D.U.C.C.
GUIDE FOR PARENTS

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quacking down on misinformation

D.U.C.C.

LETTER TO PARENTS

Welcome to D.U.C.C., **D**eveloping and **U**nderstanding **C**ritical **C**omprehension, an initiative created for students in grades 1-6, their parents, and elementary and middle school teachers to combat misinformation online.

In the contemporary Age of Information, the popularity of the internet, social media, and visual networks such as Instagram and TikTok among children have exacerbated their exposure to extremism and likeability to be radicalized. Even very young children or those without access to social media networks may be exposed to misinformation and disinformation through their interactions with peers, parents, caregivers, and educators, with misinformation and disinformation moving easily between online and offline contexts. As frequent users of the internet, primary-aged students value technology as a way to research the issues their communities face, to be informed about events and issues, gather data, and share views and experiences with others. Many find themselves more attuned to social media and the online world than their parents, caregivers, and educators and are both comfortable with this world and curious about it. The alienation generated by such a phenomenon could also lead to a lack of guidance when exposed to radical content, striving for the necessity for institutional efforts to intervene and provide assistance to at-risk youths.

Children may be particularly vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation because their maturity and cognitive capacities are still evolving, including the development of different psychological and physiological motivations, and with them, different rights and protections. According to a UNICEF survey in 10 countries on shortcomings in how young people evaluate online information, up to three-quarters of children reported feeling unable to judge the veracity of the information they encounter online. This was especially true among primary-aged children. Another study found that only 2 percent of children and young people have the critical literacy skills they need to judge whether a news story is real or false. Therefore, our project aims to target online disinformation and misinformation as our primary approach to combat extremism.

ABOUT
OUR INITIATIVE

Developing & Using Critical Comprehension (D.U.C.C.) is a tool that aims to combat misinformation and disinformation by providing tools that allow students to develop and use critical comprehension skills. As the internet becomes more prevalent for younger students, the goal of this project is to teach students how to evaluate and understand the information they are subjected to on various platforms. Research has shown that younger people are at-risk for extremism recruitment online. D.U.C.C. aims to equip these students with tools that help them to identify dangerous behaviors and empower them to think critically about misinformation online.

While D.U.C.C. was created with students in mind, it is imperative that parents and teachers also have a role in promoting digital literacy for students. D.U.C.C. has created a resource hub with videos, lesson plans, games, and other resources that will ultimately equip students with the skills to combat radicalization online. All resources are free of charge and can be accessed by students, parents, and teachers on a secure web browser.

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STUDENTS &
TEACHERS

The target audience for our project is students in grades 1-4. This group of students is often the most overlooked in counter-terrorism discourse, however, at this age young elementary students are in the formidable years of developing their emotional intelligence and critical thinking skills.

- Anna: A 9-year-old 4th grader at an affluent private school in Wisconsin. She just received an iPhone as a Christmas present last year. She plays softball for the local Rec Center with other girls from the neighborhood.
  - Anna has recently made a group chat with other members of her class. At this age, Anna is very peer-conscious and is concerned about what her classmates think. She likes participating in group activities. She often feels the need to express her opinions.
- Sebastian: A 6-year-old 1st grader at a public school in South Florida. His parents are going through a divorce. Sebastian has moved schools to live with his mother.
  - Sebastian is experiencing many common stressors. The impact of his parent's divorce has caused him to lash out at friends. He has difficulty concentrating in class and has lost his interest in learning.

The secondary audience for our project is elementary school teachers. While our resources are directed at students, teachers are responsible for disseminating this information to their students. The lesson plans and classroom activities that are listed on our website are perfect for teachers who are interested in teaching the material, but have no formal training in preventing the earliest states of extremism such as low extraversion, perceived grievances against others, and low self-esteem, among others.
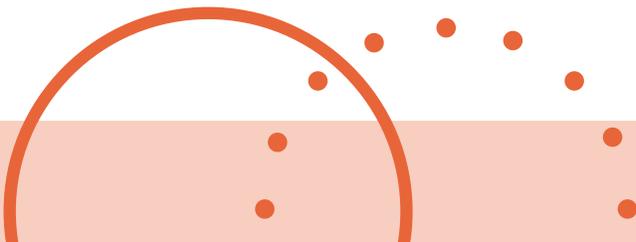
OUR PROJECT
GOALS

1. Enable students to develop critical thinking and emotional intelligence through an animated video designed to teach about the dangers of misinformation to the individual and others.

2. Create resources for teachers that best support the facilitation of critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and understanding.

3. Involve parents in the mission to protect students from the dangers of misinformation and disinformation that can lead down the path of violent extremism.

