various techniques to short-circuit emerging critical thinking skills.
- Attempt to isolate youth from trusted adults and diverse perspectives.
- Encourage secrecy and belonging within online communities.
- Make themselves seem like an individual’s only source of support and understanding.

Newer Forms of Online Extremism

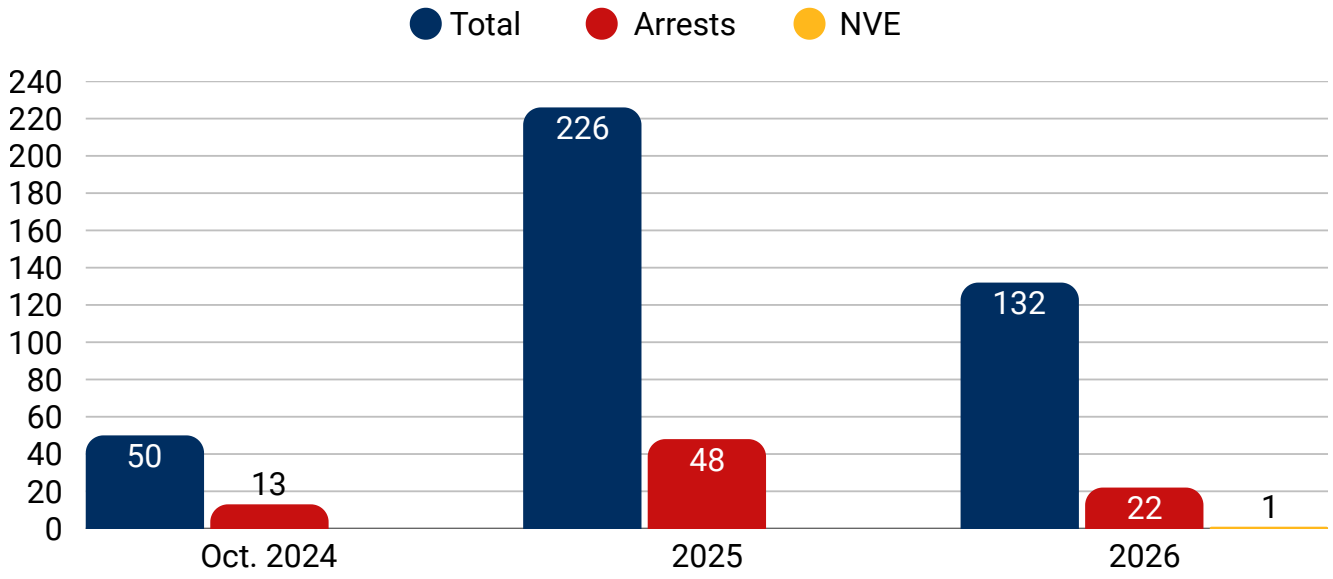
More recently, other extremist groups have focused on exploiting youth who are struggling with their identities regardless of their other demographic characteristics. These entities use similar techniques but do not have a coherent ideology, with participants potentially referencing White supremacist ideologies, Islamic extremism, antisemitism, and more. What binds individuals in these groups together is not a singular form of hate, but rather a veneration of violence and people who commit it. Many participants in these spaces see violence and the corruption of youth as a way to ultimately destroy society.

These groups, often called nihilistic violent extremists or sadistic online extortionists (NVE/SOE), encourage young people to hate themselves, hurt themselves, and hurt other people and animals. These groups function more like cults than traditional extremist groups. They identify vulnerable youth on relatively public spaces like Roblox and lure them to more private chat spaces on platforms like Discord where they are coerced into behaviors like deeply cutting themselves—carving the name of a group or a leader deep into their skin—with the goal of leaving permanent scars or livestreaming sexualized behaviors. Child pornography and sexual abuse materials (CSAM) are pervasive in these spaces. Some groups also produce animal torture and killing content, while others have groomed multiple school shooters around the globe, including in

Nashville. What cannot be ignored about NVE/SOE groups is that most perpetrators are also minors, and were first victims in these spaces before being given opportunities to regain status and security through victimizing others.

