

THE PARENT'S AND EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO

COMBATING HATE SPEECH

By Brittan Heller, J.D., and Larry Magid, Ed.D.

The internet is making it possible for people around the world to communicate with lightning speed and, for the most part, it's a good thing.

Whether it's keeping up with friends and family or meeting new folks across the world, connected technology has made it a lot easier for us all to share ideas and information, seek advice and much more.

And, while most of this interaction is kind and respectful, there are those who use it to demean, insult, bully and abuse. Hateful speech is horrible no matter who it's aimed at and who witnesses it, but it's especially troubling when it affects children and teens, who may not have the experience level or emotional maturity to compartmentalize it or know where to seek help. For some it can not only be demeaning but affect their self-esteem, leading to depression, isolation, anger and anti-social and self-destructive behavior.

This guide is aimed, in part, at parents and educators, seeking to prevent children under their care from experiencing or engaging in hate speech as well as dealing with it in healthy ways when they encounter it. But it's not just for child caregivers. Hate speech can affect people of any age, including adults, which is why we're also recommending this guide for affected adults, law enforcement, the medical/mental health community, clergy and anyone else dealing with the impact of hate speech.

DEFINITIONS

Hate speech is more than just harsh words. It can be any form of expression intended to vilify, humiliate, or incite hatred against a group or class of people. It can occur offline or online or both. It can be communicated using words, symbols, images, memes, emojis and video.



Memes, for example, may be images or images with words that appear to be humorous or even cute, like the white supremacists use of Pepe the Frog, a cartoon-like character that doesn't inherently have racist or anti-Semitic meaning. Those who traffic in hateful memes may dismiss concerns by saying "we're only kidding" or "it's a joke," but in context, hateful memes can have meaning to those who traffic in hate speech. Cartoons that depict ethnic or religious groups or even genders in "humorous" ways can - but are not always - be an example of hateful memes.

A dog whistle is a word or phrase that may seem innocuous to some but have a specific meaning to certain groups of people. The words themselves may not seem hateful, but they can be interpreted as such. In some contexts, "nationalism," can be a euphemism for racism or anti-immigrant bias. That doesn't mean that everyone who espouses nationalism is racist or anti-immigrant, but the word is sometimes used in that context. Pointing out names of one or more prominent members of a racial or religious group could be a legitimate criticism of that person but it could also be a dog whistle pandering to hatred of the group.

Using derogatory words, even if the word itself is not a racial or ethnic slur, can be hateful speech. Examples include using words like "animals" or "invaders" to describe immigrants; comparing people to "trash" or "garbage"; or alluding to certain groups of ethnic minorities as cockroaches or diseases, as was done in the Rwandan genocide.

In general, online hate speech targets a person or group because of characteristics tied closely to their identity, like race, color, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, or sexual identity.

LEGAL ISSUES IN THE U.S. AND OTHER COUNTRIES

Unlike most other countries, there is no legal definition of hate speech in the United States. Most hateful language is protected, therefore legal, under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees the right to be free from government interference in speech. But, even under the First Amendment, hate speech is unprotected and not permitted when it directly incites imminent criminal activity or includes specific threats of violence targeted against a person or group.

Many other countries have laws on hate speech. Europe passed anti-hate speech laws in the wake of World War II, to curb incitement to racial, ethnic, and religious hatred after the Holocaust. French law, for example, prohibits public and private communication that is defamatory or insulting, or that incites discrimination, hatred, or violence against a person or group on account of place of origin, ethnicity or lack thereof, nationality, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or disability. In Germany, *Volksverhetzung* (“incitement to hatred”) is an offense punishable by up to five years in prison. Since 2017, Germany has criminalized hate speech on social media sites, stating that social networking sites may be fined up to €50 million Euros (\$56 million U.S. dollars) if they persistently fail to remove illegal content within a week.

Advocates for laws against hate speech argue that they are compatible with protections on freedom of speech because under all legal codes and international human rights protections, freedom of expression has limitations. As noted above, even the First Amendment does not protect certain types of unprotected speech, like incitement to violence, child pornography and provocations such as yelling “fire” in a theatre.