D.U.C.C. aims to foster a learning environment that teaches students how to identify misinformation and disinformation in a manner that is receptive to elementary school students. This collection of resources is meant to help promote a plethora of skills, mindsets, and abilities that will help your students resist extremism on and offline and think for themselves.

- Information literacy helps provide one with the skills to locate, understand, and evaluate information presented to oneself. This helps to mitigate the effects of misinformation, disinformation, biased information, and manipulation.

- Critical thinking skills allow one to process information, specifically by:
  - understanding where the information comes from
  - being aware of the potential intentions of its author(s) or content
  - understanding the basis and limits of one's own knowledge, including potential vulnerabilities to flawed information

OUR COMMITMENT
TO SUSTAINABILILTY & SCALABILITY

We designed this project with sustainability and scalability in mind. Battling misinformation is a task that must be able to endure long after this project. Our group is committed to reducing the barriers to accessing resources, which is why our website will continue to offer free resources for students, teachers, and parents to access anytime and anywhere. D.U.C.C. is also, by virtue of our design, a scalable project as well. We welcome the addition of new resources made by parents and teachers to help combat misinformation among young children.

In order to continue to scale, we must get the message out about our project. Future investments in the project should be aimed at growing our social media presence and working with schools to disseminate our information. School partnerships would be ideal because they would allow us to engage with a larger population of students. In due time, it may also be possible for students to graduate with a certificate from D.U.C.C. With future funding, our project would help to enact these changes to continue to share our resources with students everywhere.

As with any project aimed at combating extremism, we anticipate that there will be backlash. Those who benefit from the spread of misinformation will want to be an obstacle in our efforts to share these resources with others. However, given that D.U.C.C is self-sustaining, there is no reason to be deterred. As long as there are people who are willing to spread the message about the importance of combating misinformation online, D.U.C.C will have a role to play. While this may be our final report, it does not represent the end of this project. D.U.C.C is poised to succeed because our project is sustainable, scalable, and will have impacts on students that will be felt for many years to come.
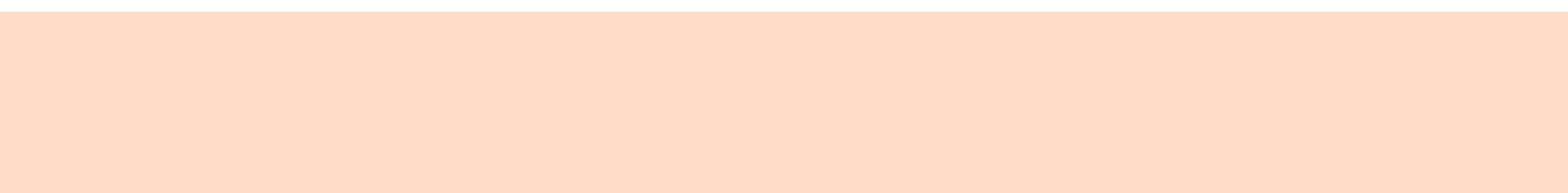
SECONDARY
RESARCH

Our secondary research primarily focuses on identifying misinformation and disinformation as a significant cause of extremism and revealing why children are especially vulnerable to this risk factor. According to the UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, primary-aged students have a biological tendency towards risk-taking and heightened vulnerability to polarized message content. When they become associated with violent extremist groups, it can reflect an age-specific psychological response to their surroundings or circumstances. Early theories posited that this was due to a poor understanding of risk, vulnerability to peer pressure, and perceptions of invulnerability.

Advances in how scholars understand brain maturation and developmental neuroscience have increasingly cast doubt on such theories, and attention has shifted towards the psycho-social factors that influence self-regulation. Today, the accepted explanation is that adolescents engage in risk-taking because their increased appetite for novelty and sensation-seeking precedes the growth of their self-regulatory competence and cognitive control systems. More simply, making sound decisions on risky behavior depends on a series of brain capacities, such as impulse control and resistance to peer pressure, that adolescents simply have not developed.

MEASURES OF
EFFECTIVENESS

In order to measure the effectiveness of our project, we conducted two virtual focus groups in classrooms to quantitatively gauge the students' learning and qualitatively gain testimonials and perspectives from teachers. Logistically, the focus groups were conducted over Zoom with two group members conducting a lesson to a class of second-grade students and a class of third-grade students in Wisconsin. We asked the students pre-activity questions, counted responses, then gave the PowerPoint, showed the video, and guided the students through a post-lesson worksheet. Upon completion of the lesson, we asked post-activity questions. A total of 42 students participated in the two focus groups, and our data reports that 100% of students learned something new from the video and 95% of students enjoyed the video.