These behaviors seem so extreme that parents and community leaders understandably want to believe their child could never engage in such spaces, but unfortunately, NVE/SOE is by far the most common kind of extremism ICDE and their colleagues encounter online. The FBI reports at least 450 open investigations into just one aspect of this online extremism, and that is likely only a small portion of active perpetrators globally. Unfortunately, these networks have a heavy presence in Middle Tennessee.

The Metropolitan Nashville Police Department's Specialized Investigations Division (SID) formed the Security Threat Section in October 2024. Since then, the Section has been investigating school related threats (group of students, group of teachers or general faculty at a school, threats made to the school building, generalized threat towards all of the before mentioned). Below is the breakdown of these investigations by calendar year.



Source: The Metropolitan Nashville Police Department

The Good News

Kids are smart, and with the right tools and support, they can recognize signals they are being targeted and exploited online. With the right knowledge and resources, parents and trusted adults can intervene before it is too late. Prevention begins with awareness, trust, and conversation.

Section 2: Why Young People Are Vulnerable

Young people may be more vulnerable to online recruitment during periods of:

- Social isolation or loneliness
- Identity exploration
- Bullying or exclusion
- Anxiety, anger, or frustration
- Family stress or instability
- Desire for belonging or purpose
- Curiosity about controversial topics

If these sound like things that almost all adolescents experience, you're right! NVE/SOE groups have recognized that youth itself is a vulnerability due to incomplete neural development, hormonal changes, social pressures, and other struggles that are nearly synonymous with this stage of life. We're still trying to understand what, precisely, makes some young people facing the same challenges more vulnerable to exploitation by these groups.

ICDE is also seeing growing evidence that NVE/SOE groups intentionally target and exploit young people facing other specific challenges. These include mental health difficulties, perceived conflicts between family and U.S. culture/values, and struggles related to gender identity. Young Black men are also being targeted by some of these groups and manipulated into internalizing and espousing self-hating racist beliefs. Some of these groups also seek to identify and exploit individuals with autism and other neuro-diversity due to how certain aspects of neurodiversity (like pattern seeking and social difficulties) enhance these youths' vulnerabilities.

Section 3: How Online Extremist Recruitment Happens

Traditional Extremist Groups[1]

Online extremist recruitment rarely starts with direct calls to violence or hate. Recruiters often begin by creating a sense of belonging, friendship, purpose, identity, validation, and community for their targets. Recruitment may begin with:

- Offers of friendship/mentorship.
- Expressions of common ground.
- Memes and humor.
- Gaming conversations.
- Conspiracy theory content/content that promises to share some underappreciated "truth."
- "Anti-establishment" messaging.
- Online influencers who share niche ideas or lifestyles.
- Viral videos and short-form content.
- Political or social grievances.
- Over time, content tends to become more extreme, isolating, hateful, or violent.

In these groups, recruitment has typically happened gradually, not suddenly, meaning there are many opportunities for intervention if signs are recognized early. These signs can include increasing interest in ideological propositions, key figures (such as religious figures), or texts alongside increasing withdrawal from family.

NVE/SOE Groups

In more recent NVE/SOE groups coercion to commit certain harms can happen very quickly, and rapid intervention is incredibly important. In one case ICDE recently reviewed, for example, it appeared that a young victim began cutting herself on camera less than 24 hours after joining a private Discord server with her groomers.

NVE/SOE groups focus less on building a sense of community and more on building a sense of competition, where individuals are praised, rewarded with enhanced status as they commit increasingly more harmful actions. These groups make youth believe they have no choice but to participate in this gamified escalation and that whatever actions they have already committed mean their family and other trusted offline individuals will never accept them. They make these youth feel that they have no choice but to commit themselves even further to the groups that are harming them.

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[1] **Adapted and Updated** from American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry [AACAP], 2025); Cooter, 2026; Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], Boston Division, 2026; Trip et al., 2019.

These groups often initiate recruitment and exploitation by:

- Enticing youth from relatively public gaming and other spaces to private servers and chats.
- Testing youths' response to violence, gore, or pornography, including CSAM.
- Promising rewards for increasingly "edgy" behavior.
- Threatening to reveal private information (like name, home address, personal and compromising images) to effectively blackmail the victim into committing additional and escalating actions.

