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# RACP Submission - Inquiry into the natures and drivers of radicalisation in Australia

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## About The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP)

The RACP trains, educates and advocates on behalf of over 24,700 physicians and 9,600 trainee physicians, across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. The RACP represents a broad range of medical specialties including paediatrics and child health, adolescent and young adult medicine, adult medicine and general medicine. Beyond the drive for medical excellence, the RACP is committed to the development of health policies which bring vital improvements to the wellbeing of patients and the community.

Contact: Jessica McCormick, Policy and Advocacy Officer, via policy@racp.edu.au



*We acknowledge and pay respect to the Traditional Custodians and Elders – past, present and emerging – of the lands and waters on which RACP members and staff live, learn and work. The RACP acknowledges Māori as tangata whenua and Te Tiriti o Waitangi partners in Aotearoa New Zealand.*

# Introduction

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security Inquiry into the nature and drivers of radicalisation in Australia.

Radicalisation and extremism have significant impact on the health, development and wellbeing of children, young people, their families and community. Through the expertise of our paediatric and adolescent and young adult medicine physicians, the RACP seeks to ensure that policy responses are founded in evidence and recognise the distinct developmental needs of children and young people.

Online radicalisation involving children and young people should be considered within a broader child safeguarding and public health framework. Extremist grooming should be recognised as a potential form of child exploitation. Children and young people are uniquely vulnerable to manipulation, coercion, grooming and recruitment. They may become involved through relationships, manipulation and coercion before they fully understand the ideology being promoted or the consequences of their participation. Policy responses should therefore incorporate both safeguarding and public safety considerations.

The RACP acknowledges that there may be a wide range of drivers for radicalisation. Our submission focuses on the impact of the online environment on children and young people consistent with the RACP Social Media: Children and Young people position statement. Our position statement stands as a source of reliable advice for governments in Australia to ensure social media platforms and environments are accountable for both creating safer online environments for children and young people, and enabling safer online environments into adulthood.

# Recommendations

1. Recognise extremist grooming as a form of child exploitation.
2. Recognise the distinct cognitive, social and emotional needs of children and young people in the design of policies and programs.
3. Adopt a public health/whole of population approach to the regulation of access and use of social media by children and young people.
4. Implement effective legislation that enforces age-appropriate social media and online algorithm design, risk mitigation, transparent moderation and child focused safety measures.
5. Improve transparency and accountability requirements for social media, gaming and messaging platforms. Require social media platforms to remove and report all extremist content immediately, log and report recruitment and grooming incidences
6. Strengthen laws around hate speech.
7. Fund education and training for professionals working with children to recognise risks of radicalisation and related support pathways.
8. Fund measures to improve social and digital media literacy through school-based education programs and parenting resources to improve online safety and make social media use as safe and healthy as possible.
9. Invest in programs that foster social connection, support networks, access to reliable sources of information, educational and creative resources, community participation, identity development and wellbeing for children and young people.

# Pathways and vulnerabilities to radicalisation in children and young people

## Children and young people require a distinct approach

Children and adolescents experience rapid social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural changes. Policy responses must recognise the developmental trajectory and vulnerabilities that can come with these life stages. Adolescence is a period marked by developing identity, autonomy, critical thinking and social belonging. Those experiencing loneliness, social isolation or feelings of not belonging may be more vulnerable to online content and extremist ideologies.

Children and young people may be at a greater risk of adopting extremist views if these are held by someone they admire or trust. Conversely, strong relationships with family, friends and other trusted individuals in their life who don't hold such views can be a protective factor to reduce susceptibility to extremist views.

Early childhood experiences influence lifelong mental health trajectories and can result from a range of factors including exposure to trauma, developmental susceptibility and individual and genetic influences.[1] Neurodevelopmental conditions, including autism, ADHD, and mental illness, may increase vulnerability to social isolation, exploitation or manipulation in some circumstances; however, these conditions do not present a propensity towards violent extremism. Risk assessments should focus on individual circumstances, behaviours, coercion, intent and evidence of actual risk.

It is essential to distinguish between exposure to extremist material, the development of extremist beliefs and an intention to engage in violence. Exposure to extremist content does not necessarily result in radicalisation, and the adoption of extremist views does not inevitably lead to violent behaviour. This distinction is particularly important for children and adolescents, whose beliefs, identities and understanding of the world continue to evolve as part of normal development. Evidence of intent and risk remain key to differentiating exposure to extremist content, and extremist views from necessarily violent motives.