HATE SPEECH VS. BULLYING

Hate speech and bullying often overlap. Bullying, whether in-person or online, is defined as repeated, unwanted, aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. Often, but not always, bullying can involve demeaning a person based on characteristics such as their race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion,

disability or body image. In some of these cases, depending on the motivation and content of the aggression, bullying could also be defined as hate speech. In these cases, bullying takes on an especially harmful dimension.

WHY IS HATE SPEECH HARMFUL?

Hate speech can harm individuals, communities and societies. Research focused on the impact of racial, ethnic, religious, gendered, and LGBTQ hate speech finds that the targets of hate speech can experience negative emotional, mental, and physical consequences. These can include low self-worth, anxiety, fear for their lives, and even self-harm or suicide.

Hate speech harms our relationships with each other. It interferes with our ability to communicate with others and to empathize. Because it often relies on stereotypes and scapegoating, it negatively impacts our ability to address the root causes of social problems. Therefore hate speech can also harm communities, even when it targets individuals.

Online hate speech has resulted in serious offline harms. The theory of “dangerous speech,” as developed by Susan Benesch, explains that some types of hate speech are prone to incite violence. This “dangerous speech” follows specific patterns that cross societies, time periods, and type of targeted group. Recently, dangerous speech in online contexts, specifically on social media, has resulted in deaths in places like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Uganda. But there have also been examples in the U.S., such as the synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, where the perpetrator had engaged in online hate speech prior to his crimes. Although not everyone who engages in hate speech commits violent crimes, many people who commit hate crimes point to hate speech on the internet as their inspiration for such acts.

Hate speech harms everyone. Expressions of hate against minority populations can be used to normalize discrimination, outbreaks of hate crimes, and targeted violence. Even for those who simply witness it, hate speech harms our ability to effectively process information. Many examples of online disinformation are centered around exploiting social struggles around race and ethnicity, deepening these social rifts through use of hate speech. This is designed to inflame our emotions and prevent us from evaluating the truth or falsity of the claim.

HATE SPEECH VS. CRITICAL SPEECH

Not all negative speech is hate speech. You could, for example, disagree with a religious doctrine or policy without being hateful. You could be opposed to a government whose citizens widely practice a particular religion or are from a dominant ethnic group without being hateful to that group. You could criticize customs practiced by different groups without necessarily demeaning individuals in those groups or threatening their well-being. You can certainly disagree or criticize a public official or any other person without it being hate speech. However, there are certain types of speech that cross the line. For example, it is perfectly okay to criticize the views of Jewish, African American or LGBTQ leaders, but sometimes those criticisms are framed in a way designed to imply that the criticism is based, at least in part, on their identity rather than what they say or how they act. This can be nuanced, and sometimes hard to prove, but it is an important distinction.

WHY DO PEOPLE PRODUCE HATE SPEECH?

People create hate speech for a variety of reasons. Sometimes hateful speech can reflect a person’s genuine political beliefs or distaste for a group of people. Hate speech can also be a product of lack of knowledge, experience, or reflection if the speakers come from an environment where slurs are commonplace. Speakers may be unfamiliar with members of a targeted group, and not realize they are stereotyping or using language that could be considered hateful. They may also lack knowledge about the relevant facts. One example could be a person who uses a slur referring to a religious stereotype, without any personal knowledge of the beliefs of that religion or the history of discrimination toward that group. Perhaps they have a good reason to dislike specific people from that group and falsely assume that most people from that group have the same negative characteristics.

Other times speakers may be engaged in “trolling” or being intentionally provocative to illicit a response from other people. This is commonly seen on the internet, where so-called “trolls” engage in this behavior as a pastime. Sometimes hate speech can be simply out of ignorance, such as uttering an ethnic slur – without even knowing it’s a slur and might be offensive and hurtful.