Section 4: Common Platforms Used for Recruitment

Parents should be aware that recruitment can happen across many online spaces, including mainstream platforms, gaming communities, messaging apps and private communities (see the table below). Recruiters may use gaming communities to build relationships with youth by starting casual conversations before moving youth into private groups. Private spaces encourage secrecy and isolation from parents or trusted adults. This means that one “easy” red flag to discuss with youth is individuals who encourage them to leave one platform (i.e., Roblox) to have more private conversations on another (e.g., Telegram or Discord). NVE/SOE groups are particularly adept at using numerous platforms simultaneously to avoid violating platform policies and evade detection.



Image 1: Online extremist recruiters and groomers may use a wide range of digital environments including social media, gaming communities, and private messaging platforms to contact, manipulate, and recruit young people. This graphic highlights some of the most common online spaces where harmful actors operate.

In addition to the relatively mainstream platforms reflected in the graphic above, extremists use a variety of alternative social media sites, encrypted messaging services, privacy-focused tools, and independent online forums. These platforms continue to emerge, but below is a table of common ones. It can feel incredibly overwhelming trying to keep up with a list of concerning apps and sites, so remember that content matters more than platform.

PRIVATE MESSAGING & COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS
Rocket.Chat
Signal
Telegram
Threema
Wire

PRIVACY & ANONYMITY TOOLS
Brave Browser
Tor Browser
NordVPN
Private Internet Access (PIA)
Proton VPN

ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL MEDIA & VIDEO PLATFORMS
BitChute
DLive
Gab
MeWe
Minds
Odysee
Rumble
VK (VKontakte—Russian Site)

PRIVACY-FOCUSED EMAIL SERVICES
ProtonMail
Tutanota

It is also worth noting that certain AI companion bots can facilitate radicalization and extremist exploitation of youth. Young people are increasingly interacting with these bots to simulate friendship, mentorship, romantic interest, authority figures, or peer relationships. While many are used harmlessly, some can reinforce unhealthy beliefs, normalize harmful content and behaviors, encourage emotional dependency, or expose youth to both extremist and sexualized material. Parents should help youth understand that not every online relationship is with a real person and should ask youth about both human and AI interactions occurring online. Some common AI companion platforms include Character.AI, Replika, Nomi AI, Kindroid, Janitor AI, and Chub AI.

Section 5: Warning Signs and Behavioral Changes



Image 2: No single behavior indicates extremist involvement. Rather than focusing on any one sign, parents and caregivers should pay attention to patterns of change across online activity, emotional and behavioral functioning, and social relationships. Specially, when those changes are sudden, persistent, or accompanied by increased secrecy, hostility, isolation, or engagement with extremist content.

Early signs[2] of extremist involvement can mirror signals of other youth difficulties, including abuse, depression, or other mental health concerns. With NVE/SOE exploitation, there are often additional signals of involvement. Early signs can include evidence of cutting, which includes unexplained injuries, scars, and clothing that is weather-inappropriate to hide such marks. Writing or symbols written in blood, unexplained injuries to or disappearances of pets, small neighborhood animals, or changes in sibling behavior can also signal possible involvement and the need for urgent intervention. Some youth who are being groomed to hurt others will also begin showing an interest in weapons and try to acquire them, military-style gear, or a partial facecovering called a skullmask.



Image 3: A typical example of a skullmask.

[2] Source: American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry [AACAP], 2025; Department of Risk Assessment, North Carolina State University, 2025; Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab [PERIL], 2024.

Section 6: Common Hate Symbols to Watch

Images, symbols, and other visual references used by extremists include some familiar, long-standing examples such as swastikas, the numbers 14 and 88 (which are stand-ins for White supremacist references), and “SS” or two lightning bolts together as a reference to Nazism. Slurs and caricatures of both Black and Jewish people remain incredibly common. Depictions of Celtic-style knots and runes can also be incorporated. A database of 231 symbols most frequently used by a variety of white supremacist groups and movements, as well as some other types of hate groups can be accessed online here: https://www.adl.org/resources/hate-symbols/search.

