Responding to radicalisation and extremism risks for youth:
An emerging child protection and youth justice practice issue in Aotearoa

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Introduction

An emerging practice issue for statutory social work in Aotearoa New Zealand is the rise of young people engaged in and with extremist and radicalised groups and behaviours. Global trends indicate that young people are engaging in extremism in increasing numbers (Cherney, et al., 2020). This activity traverses in-person and online domains. It entails an increasingly broad spectrum of extreme engagement including consumption and possession of objectionable materials, expression of extreme ideas, involvement with extreme groups and peers, susceptibility to influence from extreme family members, development and dissemination of extreme content, and threats or plans to engage in extreme violence. These trends have emerged alongside government responses. He Aranga Ake is the New Zealand cross-government initiative designed to help prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE). Social workers will be engaging with young people who may be heading down this path or vulnerable to the temptations to do so. Conversely, we have a gap in practice-focussed advice about *how* to work with young people involved or heading toward involvement in extremism; something this practice note addresses.

There is a growing body of literature and maturing definitional criteria regarding P/CVE (Combined Threat Assessment Group, 2022). However, the gap concerns what works on the ground. How could practice tools and social work models work for the assessment and interruption of youth extremist trajectories? What is available is centred primarily around young people in engaged in extreme Islamist ideas, ideologies, and groups such as Islamic State (Stanley et al., 2018). However, other extreme themes and ideologies are relevant to youth and warrant consideration. This includes the rapid re-emergence of right-wing extremism which is the primary area of concern for Aotearoa New Zealand (Mathew et al., 2023). Targeted threats and rhetoric towards government institutions including school settings are also relevant. So too, is an increasingly broad landscape of single-issue grievances and ideas including anti-democratic, conspiratorial, and violent gendered views.

This practice note highlights the contribution of social work to this emerging area of practice (see Stanley, 2018). We have a small cohort of teenagers engaged in right-wing extremism across Aotearoa New Zealand, and they present with a range of vulnerabilities and difficult life experiences. This is mirrored by reported youth radicalisation trends in Australia (Barracosa, 2024). Our social work response to cases

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of young people engaged in extremism is unique because we are advocates for children and rangatahi, work closely with whānau and family, and collaborate extensively with partner agencies, including security services. The response to children or rangatahi engaged in extremism should therefore benefit from grounded and holistic youth-oriented practice.

This practice note contributes to practitioner-based approaches when working with young people engaged in extremism. It aims to help practitioners and managers navigate and respond to the challenges posed by this cohort. It highlights what works by focusing on youth and family-centred, multidisciplinary, and practice model approaches implemented in our child protection and youth justice agency, Oranga Tamariki. Many of these cases require a child protection and youth justice response, with the age of involvement decreasing. Youth justice responses are required for those aged over 14 who engage in extreme ideas or escalate to violent threats, intentions, and acts. However, effective early identification and intervention processes necessitates a child protection focus due to possible risk of harm to self and or others.

Explaining extremism—a youth focus

Extremism is generally understood as a belief system underpinned by rigid and uncompromising views that fall outside the norms of community and society. For Aotearoa New Zealand, this might manifest in rejections of law, police, and our elected parliament. Extremism can have different ideological underpinnings including beliefs based on faith, social or political issues and ideas. Extremist belief systems can manifest in several ways and may entail a desire to bring about change and overhaul the political, social, or religious environment.

Extremist beliefs systems are developed through the process of radicalisation. Not all radicalised individuals intend to create fear, disruption or to enforce change. Most people with extreme views do not endorse or engage in acts of ideologically motivated violence. However, some extremist individuals may promote, threaten, or engage in violence to achieve their ideological goals. This can include children and rangatahi. In some cases, this can progress to acts of terrorism. Under Aotearoa New Zealand law, a terrorist act is defined as an ideologically, politically, or religiously motivated act that is intended to intimidate a population, or to coerce or force the government to do, or not to do, certain things.

Like most Western countries, Aotearoa New Zealand faces challenges regarding extremism. The risk posed to Aotearoa New Zealand by far-right extremism is of particular concern. These views promote racial separatism or dominance by one group over others. We need to be attentive to neo-Nazi insignia, white supremacist rhetoric, racist and xenophobic attitudes, and anti-democratic ideas expressed by young people. Religiously motivated hate groups and far-left extremism (such as environmentalism, animal rights and anti-capitalism) are less likely to manifest in violence in Aotearoa New Zealand (Oranga Tamariki Practice Guidance, 2023). However, they may attract some tamariki and rangatahi to their cause and, potentially, to acts of violence. Toxic masculinity and gendered violence are also areas of concern. This has been identified as relevant for some vulnerable young people in Australia (for example, see Barracosa, 2024).

