

# EX POST PAPER

# RAN YOUNG: Holding difficult conversations

## Summary

Frontline practitioners are in the unique position of having to safeguard vulnerable young people while also having an opportunity to interact with them. From the security sector to health and education, every frontline practitioner engaging with young people will at some point come up against a difficult conversation. The meeting in Stockholm, Sweden, produced new recommendations to complement existing advice from frontline practitioners on how to hold difficult conversations with young people. The contributions from RAN YOUNG are presented in this paper. We hope that these new perspectives on how to hold difficult conversations will prove particularly helpful for people working in the fields of youth, families and communities, health and social care and education.

This paper is produced by Deeqo Shire [Integrate UK together] with the RAN CoE. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the European Commission.

## Introduction

What advice have frontline practitioners already provided on the topic of holding difficult conversations? The RAN YOUNG meeting in Sweden was an opportunity to find out.

RAN YOUNG is the youth platform of Europe's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN); its participants come from a diverse range of backgrounds and hold different experiences in the prevention of radicalisation. The platform brings together activists, educators, social workers, non-governmental representatives, campaigners and even those directly affected by radicalisation.

The first section of this paper discusses the topic of 'taboo', and the implications it has for difficult conversations and the prevention of radicalisation. The paper then looks at existing work on holding difficult conversations, and offers new insights from RAN YOUNG, based upon videos and roleplay.

### The topic of taboo

Taboos form an interesting concept in the context of radicalisation. Every society, culture, religion and background has always had taboos of one form or another. A taboo can be defined as a social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice of forbidding association with a particular person, place or thing.<sup>1</sup> Previous RAN meetings have touched upon taboos and controversial topics for young people and social workers<sup>2</sup>. RAN YOUNG participants helped organise a breakout session addressing the question: **'what are in your opinion the five most relevant taboo topics for young people?'**

The discussion led to a diverse range of answers and insights, stemming from different backgrounds. From the many ideas, a number of conclusions could be drawn:

**1. Sexuality** – of the nature of one's sexual feelings towards another person. Sexuality is taboo amongst young people. The participants felt sexuality needs to 'normalised' as a conversation topic.

Ultimately, the topic of sexuality can be a factor in allowing extremist spaces to exist – especially if young people are not educated to see sexuality as something normal, and if they are not empowered to stand up against discrimination.

**2. Identity** – can be used by extremists when grooming young people. It is also important to note the role of identity for the victims of extremism. Islamophobic and anti-Semitic attacks are just two forms of discrimination-based violent extremism. Identity can also lead to forms of exclusivity.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.academypublication.com/issues/past/tpls/vol03/12/23.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> RAN YF&C Issue paper (2018) 'Discussing taboos and controversial topics'. This will be available on the RAN website in 2018 [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network_en)

### Exclusivity of identity

**Intersectional feminism is new in France. Feminist discourses in France were very exclusive for certain women. If you want to talk about the hijab, please invite women who wear it and not let white men talk about it. Give voice to Muslim women. This could be done by initiatives that media never show. Many events are created such as forums. Any type of artists and intellectuals are invited to speak and empower each other. Not to victimise, but to empower. To speak for themselves.**

**3. Religion** – negative associations with religion can make some people feel uncomfortable practising. In turn, this can make religion a taboo. In addition, some young people feel that believing in God comes with a stigma that leaves them feeling isolated. Constant attacks by society – whether in the news, at school, or during political events mean that young people often feel obliged to overcompensate their religious beliefs by always being in defensive mode. This climate can also result in young people hiding away from religion and being scared to practice openly. They are apprehensive about discrimination and about being attacked.

**4. Unresolved historical past** – whether in relation to their own experiences or those of their parents (generational trauma) also makes young people feel uncomfortable. Generational trauma may be defined as a ‘secondary form of trauma that results from the transfer of traumatic experiences from parents to their children.’ This form of trauma is also referred to as intergenerational, trans-generational, or secondary trauma. The trigger could be any number of disturbing experiences, such as atrocities of war, domestic violence, or even the psychological manifestation of Holocaust experiences in the lives of survivor offspring.<sup>3</sup> The RAN YOUNG participants discussed how talk of African slavery and colonialism are still silenced in wider communities. This can make young people feel ashamed, embarrassed and even neglected in relation to their historical pain and struggles.