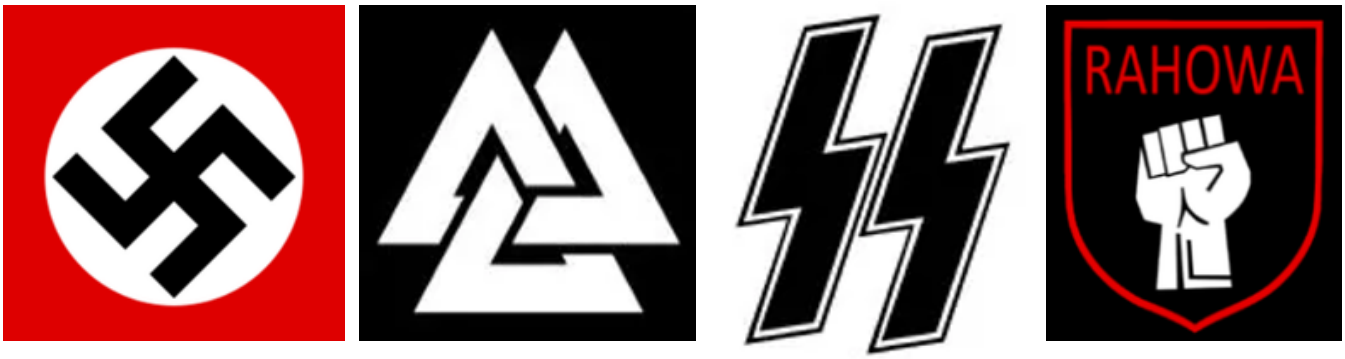


Image 4. Examples of a few common traditional extremist symbols.

NVE/SOE groups sometimes use these symbols, but tend to have their own markers as well. Group names include things like “CVLT” or other spellings where V is substituted for U or collections of three to four numbers—764 is the most well-known, but there are many others. Key individuals who have committed school shootings or other acts of mass violence tend to be referenced visually and otherwise in a variety of ways. The Columbine High School shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as well as the Christchurch, New Zealand shooter, Brenton Tarrant, are among the most commonly referenced individuals. Some entities that also use occult symbols reference terms like Temple of Blood/Temple ov Blood/ToB or Order of Nine Angles/O9A. Many of these spaces also incorporate characters from Cyrillic, the script for the Russian language, for various reasons into their writing.

NVE/SOE groups are also incredibly talented at co-opting popular memes, anime, online comics, and other material popular among virtually all youth for their purposes. Images or representations from these initially harmless cultural materials are modified or appropriated for violent and hateful purposes. Recent examples include co-optation of online characters like Skibidi Toilet, certain characters from Italian Brainrot, as well as various depictions of the older cartoon, Sponge Bob, among others.



Image 5: Examples of common NVE/SOE-style visual references/markers and how real-world mass violence actors are portrayed and glorified in NVE/SOE (and sometimes adjacent) spaces.



Image 6: Examples of how popular culture representations warped for NVE/SOE use.

Section 7: Prevention Strategies for Caretakers

For immediate help, contact Detective Andrew Anoskey, Security Threat Section with the Joint Terrorism Task Force at (615) 679-5572 or andrew.anoskey@nashville.gov.

There are concrete actions that parents and other trusted adults can take to help stop youth from being manipulated and radicalized by extremist actors.

1. Build Open Communication

Children are more likely to share concerns when they feel respected, heard, and supported.

Try asking:

- What kinds of things are you seeing online right now?
- Have you seen anything online that made you uncomfortable?
- Who do you follow online and why?
- How do you decide whether information is trustworthy?
- How do we find good sources and reliable information?

Avoid: Reacting with panic, ridicule, anger, or humiliation. These responses often increase secrecy, isolation, and shame, which can drive youth deeper into online subcultures.

2. Teach Basic Digital Safety

Many extremist recruiters, predators, scammers, and other harmful actors begin by gathering personal information or building trust online. Many adults take for granted what kids understand about online privacy and security, while many kids do not actually know how to protect themselves online.

Teach children to:

- Never share their real name, address, school, phone number, or passwords online.
- Never share details about family members, including names, locations, and jobs.
- Never share their live location (including by posting photos or videos while at an event/location).
- Understand that images, videos, audio recordings, and other self-depictions shared online are forever. They can be saved, edited and used against you in a variety of contexts.
- Turn off location services when they are not needed.
- Remember that online identities can be easily faked. You never know for certain who is on the other end of an online conversation.
- Understand that someone claiming to be another child may not actually be a child.

