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Parents Warned of Rising Terror Risks for Children Online

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UK authorities have issued a warning to parents about the increasing risk of children being exposed to online radicalisation. Security services and child safety experts are raising the alarm over a surge in extremist recruitment, online grooming, and the influence of hostile states targeting vulnerable young people through social media and encrypted messaging apps.

MI5 Director General Ken McCallum has highlighted a sharp rise in youth involvement in terrorism-related investigations, revealing that around 13 per cent of those under MI5 surveillance are now under the age of 18, a figure that has tripled over the last three years. The National Crime Agency (NCA) has also reported the emergence of “Com networks”, online groups primarily made up of teenage boys who share extremist, misogynistic and violent content. These groups have been linked to cybercrime, child exploitation, and a significant rise in online abuse since 2022.

Worryingly, some young people have also been manipulated by state-linked proxy networks. Commander Dominic Murphy of the Metropolitan Police said there have been instances of UK teenagers becoming involved, sometimes unknowingly, in activities tied to foreign governments, including Russia and Iran. In several cases, teens were suspected of acting on behalf of foreign intelligence or engaging in sabotage efforts.

Alongside radicalisation, the broader threat of online harm remains high. Recent surveys show that up to 70 percent of children aged 9 to 13 have encountered disturbing content online, such as bullying, false information, or violent imagery. A growing number of parents report serious concerns about their children’s mental health and wellbeing, with over a quarter saying online experiences have led to anxiety, aggression or withdrawal.

In response, security and child protection officials are urging parents to remain alert and proactive. Recommended steps include setting up parental controls, monitoring screen time, and keeping communication open so that children feel safe discussing their online experiences. New tactics being used by bad actors, such as AI-generated extremist

propaganda, are making it harder to detect threats and easier for children to be influenced without realizing it.

Legal experts and counter-extremism campaigners are calling for tougher regulation of digital tools and platforms that could be exploited to target children. Meanwhile, education leaders are under increasing pressure to strengthen digital literacy and critical thinking within the school curriculum.

The message from authorities is clear: the online environment is no longer just a space of casual interaction. It is now a frontline where young minds may be targeted by harmful ideologies. Parental vigilance and early conversations are essential to help keep children safe in this evolving digital landscape.