



# EXPLAINING EXTREMISM AND ADDRESSING ISLAMOPHOBIA

## PRACTICAL STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES FOR PARENTS & EDUCATORS

In the last months, the world has been shocked by a series of high-profile terrorist attacks in [Beirut](#), [Paris](#), [Mali](#), [Colorado Springs](#) and [San Bernardino](#), California. These atrocities took place in different parts of the world, but each was committed in the name of religion. All but one—the Colorado Springs massacre—were carried out by violent extremists who claim the mantle of Islam.

In our country, coverage of these events has dominated the media landscape, while the political response has reshaped the 2016 presidential campaign. In a series of recent polls, Americans have expressed increasing feelings of vulnerability and insecurity; a [New York Times/CBS News poll](#) released on December 10<sup>th</sup> found that fears of terrorism have spiked to highs not seen since the immediate aftermath of 9/11. This heightened anxiety has fueled a surge in anti-Muslim rhetoric. It's no surprise that Muslim leaders report a sharp escalation in violent [attacks against mosques—and people](#).

In the age of the 24-hour news cycle and saturation media coverage, there is no way to keep children from hearing the grim news about extremist ideologies and terrorist attacks. Nor is it possible to keep them from being exposed to the Islamophobic sentiments that are now so pervasive in our culture. As the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) has documented, rates of bullying against Muslim students have been high since 9/11. Even before the Paris attacks, the California chapter of CAIR released [survey results](#) showing that more than half of California's Muslim students endure bullying based on their religion—including being called terrorists and rag-heads, asked if they are members of ISIS or the Taliban, and told to go back to their countries. Sikh groups see similar trends—not because Sikhs are Muslims, but because they are often mistaken for Muslims. In its 2014 report, [Go Home, Terrorist](#), the Sikh Coalition found that more than 50 percent of Sikh children are bullied in school, a figure that rises to 67 percent for turbaned Sikh boys.

In the current climate, the problem of religious-based bullying is all but certain to get worse—as [anecdotal reporting](#) already indicates. For the young people who are targeted—and for those who live in fear of being targeted—this backlash will likely have devastating consequences, producing lasting feelings of exclusion, marginalization, shame, and low self-esteem. That's where parents and educators come in. They can help prevent this from happening in their learning communities.

But this is a challenge. Whether parents or educators have to answer a difficult question or respond to an act of bullying, many will find themselves with the daunting task of explaining extremism and addressing Islamophobia. Here are five strategies for addressing these difficult issues:

1. **Expand childrens' and students' knowledge about Islam and other religions.** Anti-Muslim bullying stems from prejudice and stereotyping, which in turn stem from ignorance. A 2010 survey by the [Pew Research Center](#) revealed that many Americans lack basic [religious literacy](#). Like adults, most

kids know very little about the beliefs and practices of the major world religions, including Islam, Sikhism, Judaism and other minority faiths in the U.S. If all they know about Muslims is what they see in the media, students may jump to the conclusion that all Muslims are terrorists, and that all terrorists are Muslims. With a greater understanding of Islam, young people will gain the context they need to differentiate between the mainstream followers of the religion and its extremists—and to debunk the stereotypes they see portrayed the media.

2. **Go beyond textbook descriptions of Islam and other religions.** Allow children and students to gain insights into the lived experiences of real Muslims by allowing them to read personal narratives and short stories, interact in person or electronically with guest speakers and interview community members. This will not only make the lessons more meaningful, it will enable kids to see the diversity that exists within Islam and other religious communities. Young people who recognize the diversity within a religious group will be less likely to accept sweeping generalizations about its members.
3. **Demonstrate that extremists represent a very small minority within Islam.** It's important to emphasize that 1.6 billion people around the world practice Islam, and only a small minority of them supports extremist organizations or terrorist acts. A [2013 survey](#) by the Pew Research Center found that Muslims around the world reject violence in the name of Islam, with clear majorities in seven of the eleven countries surveyed saying that “suicide bombings or other acts of violence that target civilians are *never* justified.” More [recent Pew data](#) shows that “people in countries with large Muslim populations are as concerned as Western nations about the threat of Islamic extremism, and have become increasingly concerned in recent years.” In recent weeks, ordinary Muslims across the world have taken to social media, using the hashtags [#NotInMyName](#) and [#YouAintNoMuslimBruv](#) to condemn religious extremism and violence.
4. **Make it clear that extremism is not unique to Islam or any religion.** Examples of violent extremism can be found in all religions, from [Christian Identity](#) groups in the U.S. to [Buddhist supremacist](#) groups in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Emphasize that extremism is a complex phenomenon, and religious extremists often distort religious texts and teachings to mask political and economic goals. Acts of terrorism can *never* be explained by the terrorists' religious affiliation alone.
5. **Teach youth to recognize Islamophobia and understand its consequences for their Muslim classmates and neighbors.** Help young people identify Islamophobia and recognize it for what it is—a form of bigotry that does great harm to individuals and communities. Expose children and students to stories of people who have been hurt by Islamophobia, whether in the form of discrimination, bullying or hate crimes. By encouraging students to reflect on the real-life experiences of Islamophobia, parents and educators promote important socio-emotional goals including the development of empathy and moral reasoning. They help their children and students see Muslims as individuals rather than solely as members of a group—a crucial step in preventing and overcoming prejudice.

In a time of rising fear and xenophobia, it's crucial that parents and educators rise to the challenge of explaining extremism and addressing Islamophobia. Use these strategies to promote knowledge and understanding rather than suspicion and prejudice.

**Resources:**

- PBS lesson exploring the basic beliefs of Islam:  
<http://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/islam08.socst.world.glob.lppillars/the-five-pillars-of-islam/>.
- Teaching Tolerance lesson on *Debunking Stereotypes about Muslims and Islam*:  
<http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/debunking-stereotypes-about-muslims-and-islam>.
- [\*Religious Diversity in the Classroom: Fostering a Culture of Respect\*](#): a webinar created by Tanenbaum and Teaching Tolerance about how to create safe learning environments for students of all backgrounds.

*This article was originally written by Tanenbaum for School's Out Washington's [blog](#).*