- Know that even other children may mistreat or trick them and have ulterior motives for interacting with them online.
- Immediately tell a trusted adult if someone asks for secrets, private photos, money, or personal information.
- Leave conversations that become threatening, manipulative, sexual, or coercive, and block accounts/platforms that participate in these behaviors.
- Leave conversations that introduce violent, gory, or sexual imagery, and block accounts/platforms that participate in these behaviors.

3. Teach Critical Thinking and Digital Literacy

Youth are still developing critical thinking skills in general and may have difficulty applying the kind of critical thinking taught in school to online interactions.

Help children learn to ask:

- Who created this content?
- What emotions or beliefs is it trying to trigger?
- Is it encouraging anger, fear, shame, or hostility?
- Is it blaming entire groups of people?
- Is the information verified with a reliable source?

Discuss how:

- Extremist groups and bad actors will present false and manipulative information to try to trick them.
- Extremist groups and bad actors will manipulate videos and images or create them with AI to try to trick and manipulate them.
- Extremist groups and bad actors will manipulate them to think that other perspectives do not exist.
- Extremist groups and bad actors will use conspiracy theories to offer simple explanations for complex problems or disasters. These theories are designed to make the youth lose trust in authority figures and look elsewhere for information and validation.
- Platform and website algorithms may show them hateful, exclusionary, or extremist material even if they do not search for it. The material may begin subtly and then amplify in both quantity and intensity.
- Extremist groups and bad actors may try to recruit and manipulate them online by using both positive and negative emotions. This is exactly the time to get offline and talk to a trusted adult!
- Extremist groups and bad actors will try to threaten them or their family if they don't do what these groups say. This is exactly the time to get offline and talk to a trusted adult!

- Remember, that you and other trusted adults should address any concerns they may have without judgment.

4. Stay Involved in Digital Life

It is overwhelming and often impractical for parents and other trusted adults to monitor every aspect of youth online engagement. Some ideal practices are below, though everyone's circumstances are different.

Ideal practices include:

- Maintain access to electronic devices (i.e., know the passwords and regularly check devices.)
- Review direct messages and private chats on key sites like Roblox, Minecraft, YouTube and Instagram to see how others are engaging with your child online.
- Watch for patterns of manipulation and exploitation that children may not understand as such.
- Consider apps and other programs to help stay on top of youth digital engagement; see #5 below.

Helpful practices include:

- Having proactive, regular conversations about online risks and your concerns.
- Checking in regularly without shaming.
- Keeping communication open about online experiences.
- Requiring that devices be used in shared areas of the home, not behind closed doors.
- Expressing interest in youths' online activities.
- Establishing healthy screen time boundaries.
- Encouraging balanced offline activities.

5. Use Technology as a Support Tool

Parental-control tools can help identify risks, but be aware that for every app that help parents, there are multiple apps to help youth evade them. These apps and programs are tools, not a solution. Below is a list of some suggested apps and tools to assist parents monitoring their kids' devices . Each family will need to decide what is the best solution for their needs.

Examples of helpful monitoring tools include:

- Apple Screen Time
- Aura
- Bark
- FamilyTime
- Google Family Link

- Net Nanny
- Norton Family
- Mobicip
- Qustodio

Tools like Google Lens can be helpful with identifying some symbols and images. Yandex is a similar tool that is a better option for identifying recognizable individuals. All such tools make errors, however.

6. Strengthen Protective Factors

The best approach for preventing a range of problems with youth behavior is establishing strong relationships and communication before they are ever approached by extremists and other bad actors, but it is never too late to develop these connections.

Protective factors include:

- Strong family relationships.
- Sports and other offline extracurricular activities.
- Community engagement.
- Volunteer opportunities.
- Part-time jobs (when age appropriate).
- Positive peer groups.
- Cultural and interfaith connections.
- Trusted mentors.
- Opportunities to develop purpose, belonging, and achievement.