**5. Mental health** – the RAN YOUNG participants felt that there is a generational misunderstanding when it comes to the topic of mental health. Their parents’ generation doesn’t understand how serious mental health is, and that therefore it often trivialised, or seen to be something that can be cured without professional support. As a result, young people feel lost and do not speak about serious mental health concerns.

### Existing work on holding difficult conversations

Advice already exists for frontline practitioners who need to have difficult conversations with vulnerable young people. Handbooks such as ‘The contribution of youth work to preventing marginalisation and violent radicalisation’ by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for education culture were produced in 2017. It targets social and youth workers that work with young people, particularly those susceptible to

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<sup>3</sup> Marilyn Doucet & Martin Rovers (2010) Generational Trauma, Attachment, and Spiritual/Religious Interventions, *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 15:2, 93-105, DOI: [10.1080/15325020903373078](https://doi.org/10.1080/15325020903373078)

radicalisation. The toolbox covers different approaches according to the 'level' of prevention required: generic, targeted and indicated prevention <sup>4</sup>.

Mental health workers also face difficult conversations with their clients, including vulnerable young people.

At national level, some countries, such as the United Kingdom's National Health Services (NHS) have implemented training schemes on the prevention of radicalisation. Radicalisation is defined as the "psychological process where vulnerable and/or susceptible individuals are groomed to engage into criminal/terrorist activity" <sup>5</sup>. The training covers ways to safeguard vulnerable young people, spotting the signs and symptoms of radicalisation, and how to report or refer.

A lot of work has also been done in the education sector, particularly in terms of counter-narratives and critical thinking. This is helpful not only in terms of preventing radicalisation, but also for holding difficult conversations. RAN EDU has contributed here, with a paper on fake news, propaganda and conspiracy theories in the classroom <sup>6</sup>, including suggestions on how to deal with these controversial topics.

## RAN: Dealing with difficult conversations

RAN has produced three short videos that begin with a potentially explosive scenario involving politics, immigration and extreme views. The videos also present related experiences and recommendations from exemplary frontline practitioners from three working groups. RAN YOUNG participants also have their own ideas on how to deal with these difficult conversations and events, as presented below.

### RAN Youth, families and communities: difficult conversations

Scenario: a teenager, surrounded by friends, starts to graffiti the word 'NOT' on a poster displaying the words 'Refugees welcome'. A youth worker sees that something is not right, and calls out to the young teenager. The short video ends with the youth worker confused, wondering how to deal with the sensitive situation.

#### Recommendations from RAN YOUNG

1. It is important to distinguish and detach the politics from the act. The act might be political or be the result of extreme political views – the boy may not want refugees in his country, which might be evidence of xenophobic and racist views. The difficult conversation with the young person should avoid politicising the matter, and should instead reinforce the

#### Recommendations from the YF&C working group:

- **Do not trivialise or penalise the individual;**
- **Make the person aware what he or she is doing (if illegal) is against the law – talk about the consequences of the young person's actions;**
- **Show interest and respect – this allows the young person to demonstrate a level of equality in the conversation.**

<sup>4</sup> <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0ad09926-a8b1-11e7-837e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/safeguarding/our-work/prevent>

<sup>6</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-edu/docs/ran\\_edu\\_dealing\\_fake\\_news\\_conspiracy\\_theories\\_propaganda\\_classroom\\_29-30\\_11\\_2017\\_.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-edu/docs/ran_edu_dealing_fake_news_conspiracy_theories_propaganda_classroom_29-30_11_2017_.pdf)

importance of humanity For example, pointing out that refugees are people, not just a concept, and that the graffiti will therefore hurt real people, will counter the dehumanisation of refugees.

