

# Combating Hate Speech

A QUICK-GUIDE FOR PARENTS & EDUCATORS

ConnectSafely

For a more in-depth look at hate speech, visit [ConnectSafely.org/hatespeech](https://ConnectSafely.org/hatespeech).

## ➔ What is hate speech?



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. 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.

## Why is hate speech so dangerous? ⬅

Hate speech can harm individuals, communities, and societies. Research has found that 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. 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 as well as in Pittsburgh, El Paso, and other American communities.



## ➔ What is the difference between hate speech and 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. But it can become hate speech if 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.

## Is hate speech a form of 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. Bullying can morph into hate speech when it involves demeaning a person or group based on characteristics such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, disability, or body image.



## Legal issues in the U.S. and other countries.

For the most part, hate speech is legal in the United States, though it is not legal in many countries. European countries, for example, passed anti-hate speech laws in the wake of World War II, to curb incitement to racial, ethnic, and religious hatred after the Holocaust. But, in the U.S., 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.

## Found on mainstream platforms and fringe sites.

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. And there are "fringe" sites, often designed to appeal to extremists, which fester and tolerate hate speech.

## Tech companies have the right to "censor" hate speech.

The First Amendment applies to government, not to private companies. Social media and other privately owned sites and apps have the right to determine the type of speech they allow on their platform. Just as nudity is legal, it's generally not allowed on many mainstream platforms. Companies have the right to enforce terms of service or community guidelines that dictate what may or may not be posted on their platforms.

## A few things parents & educators can do to combat hate speech.

- Parents and educators can start by taking preventative action, by dealing with situations before they reach the hate speech level. Encourage empathy in children and remind them that, when engaging with others online, there is another person on the other side of the screen. Encourage 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 a 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. 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.
- Schools can foster a climate of tolerance and inclusion to both prevent and isolate hate speech incidents and create a social norm around acceptance of all students, regardless of who they are.
- Teachers can 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.
- Schools can implement digital citizenship programs to encourage students to be upstanders not bystanders.
- Educators and parents can teach by example, being sure their own words don't contribute to the problem.
- Schools may be able to take action if online hate speech impacts the school or any students or staff even if the hate speech did not take place on campus or during school hours.

*This Quick-Guide is based on the free booklet "The Parent & Educator Guide to Combatting Hate Speech" by Brittan Heller, J.D., and Larry Magid, Ed.D, at [ConnectSafely.org/hatespeech](http://ConnectSafely.org/hatespeech). Creative Common License - attribution required.*