Becoming radicalised—a youth focus

Radicalisation is viewed as a process impacted by individual, social and contextual experiences and influences (Borum, 2004). It is argued that the process of radicalisation differs for young people due to the impact of their own unique vulnerabilities and life experiences during

childhood and adolescence (Bhui et al., 2012; Cherney et al., 2020). However, few formal models or theories exist to explain youth radicalisation.

Vulnerability is an important consideration for social workers to hold in mind when trying to understand, explain, and work with young people engaged in extremism. We are seeing younger, and increasingly vulnerable, tamariki attracted to extremism in Aotearoa New Zealand. Globally, research is also pointing to the relevance of online environments (Brown & Pearson, 2018; Rose & Vale, 2023). This includes the capacity for young people to operate anonymously online where the threshold for risk is reduced, where a sense of meaning and belonging can be established based on extreme engagement, and where objectionable and dangerous materials can be consumed and shared with others. This includes violent extremist content and gore imagery depicting harm, injury, torture, and suffering. The possession or sharing of this content by tamariki or rangatahi is a police and child protection concern; something stepped up after the 2019 Christchurch Mosque attacks. The online world is particularly relevant to extremist supporters, groups, and recruiters. For many social workers this will be a foreign world—the converse for the children and young people that we work with.

Signs of youth radicalisation and extremism

An increase in academic attention regarding young people engaged in extremism has been observed. This has resulted in the identification of an increasingly broad set of risk factors. It is argued here that many of these vulnerabilities and risk factors are common in the work conducted in child protection and youth justice settings. This includes the relevance of factors such as emotional and behavioural dysfunction, susceptibility to peer and family influence, identity development, a desire for status and power, and a propensity for risk

taking (Campelo et al., 2022; Cherney et al., 2020; Malik, 2019). The impact of adverse life experiences such as fractured family environments, educational disconnect, youth crime and delinquency, and trauma have also been identified (Koehler, 2020; Logan, et al., 2022; Simi et al., 2016). More recently, considerations are emerging regarding the impact of clinical conditions and the presence of some young people with neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism being attracted to extreme views (Rosseau et al., 2023; Salman et al., 2023). The social work role is not to profile, rather to build a comprehensive understanding of the situation.

A composite practice case study

Jeremy is a 13-year-old male. He was removed from his parents' care in his infancy due to concerns regarding neglect and inadequate supervision. Jeremy was subsequently placed with various family members during his upbringing. He has a long pattern of defiant and disruptive behaviour in home and school settings. Jeremy is diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, and autism spectrum disorder. He is socially isolated and is not engaged in any pro-social activities in the community. Jeremy spends extended periods of time online playing video games and chatting with "friends" overseas. His family struggle to manage or monitor his internet use. However, they are quite relieved Jeremy is active online as he is making friends and is less disruptive and aggressive at home.

Jeremy has been suspended from school for threatening to engage in an act of mass casualty violence targeting teachers and school peers. He has received criminal charges related to this. Jeremy made the threat on a social messaging application where he is known by other students to express offensive views promoting white supremacy, anti-Semitism, and dehumanising rhetoric towards certain cultural and sexual minority groups. Jeremy has expressed similar views at school. This includes drawing right-wing

symbols in class and refusing to participate in discussions regarding Indigenous history. Jeremy also has a history of expressing grievances towards school and child protection services.

Theory into practice: social work with Jeremy and his family

Understandably, situations like Jeremy's can feel perplexing and overwhelming for social workers and their supervisors. Where to begin? Police and security services will hold information necessary to the case, and we will be working together. It is important that we appreciate the social work role as distinct from security services whilst also remaining collaborative. Our role is to undertake a comprehensive ecological assessment to understand the situation. This includes Jeremy's strengths and vulnerabilities, as well as his family's situation and needs. This also involves additional considerations related to school, child protection, mental health, and other relevant people or services that are involved.

The social work contribution offers the ecological analysis needed to understand why Jeremy was attracted to extremism, as well as the meaning, perhaps pleasures and emotional value that he derives from engaging in extremist threats. His diagnoses are an important consideration but may not completely explain his extreme behaviour. Rather, his clinical profile is likely to form part of a broader picture. Our social work thinking is therefore to go deeper in understanding what is happening, how this may have arisen, and then plan for how we can help bring about the changes needed.

Oranga Tamariki has practice advisers on hand to consult with, as these cases, while rare, will feel challenging and anxiety provoking to deal with. Practice guidance is also available, and publicly available, and further reading is available on the Practice Centre. The social work job is to be clear on "how will I undertake my mahi and work

effectively at the interagency table?" The Practice Framework is on hand to support kaimahi and supervisors plan and undertake their mahi (see Stanley, 2024). The practice framework offers a range of practice models, tools, and resources to guide and support the mahi needed. This includes the Family Group Conference (FGC) and Signs of Safety, an evidenced-informed practice model used in other jurisdictions for extremism and radicalisation cases (Stanley et al., 2018).