2. The youth worker should connect with the youngsters by expressing his or her own opinion – this gives the young person the confidence to expressing an opinion. The key here is to allow space for an opinion to be expressed, but also to counter that opinion through personal experiences and perspective. This should link back to the ideals of commonality and humanity.

3. Take a stand on the actions and make clear that you are a responsible adult and professional. It is important to reinforce that what the teenager is doing is wrong – vandalism is illegal and wrong.

### **RAN YOUNG’S do’s and don’ts for RAN Y&FC**

Do’s	Don’ts
<b>Show the young person around the space in which the conversation will take place, and highlight that the environment is a safe space. This should help them to feel more comfortable.</b>	Intimidate the young person or enter their personal space. Some RAN YOUNG participants with experience of such situations reported feeling intimidated by some youth and social workers.
<b>Be transparent and let the young person know what the conversation is about, who you are and what responsibilities you have.</b>	Don’t share information with the young person that might derail the conversation. For example, don’t be direct and say, for example, “your parents told me that you have been violent”. This might make them angry, and might derail the conversation. The young persons may then lose trust in the social worker and/or youth worker.

#### [RAN Education: difficult conversations](#)

The short video shows a classroom in which the teacher seeks to reassure students following an attack on a soldier near the school. The conversation is quickly interrupted by a student who says the only people who should feel unsafe are soldiers. The conversation starts to become intense, leaving the teacher confused, lost and uncomfortable.

*Recommendations from the EDU working group*

- Focus on a sense of belonging and common understanding of cohesion.
- Ask the students to calm down.
- Facilitate the conversation, do not impose on your own views.
- Reinforce the school's values and the institution's ethos, which directs the students back into a sense of understanding and common ground.

*Recommendations from RAN YOUNG*

1. Teachers should facilitate debates and difficult conversations. **Educating educators** through existing toolkits for example through **extreme dialogue**, would provide practical support.
2. It is important that teachers **remain neutral** in the debates – even if their political opinion or views clash with the young person's opinion.

**3. Have rules and define goals for creating a safe space.** This should not involve convincing students to think a certain way, but giving them an opportunity to share their opinions on specific topics. It is also critical for teachers to explain that the students' opinions might change, and that this should not be regarded negatively.

**RAN YOUNG'S do's and don'ts for RAN EDU**

Do's	Don'ts
<p><b>Show interest and take your students seriously. This is integral for a productive session, because as the facilitators, teachers need to engage with students. Use techniques like, 'playing devil's advocate' and setting out hypothetical scenarios.</b></p>	<p>Control the narrative. Sometimes teachers do this without realising. Teachers should always allow students the opportunity to speak. Teachers should be able to listen to the views expressed by the students, even if they are unsettling.</p>
<p><b>Make sure the lesson plan involves a counter-narrative. This is a message that offers a positive alternative to extremist propaganda. <sup>7</sup></b></p>	<p>Become angry. This can disrupt the purpose of the conversation and debate. It is important that teachers remain calm, even if the conversation becomes offensive/derogative.</p>

**RAN Health and Social Care: difficult conversations**

The video opens with a boy waiting for a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist is firm and starts to talk to the young person about who she is, why the young person is there and what they will be doing. It also includes information on confidentiality and assessment. The young person ends with "I am only here because of my parents. I'm not mad."

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Impact-of-Counter-Narratives\\_ONLINE\\_1.pdf](https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Impact-of-Counter-Narratives_ONLINE_1.pdf)

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**Recommendations from H&SC working group**

- Reassure and empathise
  - Don't try to be an expert on radicalisation or politics.
  - Layout of the setting is important – make sure the young person is comfortable.
  - Listen – let the young person express and explain him or herself.
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**Recommendations from RAN YOUNG**

1. Typically, young people do not like when professionals say they understand how a young person is feeling. It normally shuts them down and the conversation is not resolved. One key thing in preventing and holding conversations is to **remain natural, authentic and organic**. This means being honest in the conversations – for instance, “I haven’t been through that experience or feeling. However, I am here to listen.” This is instead of, “I understand what you are going through.” The participants believe that remaining natural, honest and authentic will make it easier for the young person to engage in the difficult conversation.