Young people may encounter or engage with extremist content through curiosity, peer influence, a desire for belonging or deliberate manipulation, without fully understanding or endorsing its underlying ideology or implications. Responses must therefore be developmentally informed, proportionate and grounded in an assessment of the individual young person's circumstances, behaviours and actual risk of harm. Conflating exposure, ideology and violent intent risks unnecessarily criminalising children, stigmatising vulnerable young people and missing opportunities for early intervention, safeguarding and rehabilitation.

## Impact of social media and online use

The social media ban for children and young people under 16 years old has not been as effective as hoped, with many children and young people still engaging with social media platforms.[2]

Excessive social media and online consumption may negatively affect children's language, cognitive development and social and emotional wellbeing. Research has linked chronic media multitasking behaviour to cognitive operation deficits including deficits to working and

[1] The Role of paediatricians in the provision of mental health services to children and young people. 2016
[2] Social media Minimum Age: Compliance Update (eSafety Report March 2026)

long-term memory, impulse response, and inhibitory control. This can in turn impact academic performance, attitudes and behaviours.[3]

Exposure to aggressive, violent, misogynistic and racist content can normalise unhealthy behaviours and beliefs. Research has found that frequent social media use and addiction can increase irritability and aggression, while online social comparisons can lead to feelings of envy and frustration. [3] The nature of the anonymous online environment can perpetuate hostility and reduce accountability, leading to behaviour changes.

Online environments can amplify the risks of extremism; increasing both the speed in which radicalisation can occur and the speed with which violence can be orchestrated and operationalised. Those who are socially isolated, experiencing poor mental health or seeking sense of identity may be more vulnerable to these influences.

Online environments can however present important opportunities for young people to connect, learn and communicate. Measures designed to prevent radicalisation must not inadvertently restrict young people's access to legitimate political discussion, educational resources, social connection or communities that provide important protective relationships.

## Preventing radicalisation and protecting children and young people in digital environments

Obligations to maintain the online safety of children and young people cannot be placed solely on them or their parents. The responsibility for protecting children must extend beyond individual families to include governments, technology companies, education systems, and healthcare services. One aspect is strengthening laws around hate speech.

A child safeguarding and public health framework recognising the responsibilities of digital platforms and the need for developmentally appropriate prevention, early intervention, and rehabilitation is needed.

### Implement stronger online regulations

The under 16-year-old social media restriction cannot by itself, address radicalisation. Children and young people continue to engage with a wide range of online platforms, highlighting the need for regulations across the broader online environment.

The RACP strongly supports the efforts of online social media platforms where they moderate and sensor extremist content. With algorithmic amplification, young people are at risk of being consistently and repeatedly exposed to harmful content daily. Misinformation is also rampant, targeting children and young people.

Reasonable steps must be taken to protect children and young people from recruitment activity and grooming behaviour for extremist actions or violence.

All social media platforms should be required to remove and report all extremist content immediately, log and report extremist recruitment and grooming incidences.

The RACP supports stronger regulations of violent and age restricted content online, including gaming, to ensure that these are not accessible by those under 18 years of age.

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[3] RACP Social Media Policy. 2025

## Improve health and media literacy

Young people may lack the developmental maturity required to recognise the manipulation and misinformation in online environments. Coupled with low health and media literacy, a child or young person is at greater risk of being exploited.

Governments should invest in digital literacy, critical thinking and media literacy programs that equip children, young people and their families to identify misinformation, manipulation, extremist narratives and online grooming tactics. School based programs that deliver this education along with resources to support parents can help identify concerning behaviours, grooming signs and attitude changes.

## Promote cultural, community and education support

Protective factors for decreasing risk to radicalisation include community participation, family relationships, school connectedness, cultural identify and access to mental health support. Children and adolescents need mechanisms in place that support social connection, access to education, creative resources and avenues for help seeking. Schools should be supported in identifying and responding to children and young people who may be at risk such as access to appropriate resources, training and referral pathways.

Community based initiatives that foster inclusion, belonging and cross-cultural engagement can support social cohesion, learning, and may protect against radicalisation and extremism content.

## Developmentally appropriate rehabilitation and recovery

For children and adolescents who have been involved in extremist activity, it is important that rehabilitation approaches are developmentally appropriate and trauma informed. Support should be provided from families, schools, healthcare professionals and social and community services. Fostering positive relationships and strengthening protective factors including building resilience and knowledge can assist rehabilitation and reengagement within society.

# Concluding comment

The RACP welcomes the opportunity to engage with the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security. For any queries regarding this submission, please contact Jessica McCormick, Policy and Advocacy Officer, via the RACP Policy and Advocacy unit policy@racp.edu.au.