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For more gang-related information and materials, contact the **National Gang Center™**

Post Office Box 12729
Tallahassee, Florida 32317
Phone: (850) 385-0600, Ext. 224
Fax: (850) 386-5356
E-mail: information@nationalgangcenter.gov
Web site: www.nationalgangcenter.gov



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Parents' Guide to Gangs

This guide is designed to provide parents with information in order to recognize and prevent gang involvement.



Introduction

Research indicates that parents play a pivotal role in keeping young people out of gangs. Negative influences within the family—including domestic violence, child abuse, harsh or inconsistent parenting practices, and/or drug/alcohol abuse by family members—can increase the risk that a youth will join a gang.

Parents can protect their children from gang activity through taking positive actions, such as monitoring their children's activities, fostering close relationships with them, and using positive discipline strategies. However, parents often lack factual information about gangs.



Behaviors Associated With Joining a Gang

The early adolescent years (12–14 years of age) are a crucial time when youths are exposed to gangs and may consider joining a gang. Youths who are becoming involved in a gang may exhibit the following behaviors:



Negative changes in behavior, such as:

- ✓ Withdrawing from family.
- ✓ Declining school attendance, performance, or behavior.
- ✓ Staying out late without reason.
- ✓ Unusual desire for secrecy.
- ✓ Confrontational behavior, such as talking back, verbal abuse, name calling, and disrespect for parental authority.
- ✓ Sudden negative opinions 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 at these activities.

Unusual interest in one or two particular colors of clothing or a particular logo.

Interest in gang-influenced music, videos, and movies.

Use and practice of hand signals to communicate with friends.

Peculiar drawings or gang symbols on schoolbooks, clothing, notebooks, or even walls.

Drastic changes in hair or dress style and/or having a group of friends who have the same hair or dress style.

Withdrawal from longtime friends and forming bonds with an entirely new group of friends.

Suspected drug use, such as alcohol, inhalants, and narcotics.

The presence of firearms, ammunition, or other weapons.

Nonaccidental physical injuries, such as being beaten or injuries to hands and knuckles from fighting.

Unexplained cash or goods, such as clothing or jewelry.



Common Gang Identifiers

Gang-style clothing and dress:

Gang members may use a particular style of dress to identify with a particular gang, set, clique, or crew. This might include clothing or bandanas worn only in certain colors that are representative of a gang.

Other clothing that might be worn by gang members could include pants worn well below the waist (sagging); gang-themed T-shirts with pictures of gang members, prison scenes, graffiti, or slogans; two- or three-toned bead necklaces; sports clothing of specific teams; or colored fabric belts, occasionally with a metal buckle that includes the initial(s) of the gang.

However, gang clothing trends change and may be different from one place to another, so clothing alone may not be enough to indicate a child's affiliation with a particular gang, though it can be a clue.

Colors:

Many gangs use one or more colors as a symbol to represent their gang. These colors may be worn on shirts, bandanas, multicolored or single-colored beads, belts, hats, shoes, shoelaces, headbands, jewelry, and other items.

Symbols and numbers:

Some symbols and numbers may have special significance within the gang culture in a particular area. A few common symbols from some of the large gangs in the United States are stars (five- and six-pointed), crowns, pitchforks (pointing up or down), three dots in a triangle, and numbers. Contact your local police or sheriff's department to get specific information on the meaning of unidentifiable symbols or numbers that you may see in graffiti or clothing in your area.

Sports items:

Letters, colors, or symbols may have a specific gang meaning in local street-gang culture, such as Kansas City Royals (KC = Kill Crips). Sports items may be purchased in a nontraditional color to correspond with the gang's colors or may be altered with graffiti or extra symbols or writing.

Graffiti:

Gangs use graffiti to mark their territory, brag about their reputation, mourn fallen members, and threaten or challenge rival gangs. For this reason, graffiti can be very dangerous and should be removed as soon as possible. Youths who are participating in graffiti may have items such as spray paints, spray-paint plastic tips, wide-tipped markers, or sketchbooks with graffiti works in progress and may have paint on their clothing, backpacks, or other items.

Tattoos:

Tattoos are used to show an individual's loyalty to his/her gang. These tattoos often include the name, initials, or symbols of the specific gang and may be found on the hands, neck, face, chest, or arms.

Hand signs:

Some gangs use specific hand gestures to communicate their affiliation with the gang and issue threats or challenges to rival gangs.

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. Many popular movies also focus on street gangs and their activities. Youths may show their interest in gangs through fascination with music and movies that portray street-gang culture.



What Parents Can Do

Talk to your children about gangs and ways to avoid them.

Let them know that you disapprove of gangs and do not want to see them hurt or arrested.

Tell your children not to:

- ◆ Associate with any gang members.
 - ◆ Hang out where gangs congregate.
 - ◆ Attend any party or social event sponsored by gangs.
 - ◆ Use any kind of hand or finger signs that may be meaningful to gangs.
 - ◆ Wear clothing that may have meaning to gangs in your area.
- (Explain to your children that these clothing items can put them in danger and that you will not purchase them or allow them to be worn. If you are not familiar with these items, contact your local law enforcement agency for more specific information about gangs in your area.)

Get to know your children'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.

Talk to your children about ways to deal with pressure from friends.

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

Set firm limits with your children and teens.

Children and teenagers need to know clearly what is expected of them and the consequences for acting otherwise. Do not rescue your children from the consequences of their decisions.

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.