2. Young people are often reluctant to communicate and might feel embarrassed or ‘not normal’, when confronted by a mental health worker. **Breaking the ice** will help the patient to feel **more comfortable** and help the practitioner to gain a better understanding. This could be done through a storytelling session and activities to make sure the young person is comfortable before the real conversation starts.

3. Finally, practitioners should have a diverse range of backgrounds in terms of **gender, race and age**. One participant referred to evidence suggesting that when young offenders going through rehabilitation return to society, the success rate is higher when the mentor they are working with is from the same cultural background or shares the same culture<sup>8</sup>. Young people interact well when the practitioner understands their identity, whether that relates to gender, race or age. As a result, practitioners who identify with the young person are more likely to achieve results. If the practitioners do not come from a background that is similar to that of the young person, **cultural awareness training** would be appropriate to avoid misconceptions and stigmatisation.

**RAN YOUNG’S do’s and don’ts for RAN H&SC**

Do's	Don'ts
<p><b>It is important to ask a young vulnerable person open questions. Close questions can lead to ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers, while open questions normally lead to longer and more interesting answers.</b></p>	<p>Show ‘false empathy’ or say “I understand what you are going through”. This trivialises the situation and might make the young person reluctant to speak.</p>

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bureaumhr.nl/vrijkomen-gevangenis-na-detentie.html#forsa-prejob>.

<p><b>Be patient. It is important to give space and time for the young person to speak. Overloading him or her with questions and concerns might make the young person reluctant to speak.</b></p>	<p>Talk too much – or ask trigger questions; this can derail the conversation. Information-sharing should ensure that the mental health worker knows what questions and topics are triggers. This implies collaboration with safeguarding leads (teachers, social workers, police, other frontline-professionals).</p>
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**Extreme dialogue**

**Extreme Dialogue aims to build resilience to radicalisation among young people through a series of open-access educational resources and highly engaging short films that foster critical thinking and digital literacy skills. It encourages safe, constructive discussions around extremism and radicalisation in educational or community settings in the UK, Canada, Germany and Hungary <sup>9</sup>.**

## Conclusion

The meeting in Stockholm, Sweden, was intended to develop new recommendations on how to hold difficult conversations. This ex post paper discussed the results from the meeting.

It is important that young people are involved in discussions on prevention issues and that they are able to propose recommendations. The RAN YOUNG participants in Stockholm all came from different backgrounds within different EU countries, which provided for a diverse range of opinions and views. RAN YOUNG brings together very different individuals, such as educators, social workers, non-governmental organisation representatives, campaigners and even those directly affected by radicalisation.

The meeting and workshops led to new perspectives through the use of creativity, and discussions on different experiences and perspectives of difficult conversations.

One RAN YOUNG participant explained to the group that he had asked some younger people (aged 12-16) in Sweden about taboos. The youngsters' responses to those outlined by RAN YOUNG. This gives some indication that the ideas and opinions of RAN YOUNG are likely to be representative of the ideas and opinions of young people at large.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://extremedialogue.org/about/>



## APPENDIX

1. <http://extremedialogue.org/about/>
2. <http://www.academypublication.com/issues/past/tpls/vol03/12/23.pdf>.
3. <http://www.bureaumhr.nl/vrijkomen-gevangenis-na-detentie.html#forsa-prejob>.
4. <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0ad09926-a8b1-11e7-837e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>
5. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/safeguarding/our-work/prevent>
6. [https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Impact-of-Counter-Narratives\\_ONLINE\\_1.pdf](https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Impact-of-Counter-Narratives_ONLINE_1.pdf)
7. Marilyn Doucet & Martin Rovers (2010). Generational Trauma, Attachment, and Spiritual/Religious Interventions, *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 15:2, 93-105, DOI: [10.1080/15325020903373078](https://doi.org/10.1080/15325020903373078)
8. RAN YF&C Issue paper (2018) 'Discussing taboos and controversial topics' (available on the RAN website in 2018)
9. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-calendar\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-calendar_en)