



Andy Reid, Buddy Up CEO (Right) speaking with a young person in Southeast England, Photo by Buddy Up Charity UK.

## **"A wild west of opinions"**

### **The rise of hate among young boys in English schools**

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Experts are becoming concerned around the presence of misogyny, harassment and hate speech in UK schools (Plan International UK, 2024; UK Parliament, 2023). Local reports of teachers refusing to work with certain classes because of the aggressive identity-based hate they receive by students have drawn concern. Concern by teaching staff has, in some cases, led to them refusing to teach certain cohorts because of the aggressive identity-based hate that they experience. Misogyny in English schools is not only present, but changing, as technology transforms the form hate and harassment take for young people.

One example of this includes cases of young people receiving AI deepfakes of themselves within sexual abuse imagery, an issue which has been reported for several years as Generative AI technologies have made this possible (Internet Matters, 2024). Through the review of interviews with youth work professionals in late 2025, this article investigates youth hate in England, suggesting that it is symptomatic of wider issues such as the defunding of youth services, wider political shifts, and the influence of online opinions.

The research used for this article comes from my time working at Buddy Up, a small English charity supporting young people's mental health through one-to-one support in schools, and now also provides workshops on hate and misogyny. During my time at Buddy Up, my colleagues working directly with students were shocked at a rise in hate speech and aggression, particularly in young boys. Andy Reid, the CEO of Buddy Up commented, *"when we spoke to the schools we partner with, they all saw this increasing in the last year or so, particularly amongst the younger students aged around 12-14, so we're collaborating to try and combat this. A lot of these views, when challenged, seem to come from online figures like Andrew Tate, but are also reinforced by other students at school."*

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Holly Bloom, a mental health specialist and member of Buddy Up's advisory board, attributes much of this hate to how young people use online spaces to search for their identity, by arguing that: *"because of the lack of controls, a large number of children are trying to seek their identity via social media in ways that are unhealthy"*. When confronted with the internet, Bloom explains how many young people are unable to discern what is true or otherwise, *"historically, young people would almost have to try to research and seek out different opinions, which were often based in real life. You might come across another peer in your school who had quite extreme opinions, but you would have a debate with them. Now we're seeing more young people coming through who are exposed to these types of beliefs who might have a comorbid mental health difficulty, and they're not necessarily getting that healthy debate about people's opinions anymore. [Online] they are faced with, effectively, a wild west of opinions."*



School classroom. Photo by DeltaWorks.

As young people are faced with this sea of opinions, larger changes in our media landscape offer clear explanations for the prevalence of radical opinions among young people. Gone are the traditional signposts of authority and legitimacy in media, such as being an “expert” on TV news. Instead, young people navigate algorithms wherein anyone can have a voice, and the “legitimacy” is granted to those whose voice is loudest and with whom you personally agree most. Bloom highlights that these cases are worsened by AI use, where human opinions are replaced by an artificial patchwork of ideas.

Young people are also influenced by the wider events in English politics and society. From far-right nationalist protests over the past two summers (Vinter et. al, 2025), or the proliferation of English flags on the streets students live on (the flying of which is commonly associated with far-right, racialised, exclusionary views on citizenship)(Shanafelt, 2016), to the divisive and discriminatory language found at the highest levels of British politics (Bolet and Foos, 2025); extremism and racism are a part of these young people’s environments. Reid explains, *“we’ve had a lot of discussions with students about the English flags, many of which are being put up around the schools here. Many students support it, they argue is to show national pride, but for many it is seen as being rooted in racism. When you drill down to it, their views about being British is about being white, born here, and generally middle class.”*

Tackling this rhetoric among young people is further complicated when it is supported at home. A 2023 report by *Internet Matters* (2023), a UK non-profit, found that 32% of fathers hold favourable opinions towards Andrew Tate, (charged sex trafficker and “misogynist influencer”) (BBC News, 2025b).<sup>1</sup> This figure rises to over 50% amongst young fathers (aged 25-34) (Internet Matters, 2023). Reid comments, “*there’s a risk that by challenging those views you will get issues from their parents*”, which Reid argues not only suggests that these views are heavily influenced by parents, but makes it challenging to address without risking backlash by parents. So, how does Buddy Up address this in their work with young people? Alongside their one-to-one sessions with young people, Buddy Up provides assemblies and workshops about these topics, as well as support groups for students impacted by hate to talk about their experiences.

More broadly, Bloom calls for the need to fund youth groups. The high cost of living means that many parents cannot afford access to paid community spaces for their children, and the huge defunding of youth groups during the past decades (Economics Observatory, 2024) often leaves young people no place to go but the internet.

To conclude, whilst young people may be gaining national political attention for their behaviour (British Government, 2025), this is not an isolated issue. Youth hate reflects a wider shift in how our communities and our politics function. Young people are not immune to rhetoric found in national politics, and when they have no spaces in their communities, the online world acts as a poor but ever available substitute. The views that young people are exposed to online will inevitably go on to affect their behaviour in schools. Whilst internet moderation is hugely important, much of this issue starts with how we speak to our young people in our communities, and whether they feel a part of those communities at all.

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