OJJDP
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Parents' Guide to GANGS

A guide designed to provide parents with answers to common questions about gangs to enable them to recognize and prevent gang involvement.

NGC
NATIONAL GANG CENTER

Prevent Gang Involvement

Introduction

Parents play an important role in keeping young people out of gangs. There are many things parents can do to help their children stay away from gangs, including monitoring their activities, fostering close relationships with them, and using positive and consistent discipline. However, parents often lack factual information about gangs. This guide is designed to provide parents with answers to common questions about gangs to enable them to recognize and prevent gang involvement.

Why do youth join gangs?

There are a lot of reasons why youth get involved in gangs. Sometimes youth get "pulled" into a gang because they think they might earn a lot of money and gain status, or they may think it is a good way to show family, neighborhood, or cultural pride. Other times youth get "pushed" into a gang because they are afraid for their safety and think a gang will provide protection from neighborhood crime and violence, or they have been pressured by the gang to join.

What are the consequences of gang involvement?

Even though some youth believe that gang involvement might provide safety, protection, excitement, and opportunities to earn money, the truth is that gang involvement is very dangerous and limits opportunities for the future. Research has shown that youth who are gang-involved are more likely to commit crimes, which increases their chances of being arrested and incarcerated, and to be victims of violence themselves. Young girls are especially vulnerable to sexual victimization. Youth who get caught up in gangs are also less likely to graduate high school, less likely to find stable jobs, and more likely to have alcohol and drug problems and even health problems later in life.

How do I know if my child is involved in a gang?

The most common age that youth join a gang is around 15, but the early adolescent years (12–14 years of age) are a crucial time when youth are exposed to gangs and may consider joining a gang. While it is more common for boys to get involved in gangs, girls also face similar pushes and pulls and can also become involved in gangs. Gang involvement can be fluid, as some youth move in and out of gang-involved friendship groups. Thus, parents should pay attention to even small changes in behavior.

Common Gang Identifiers for Parents

Colors

While some gangs have reduced their use of specific colors to avoid identification by law enforcement, many gangs still use one or more colors as a symbol to represent themselves. These colors may be worn on shirts; bandanas; multicolored or single-colored beads; and belts, hats, shoes, shoelaces, hair bands, and jewelry. These colors may also appear in other possessions such as school supplies and room decorations.

Symbols and Numbers

Symbols and numbers have special significance within the gang culture. Common symbols of some of the large gangs in the United States include stars (five- and six-pointed), crowns, pitchforks (pointing up or down), three dots in a triangle, and numbers. These characters do not have the same meaning across the country, and symbolism varies regionally. Contact your local school resource officer or other law enforcement representative to get specific information on the meanings of unidentifiable symbols or numbers you may see in your area.

Clothing and Apparel

Gang-involved youth may dress a specific way to identify with a particular gang, set, clique, or crew. This might include clothing or bandanas worn only in certain colors; pants worn well below the waist; gang-themed T-shirts with pictures of gangs, prison scenes, graffiti, or slogans; two- or three-toned bead necklaces; or colored fabric belts, occasionally with metal buckles that bear the initial(s) of the gang. However, gang clothing trends change and are often different from one place to another, so clothing alone may not be enough to indicate a youth's affiliation with a particular gang.

Graffiti

Gangs use graffiti to mark their territory, brag about their reputation, mourn fallen friends, and threaten or challenge rival gangs. For this reason, graffiti can be very dangerous and should be removed as soon as possible. Youth who are engaging in graffiti may have items such as spray paint, spray-paint plastic tips, wide-tipped markers, or sketchbooks with graffiti works in progress. They may also have paint on their clothing, backpacks, or other items. For helpful information on graffiti, go to: http://www.graffitihurts.org/.

Social Media

The Internet has provided a new medium for gang communication and promotion. Social media Web sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and others allow gang-involved individuals to represent their gang affiliation, taunt others, post threats, and organize and promote their gangs' activities. Social media escalates the potential for violence, since it reaches such a large audience.

Gang-Influenced Music and Movies

Gangsta/gangster rap is a style of rap music characterized by violent, tough-talking lyrics that glorify street-gang culture. Popular movies also focus on street gangs and their activities. Youth may show their interest in gangs through fascination with music and movies that portray street-gang culture. However, interest in these types of entertainment alone may not be enough to indicate involvement in a gang.