7. Respond Calmly to Concerning Content

If you discover troubling online activity, avoid immediately reacting with punishment, humiliation, or accusations.

Instead:

- Stay calm.
- Ask questions.
- Gather information.
- Listen before drawing conclusions.
- Focus on understanding what attracted the child to the content.

- Develop and communicate a plan for moving forward.
- Do not immediately delete accounts or material. These may be needed for legal and other interventions regarding blackmail, extortion, other threats, CSAM solicitation, or coercion to self-harm.

Many young people encounter harmful material accidentally. Just because a child has been approached by a bad actor, it does not necessarily mean they have done anything wrong, but it is still crucial to discuss these interactions. Early supportive intervention is usually more effective than punishment alone.

Seek immediate help if you see signs of:

- Suicide threats or suicidal fantasies.
- Blackmail.
- Sextortion .
- Threats of violence.
- Weapon acquisition.
- Animal torture or cruelty.
- CSAM production/distribution

Section 8: Other Considerations

Awareness Around Extremists Targeting Youth Online Remains Limited
If you see signs of extremist exploitation, you may find yourself in a position where you have to advocate for your child's needs. Many mental health professionals, educators, youth workers, and community leaders do not yet have training on contemporary online extremist recruitment, online grooming, or NVE/SOE ecosystems.

Parents unfortunately cannot assume that every professional understands issues surrounding online recruitment tactics, extremist subcultures, grooming and coercive control, or how extremist manipulation can fundamentally carry different implications for intervention than other youth harms. You may need to share resources, ask questions, and advocate for additional training and support when seeking help.

Sources of support may include:

- School counselors.
- Mental health professionals.
- Community organizations.
- Youth Mentors.
- Faith Leaders.
- Prevention Specialists.

A Note on Schools and School-Issued Devices
Many schools are also unaware of the full risks of online extremist exploitation. Numerous cases ICDE has reviewed where children have been groomed and manipulated by extremist groups have included parents doing their best to protect children on home devices but not knowing that school devices were providing opportunities for extremists to harm their children. School-issued devices often provide a valuable opportunity to teach and reinforce healthy online habits before problems occur, but parents may need to advocate for stronger digital safety measures in schools. Examples include:

- Digital safety education for students.
- Online exploitation awareness training for students and staff.
- Removal of unnecessary location-sharing features.
- Appropriate filtering of harmful content.
- Blocking key sites for harm altogether. YouTube and Roblox have both been implicated in cases where school-issued devices facilitated extremist manipulation.
- Proactive monitoring of school-issued devices consistent with school policies and applicable laws.
- Clear and anonymous reporting pathways for concerning online behavior.

Section 9: Additional Resources for Parents

Nashville Police Department Specialized Investigation Division	For Immediate help, contact: Detective Andrew Anoskey Security Threat Section, Joint Terrorism Task Force 615-679-5572 | andrew.anoskey@nashville.gov
The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children Phone Number:1-800-THE-LOST.	The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children is a private, non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation whose mission is to help find missing children, reduce child sexual exploitation, and prevent child victimization.
The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline	This is 24/7 mental health crisis line.
Common Sense Media	This is an independent, research-backed nonprofit that assists families and kids with how to safely use media and tech.
FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3)	This is the official U.S. government portal for reporting cyber-enabled crimes, and complaints
Youth Villages	Youth Villages provides help for children and young people who face a wide range of emotional, mental and behavioral problems.
Life After Hate	Life After Hate is a nonprofit organization that helps individuals disengage from hate-fueled violence and extremism through evidence-based interventions, community support, and compassionate re-engagement programs
Parents for Peace Phone Number: (1-844-497-3223)	Parents for Peace is a nonprofit organization that provides confidential support, training, and intervention services to help families and communities prevent and address radicalization and extremism, including through a national helpline.
The Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL) at the American University's School of Public Affairs.	PERIL is an applied research lab that uses a public health approach to design, test, and scale evidence-based tools and strategies to prevent hate, bias, and radicalization before they lead to violent extremism preventing radicalization to violent extremism.
StopBullying.gov	StopBullying.gov is the U.S. government's official resource for information on preventing and responding to bullying, including cyberbullying, for parents, educators, and communities.

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