Signs of Safety is a principle-based model that encourages partnership working while helping reach an analysis about the degree of risk. Importantly, the model guides us toward understanding what would help interrupt or offset Jeremy's behaviours, threats and actions. Family and friends, teachers, police, security services and others play a core role in challenging Jeremy in his thinking and actions. Scaling questions (on scale of 0–10, where 0 means the most dangerous situation and 10 means Jeremy is as far away from possible harmful actions and threats) help to prompt further exploration. Family members, Jeremy, police colleagues, social workers and others can share views which is useful for reflective thinking about what is considered risky and dangerous. Different views are invitations to consider our risk thinking (Stanley et al., 2018). A plan is drawn up, with family driving the changes needed for Jeremy. This places greater emphasis on how participants define the risk for themselves as part of the risk assessment process. Moreover, Jeremy and his family are at the table working with professionals to produce assessments and plans that incorporate all of the knowledge, views, ideologies and goals needed to explore danger, risk and harm alongside strength, potential and safety.

The FGC is a statutory practice model used extensively in Aotearoa. Jeremy is 13, so a care and protection FGC would be arranged. This offers a restorative-based intervention for cases of extremism risk. Being a family-

focused model, members of the family meet to plan for, and with, Jeremy about the concerns. Suspicion of the State and resistance can be present in these cases. However, this model is the only care and protection model with built-in family time. Thus, families are given the information that worries people, and then provided space and time alone to debate, challenge each other and plan ways forward. Exploring beliefs and ideologies held by family members is important. Family members challenging each other on concepts and views that they are concerned about is a core part of the FGC process.

Working with complex young people in child protection and youth justice settings can be confronting, emotive and anxiety provoking. Feelings of emotional intensity are common in child protection work. These cases will invariably feel this way. It is therefore important to recognise these challenges and understand how demanding these cases can feel. The stakes are high and there is often a lot of scrutiny attached. Nevertheless, social workers are responsible for completing comprehensive assessments and driving subsequent multi-disciplinary and multi-agency case management and intervention plans that are focused on positive outcomes for young people like Jeremy. Our social, familial and contextual focus offers a significant contribution.

Aotearoa New Zealand and colleagues in New South Wales (NSW) are subsequently collaborating to build and share practice knowledge and experience. The Youth Justice New South Wales P/CVE framework is grounded in practice-based support and consultation opportunities for staff, focused specifically on working with at-risk and radicalised youth (see Barracosa, 2024). Oranga Tamariki offer this via practice advisors to support their social workers, and our colleagues in NSW have offered their experience on a case-by-case consultation basis. A practice partnership that nurtures

consultation avenues and support between Oranga Tamariki and Youth Justice NSW is now in place to ensure that shared practice knowledge and expertise promotes effective identification and intervention outcomes for young people engaged in extremism through robust and informed practice. A key message here is for practitioners to "pick up the phone" and reach out for advice; to use the practice framework, tools and models on offer and work collaboratively. Jeremy needs the absolute best of social work.

Summary notes

Practice notes, such as this, are a resource to help practitioners gain confidence and skills in emerging practice issues. However, working with young people engaged in extremism will challenge us to consider content-specific knowledge, insights and approaches outside of normal practice. To address this, and to effectively support our staff, Oranga Tamariki and counterparts from Youth Justice New South Wales in Australia have established a collaborative working relationship. Youth Justice New South Wales has extensive experience working with young people engaged in extremism and has a dedicated practice-based unit designed to respond to this (see Barracosa, 2024; Barracosa & March, 2022).

Tamariki and rangatahi engaged in extremism in Aotearoa New Zealand will present with a range of vulnerabilities and needs. Many of which are common to our social work practice. Family and whānau are key to understanding and then planning actions needed to support and adjust behaviours and offset risk. This is sound social work. Tamariki and rangatahi engaged in extremism will pose practice-based challenges; however, we are well placed to respond through collaborative and evidence-based social work practice in child protection and youth justice settings across Aotearoa New Zealand.

Acknowledgements

Note: See helpful resources at end of References.

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Helpful Resources for Social Workers

He Atanga Ake. https://www.police.govt.nz/advice-services/counter-terrorism/he-aranga-ake

NZSIS Know the Signs. https://www.nzsis.govt.nz/assets/NZSIS-Documents/Know-the signs.pdf Know-the-signs.pdf (nzsis.govt.nz)

NZSIS New Zealand's Security Threat Environment 2023. An assessment by the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service New-Zealands-Security-Threat-Environment-2023.pdf (nzsis.govt.nz)