Finally, hate speech is dependent upon context. What may be hate speech in one context can be innocent or even positive when used in other contexts. There are, for example, terms that are generally considered to be hateful when used by someone outside the targeted group that can be used as a term of endearment within the group. There are also words that start out as derogatory, like “queer” and “Chicano” that have been adopted and repurposed as affirming terms by members of the affected group.

FREE SPEECH AND ONLINE PLATFORMS

The internet hosts many types of media and content. Hate speech can be found in a variety of platforms and online forums. Generally, platforms known for more permissive terms of service or those who do not engage in active content moderation will likely have more hate speech.

Although generally prohibited, it’s not uncommon to encounter hate speech on mainstream social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Although these companies prohibit and strive to take-down hate speech, they are not always able to do so. Sometimes this is because the content hasn’t been reported or picked up by their software designed to find it. Sometimes it’s because the platform’s reporting channels are backed-up and content moderators haven’t gotten to it yet. Sometimes questionable content is part of a private or group discussion that is off-limits even to the company’s moderators. Sometimes content reported as hate speech doesn’t fall into the company’s definition of content they prohibit and sometimes moderators make what amounts to a bad judgement because they don’t fully understand or follow the company’s policies.

The majority of public critique about hate speech falls on mainstream popular platforms, but many young people are moving to newer online spaces, especially gaming-related, live streaming, and image sharing platforms.

Hate speech can also be found in chat rooms or message board-style forums, including ones known for so-called “controversial speech” and more mainstream sites where it can slip in during live gaming sessions or chats or forums that are not constantly moderated.

Hate speech can be found in videos, cartoons, drawing, even photos. Image and video-based platforms can also contain hateful content. These have a range of moderation, from users enforcing and creating the rules to no moderation. The boards contain user-generated content, and in some forums, any type of content is allowed. Message boards are the birthplace of many memes and internet hoaxes, which can often include hateful speech.

Hate speech also occur in image and video sharing platforms, some of which are extremely well-known and popular. The bigger ones and even some of the smaller ones are moderated forums, but they still have challenges with content moderation, due to a lack of context presented with the images. The platforms contain a mix of user-generated content and advertisements. Youth and internet influencers are often found here, as opposed to Facebook and Twitter.

Finally, hate speech flourishes on fringe platforms. New platforms are developed all the time, and sometimes existing platforms shut down. Many of these fringe platforms were developed in response to content moderation and concerns over “censorship” on mainstream platforms. Generally, any type of content is permitted, and many users are part of fringe groups or extremist audiences that produce and consume hate speech. These forums can be operated in the U.S. or other countries and, even if the content is illegal, it may be difficult to compel the platform to remove it.

Why is hate speech found on such platforms? Every minute, there are millions of posts created and shared on social media. The scope and scale of online content is so immense, that human moderators cannot enforce the platforms’ terms of service manually. Artificial intelligence-based systems are still new, and lack the understanding of context to determine what is hate speech and what is permissible political critique, artistic expression, or unpopular opinion. Even with the best terms of service, both human moderators and artificial intelligence-based systems are subject to mistakes and misinterpretations.

TECH COMPANIES HAVE THE RIGHT TO DICTATE ACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOR

Additionally, as previously noted, the law does not force companies to moderate content, but it also doesn’t prevent them from doing so.

The First Amendment allows most hate speech, apart from incitement to violence and other limited categories such as child pornography, and protects from government interference in speech. It doesn’t govern private companies, including platforms who create online spaces. But it’s important to emphasize that the First Amendment applies to government, not private companies, which have a legal right to determine what is and isn’t acceptable on their platforms.

But even if platforms do not have a legal responsibility, they may still have a moral obligation to serve the best interests of their users, who overwhelmingly do not want forums full of hateful content. Platforms, if they wish to serve diverse populations, have a social obligation and a business model that should value inclusivity. But they sometimes fail at this. Parents should understand the policies of the platforms that their children use, in order to understand the type of content that you’ll find on each. Even companies with strict anti-hate speech policies face challenges in knowing exactly where to draw the line so as to protect diversity of viewpoints while combating hate speech. Additionally, parents should look at the platforms their children want to use, so that they are familiar with the type of content hosted by the platform. Parents can then have informed conversations with their children about what they see and how they can respond.