Sports Items

Letters, colors, or symbols associated with professional sports teams may have specific gang meanings in local street gang culture. Sports apparel may be purchased in nontraditional colors to correspond with a gang's colors or may be altered with graffiti or extra symbols or writing.

Tattoos

Gang-related tattoos are used to show affiliation, rank, crimes committed, racial and ethnic alliances, and loyalty to a gang. These tattoos often include the name, initials, or symbols of a specific gang and may be found on the hands, neck, face, chest, back, or arms.

Hand Signs

Some gangs use specific hand gestures and handshakes to communicate their affiliation with the gang, to issue threats or challenges to rival gangs, or to communicate in code when authority figures are present. These gestures can be known as "throwing up" or "stacking."

Other changes to look for:

- Withdrawing from family activities and planned events.
- Changed academic performance or declining school attendance.
- Defiant or confrontational behavior, such as talking back, verbal abuse, name-calling, and disrespect for parental authority.
- Staying out late without reason.
- Unusual desire for secrecy.
- Angry outbursts, excessive aggression.
- Excessive worry about safety; constantly surveying surroundings for danger.
- Sudden negative attitudes about law enforcement or adults in positions of authority (school officials or teachers).
- Change in attitude about school, church, or other normal activities or change in behavior when attending these activities.
- Drastic changes in personal style.
- Withdrawal from longtime friends and forming bonds with an entirely new group of friends.
- Suspected use of drugs, such as alcohol, inhalants, and narcotics.
- Possession of firearms, ammunition, or other weapons.
- Nonaccidental physical injuries (such as evidence of being beaten or injuries to hands and knuckles from fighting).
- Unexplained cash or goods, such as clothing, video games, or jewelry.

How Can I Help My Child?

Talk to your child about the negative consequences of gang behaviors and ways to avoid them

Be clear that you disapprove of gangs and do not want to see your child hurt or arrested. Be firm in your expectations that your child should NOT:

- Associate with any gang-involved individuals.
- Hang out where gang members congregate.
- Attend any party or social event sponsored by gangs.
- Use any kind of hand or finger signs that may be meaningful to gangs, especially in pictures (even as a joke).
- Wear clothing that may have meaning to gangs in your area. (Explain to your child that these clothing items can put him or her in danger and that you will not purchase them or allow them to be worn.)

Get to know your child's friends and the friends' parents

Be aware of their attitudes toward drugs, alcohol, and gangs. When children start to feel pressure to use drugs or join gangs, it usually comes from their friends.

Familiarize yourself with the Internet, popular slang terms, and your child's online activity

Communicate with your child about the potential negative consequences of online activity, including what he or she may post online. Spend time online with your child. Ask your child to show you his or her favorite online activities, sites, and online contacts. Finally, keep the computer in a common area and utilize the computer's and Web sites' parental controls to limit the child's access to Web sites and social media.

Talk to your child about ways to deal with pressure from friends

Help your child practice simple ways to respond to peer pressure. For example, if your child is challenged by a peer who says, "If you were my friend, you would," your child can respond, "If you were my friend, you wouldn't ask." Then, he or she should walk away.

Limit interaction with gang-involved individuals

One of the strongest risk factors for joining a gang is living in the same house as someone who is involved in gangs. If your child has older siblings or other relatives in your home who are associated with gangs, be very watchful of the influence they have on your child, and intervene immediately if your child starts to copy their dress, attitudes, and/or behaviors.

Set firm limits with your child

Children and teenagers need to clearly know what is expected of them and the consequences for acting otherwise. When your child misbehaves, be sure to use fair and consistent discipline, while demonstrating unconditional love and support for your child.

Plan family time

Make time for your family to play, eat meals together, take trips (even to local parks or activities), keep family traditions, and have family meetings to talk about plans, feelings, and complaints.

For More Information

For more information, please visit our Web site at www.nationalgangcenter.gov. There are additional resources, such as the video "Why Youth Join Gangs" and a page dedicated to "Frequently Asked Questions About Gangs," that will provide information regarding gang joining and gang membership.

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