

Going back to the basics

Spending time with children is key to countering religious extremism: Analysts

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SINGAPORE — The medium of choice for the religious radicals' propaganda is the Internet. So, can the guardians of a generation weaned on the web guide their children adequately if cyberspace is an unfamiliar territory to them?

It would be advantageous if parents were au fait with the Internet, said S Rajaratnam School of International Studies research analyst Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin, as this would allow them to detect warning signs in a child not just in their offline behaviour, but also online.

But this does not mean parents who are not Internet savvy would be hindered, she added.

It boils down to the basics: Spending time with their children and discussing the issue of religious extremism.

"The problem may very much be slanted towards an online one, but it is the offline counter efforts of close ones that would have more impact on the individual," said Ms Nur Azlin.

In fact, Institute of Policy Studies adjunct research associate Azhar Ghani believes it may be unrealistic to expect "untrained citizens" to know enough about the extremist links online.

Radical Yemeni-American ideologue Al Awlaki, for instance, may have been known to the intelligence community, but he only came to public prominence after being linked to the Fort Hood shooting in the United States, said Mr Azhar.

He suggested that parents turn to the reference points in Singapore — the office of the Mufti, registered religious teachers and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) — perhaps with more being done to publicise these resources.

Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim had said one way to counter such radicalisation was to engage Internet users through religious education programmes that have been revamped to attract the young.

One of them is Invoke.sg, an online social portal moderated by local religious teachers that allows users to post questions about Islam.

Meanwhile, blocking radical websites would be futile, Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng told Parliament on Monday, as new ones would crop up.

He added that families must take the lead, as "early intervention is the best way to save a relative from the road to radicalisation".

However, this is the challenge, social workers told MediaCorp.

The reason: Based on their experience, there are some Malay-Muslim families who do not practise open communication, preferring to leave such matters to schools and self-help groups.

Ms Muzaiyanah Hamzah, president of help-group Kelab Belia, agreed: "The truth is Malay/Muslim parents aren't comfortable with open conversation with their children, preferring to leave matters like radicalisation or even pre-marital sex to external agencies ... I think it'll take a long time for that attitude to change."

Some parents say it is hard to keep track of all their children's activities, given their busy schedules.

Mrs Rosmah Ali, 44, said: "I do try to be open with my 14-year-old daughter in matters of sex and peer pressure.

"I try to tell her to ignore extreme religious ideas, but there's too many out there to keep track of ... That's why I prefer to leave matters like that to her religious teachers."