IS BANNING HATE SPEECH A FORM OF CENSORSHIP?

There have been accusations that social media companies censor people with certain political perspectives and, ironically, some of the people who accuse social media companies of censoring them have very large social media followings. It is true that some people have been banned from Twitter, Facebook and other platforms while others have had posts removed or demoted so they would get less attention. In the vast majority of these cases, the social media companies have taken these steps because of the person's behavior rather than their ideology. Expressing opinions on all sides of the political spectrum isn't just allowed, it's encouraged on platforms like Twitter and Facebook. What isn't allowed is harassment, bullying, threats or posts that demean people based on race, religion, ethnicity or other personal characteristics. Therefore posts that contain racist, sexist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim sentiment, or similarly hateful content may be flagged or removed.

FREE SPEECH VS. HATE SPEECH AT SCHOOL

Students in public schools do have free speech unless that speech is determined to "materially and substantially interfere with the requirements of the appropriate discipline in the operation of the school." This ruling from *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District* (1969) is still the legal standard that other cases follow. While online speech can be created outside of the school building or outside of the school day, the school can use disciplinary measures if the online speech interferes with others' rights to feel safe in school and receive their education. For instance, in *Shen v. Albany Unified School District* (2017), a federal judge in San Francisco ruled that off-campus social media activity - in this case a student created and posted to an Instagram account with racist messages targeting members of the school community - could be considered "school speech" if the online acts were done by students and with the intention of disrupting the school operations.

SOLUTIONS FOR PARENTS

If you or your children find hate speech on any online forum that tries to be responsible, you should immediately report it. While the reporting mechanisms are different for each platform and reporting service, most will have online guides to walk users through the process. But, while an important step, reporting alone, will not prevent hate speech anymore than policing will prevent all crimes. You'll find guides to the most popular services at ConnectSafely.org.

Parents can start by taking preventative action, by dealing with situations before they reach the hate speech level. This applies equally to children who may be potential speakers or potential targets of hate speech.

- Encourage empathy in your children and remind them that, when engaging with others online, there is another person on the other side of the screen.
- Encourage your children to have an open attitude and honest curiosity about other people because some instances of hate speech are based on ignorance or false information or designed to recruit young people to a hate group or radical ideology.
- Look for terms that might creep into your child's vocabulary. Sometimes kids (and adults) use derogatory terms without realizing their impact. They may not mean to be hateful but the words they use can still be hurtful and they may be getting into bad habits. Phrases like "that's so gay" can be hurtful and inappropriate, even if they're not motivated by hate. Don't overreact to these situations. Lots of kids use derogatory terms without realizing it. They're not being hateful but they might need to be reminded that their words impact others.
- Look for group behavior. Your child may be fine in most situations but slip into using hateful terms when around others, such as teammates or groups of friends.

Children can also be taught techniques to engage hateful speech productively, when they encounter it online. Counterspeech is any direct response to hateful or harmful speech which seeks to undermine it. Just as influential speakers can make violence seem acceptable and necessary, online speakers can also favorably influence discussions and interactions through counterspeech. Tell your children that they do not have to respond to online aggression with more aggressive behavior. Counterspeech can be calm and matter of fact expressions of belief, expressing opinions like "I don't think that's right" or stating that hateful content "doesn't belong here."

Children can also be taught to show support for the targets of hate speech. Oftentimes, when someone is targeted online, there is a silent majority of onlookers who do not agree with the hate speech - but say nothing out of fear of standing alone. Producers of hate speech may back down, if they feel like the social norms of online spaces don't support that type of behavior.

Many producers of hate speech are behaving aggressively to feel powerful and legitimize their views. Because of this, it can often be effective to diffuse hateful speech with humor. Hate speech can also be a ploy for attention from online trolls, so another effective strategy can be to instruct children to ignore speakers who are trolling for a response. Many platforms offer controls that can block speakers, hashtags, or trending topics, which can help remove hate speech from children's feeds. You can also teach your kids to cool down before responding to hate speech. Seeing incendiary and hurtful content online is designed to get a rise out of targets and onlookers. This is similar to the way that bullying works.