More specifically, we measured students' knowledge of the term misinformation before and after the lesson, and their risk assessment as to whether it is something harmful or helpful. Our results show that after participating in the lesson activities and watching the short animated video, all students who participated knew misinformation is harmful.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Our social media campaign is aimed at reaching key stakeholders through various platforms. Our Instagram continues to post informational graphics about the growing dangers of youth radicalization and the vulnerabilities that are most prevalent among our target audience. We have leveraged Facebook to join teacher groups to share our resources with educators and school leaders.

Our Twitter has flagged the attention of leaders in the counter-terrorism community who are hoping to move away from securitized approaches toward community-based responses to violence prevention. We bought nearly 200 stickers with our logo to share with students and schools who participated in our focus group study. The goal of this campaign was to draw attention to our website which includes the animated film and several age-appropriate resources for young students
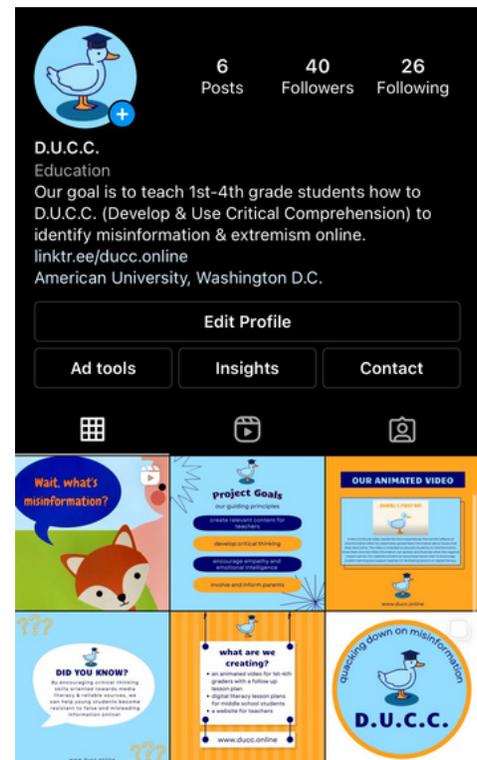
RESOURCES

Our resources help reduce reactionary or impulsive thinking, cultivate awareness of one's mental processes, reinforce individual responsibility for information consumption and communication, and increase feelings of self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-efficacy.

- **Decision-making skills** allow one to use learned information to make choices about their behavior and cognition. These help to reduce anxiety and fear surrounding decision-making, allowing one to make choices based on reason and cognition instead of just emotion or circumstance.

- **Access to resources** provides one with multiple sources of information, preferably trusted and reliable ones. It allows one to access information that one does not inherently possess. This provides both more information and differing viewpoints, reducing the chance that a single point of view or source of information will be the only information for one to draw on.

- **Knowledge** of and confidence in one's own beliefs and values has three potential benefits: it prompts investigation and consideration of beliefs and values; it provides one with a solid, pre considered base for decision-making in times of uncertainty or anxiety; and it develops and strengthens a sense of identity. All of these reduce the likelihood of manipulation by others or by fear.

- **Interaction** with others who are not like oneself exposes one to differences between people and normalizes natural diversity of thought, feeling, experience, and identity. This helps to develop tolerance, empathy, and respect for others. These decrease susceptibility to hateful, bigoted, entitled, and/or prejudiced views of others.

- **Empathy** is an essential factor in deradicalization and anti-violence because a core feature of radical ideology is viewing and classifying a group as "other," and therefore "inferior" or "threatening," which requires mental and emotional separation of these people from oneself. A developed sense of empathy can make this process difficult or impossible, making hate and radicalization more difficult or unlikely.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A Child-Resilience Approach to Preventing Violent Extremism
https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org
/files/2020/reports_extremism/un_hq_osrsg_a_child-
resilience_approach_to_preventing_violent_extremism_20-01153_lo-res.pdf

Signs of Radicalisation & Extremism
https://www.bhscp.org.uk/preventing-abuse-and-neglect/spotting-the-
signs/signs-of-radicalisation-extremism/

Parent Resources
https://educateagainsthate.com/parents/

Parents 4 Peace
https://www.parents4peace.org/resources/

**Fighting Extremism Online: New resources help parents combat
radicalization of youth on the web**
https://www.splcenter.org/news/2021/06/30/fighting-extremism-online-
new-resources-help-parents-combat-radicalization-youth-web

Radicalization And Extremism: How Do I Talk About It With My Child?
https://info-radical.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/How-do-I-talk-about-
it-with-my-child_CPRLV.pdf