SOLUTIONS FOR EDUCATORS

As we said earlier, hate speech sometimes overlaps with bullying – though there are differences – some of the solutions to hate speech are similar to those of bullying and other anti-social behavior.

- Many schools are implementing digital citizenship curriculum starting in elementary school and continuing through high school. Students are encouraged to be upstanders online rather than being bystanders when they see bullying or hurtful speech online. Examples of well established programs that schools can consider using include Google’s Be Internet Awesome and Common Sense Education’s K-12 lessons. ConnectSafely has parent and educator guides and short “quick guides” that cover subjects such as media literacy and fake news, cyberbullying and LGBTQ cyberbullying that can be used by educators and parents.
- Teachers should help students by posing realistic scenarios that they are likely to experience online and encouraging them to work together to come up with the words and actions they can use to stand up for people who are targeted by hate speech and bullies and to prevent the spread of false information and hate speech, and encourage the spread of accurate and positive information. This will help our youngest users of the internet feel empowered to help make the online world a better place.
- Penn Graduate School of Education recommends educators “practice or role-play scenarios that you find the most challenging,” and suggests that, after an incident, “resist the urge to condemn the student. Instead ask what was behind their action?”
- Educators can teach by example, being sure that their own words don’t contribute to the problem. They can also call out incidents of hate speech and make sure that bigoted statements are countered.

- Fostering a school climate of tolerance and inclusion can help both prevent and isolate hate speech incidents. That could include teaching about contributions from authors, inventors and other members of diverse groups.
- Chances are very good that the social norm at your school is kindness and tolerance, not hate and bullying. Whether it’s smoking, excessive drinking or bullying, social norms research has shown that establishing positive norms encourages positive behavior.
- Having grade appropriate discussions about well publicized incidents of hate speech or violence aimed at groups such as the rally and riots in Charlottesville and the shootings in El Paso, Pittsburgh and Christchurch, New Zealand.

As with bullying, there are times when the people engaging in hate speech and their targets know each other, such as fellow students at the same school, and it’s not uncommon for online behaviors to carry over to in-person encounters and vice versa. There are also cases of group hate speech such as students at sporting events engaging in derogatory chants that reference the ethnicity of people on the opposing team. These encounters can be extremely hurtful and frightening, not just for the athletes on the field but for everyone who witnesses or hears about it. The National Education Association and Teaching Tolerance have excellent resources on combating hate speech in schools, which you can find at ConnectSafely.org/hatespeech.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

When dealing with young people, it’s important to approach both the targets and the speakers of hate speech with empathy. Sometimes speakers may not be aware of the hateful implications of their language. Terms are also constantly changing, and so terms can develop or lose hateful implications over time. Emphasize to your children that hate speech must be confronted with openness and potentially emotional conversations. Talk with your kids about the importance of leadership and role models, especially when standing up for yourself or other targets of online abuse.

Just as with children and teens who have bullied others, some young people who engage in hate speech may themselves be victims of some type of abuse or mistreatment or may be dealing with emotional problems that need to be thoughtfully addressed. There may be other factors, such as negative role models that might be influencing the child. While hate speech should never be tolerated, it’s important for parents and educators to approach the situation calmly with the goal of helping the child grow and learn empathy for others.

Finally, remember that freedom of speech doesn’t mean that you can say whatever you want. Many people do not understand that freedom of speech is meant to prevent government from inappropriately suppressing critical voices, and the First Amendment does not bind tech companies – for that matter individuals – to allow all content, even if it’s legal. Even so, children need to understand that online communication is not just about what is legal, but how you communicate effectively. You can teach your children that diverse points of view are valuable, even if you don’t agree with them. Multiple points of view create strong communities. You can also emphasize to children that you don’t have to like all people, but you still need to treat all people with respect.

