

Gangs: You and Your Child

*Advice to parents on gangs -
helping your child make the
right choice*



WHY - DO YOUNG PEOPLE JOIN GANGS?

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A gang can be summarised as *a group who see themselves and are seen by others as a gang, and for whom crime and violence are a central part of their activities.*

Children and young people face all sorts of pressures and it may be that your child is feeling pressure to follow friends who may be in a gang.

You can help your child make the right choice. If there is one person your son or daughter will listen to, it's probably you. By recognising the signs and seeking help, you could be making a positive step towards changing the course of your child's life.

Many young people will not recognise themselves to be in a gang, but in a group of friends – and most groups of young people do not commit crime. Being in a gang is not illegal, it is only the criminal offences committed that are illegal.

Reasons why young people may join a gang are:

- to be recognised
- to gain friends
- to be accepted
- for excitement
- for a sense of belonging
- for power
- for protection
- for money from crime
- to defend their territory
- for respect

The Fantasy

Images of gangs on TV, in movies and the media tend to glorify drugs, sex and violence as an acceptable lifestyle. They don't always show the truth about gangs and the destruction that they can cause to those in gangs, our families, friends and the communities we live in.

The Reality

Being in a gang puts your child more at risk of offending, using or dealing drugs, ending up in prison or worse - being a victim of violence and possibly an early death. The 'respect' they feel they are given is only an illusion.

WHAT YOU CAN DO – PREVENT

There are things you can do to help prevent your child from being involved in the first place. Have open discussions with your child and see what s/he thinks about gangs (you may have seen something in the news about gangs that you could discuss).

Involve yourself in your child's life in a positive way

- Talk to your child – keep reminding him/her that they can raise any issues of concern with you.
- Praise and acknowledge your child's achievements and efforts
- Help your child to understand that success requires effort
- Get involved in your child's school activities, if you can spare time
- Encourage your child to take part in positive after school activities
- Know your child's friends and their families

Help your child lead a positive life

- Be a positive role model; remember children learn from what they see and experience
- Teach them how to cope with peer pressure, and how to deal with conflicts without use of violence.
- Talk about the dangers and consequences of gang involvement
- Teach them that rights come with responsibilities

Discipline

- Set limits and boundaries, and keep applying them
- Stick to your rules – avoid appearance of double standards

WORK TOGETHER

- You're not alone! Have a chat to your child's friends' parents or their school/college staff. If you're worried they probably are too.
- Other parents may see your child when you don't and you see theirs – by working together you can have another pair of eyes to watch their behaviour.
- Are there other members of your family who could lend a hand in talking to your child about this? Perhaps someone they respect and would listen to?

KNOW - THE SIGNS

There are some signs you can watch out for that might mean your child is involved in a gang, but be aware that almost all of them are normal teenage behaviours and may not indicate gang involvement at all. However where many of these signs are present, you should take action:

Behaviour

- Has your child withdrawn from the family?
- Is there a sudden loss of interest in school, decline in attendance or academic achievement?
- Is your child's school or college reporting worrying changes in behaviour or attendance?
- Has s/he dropped out of positive activities? e.g. sports clubs
- Has s/he started to use new/unknown slang words?
- Does s/he hold unexplained money or possessions?
- Does s/he stay out unusually late without giving any reason?
- Does s/he have a new nickname?
- Is s/he vague about his/her whereabouts and friends?
- Does s/he constantly talk about another young person who seems to have a lot of influence on him/her?
- Has s/he broken off with old friends and only hangs around with one group of people?
- Does s/he express aggressive or intimidating views towards other groups of young people, even though they might have been friends in the past?
- Do you suspect that s/he uses or deals drugs?

Visual signs

- Has s/he suddenly changed appearance? Is he dressing in a particular style or 'uniform' (bandanas etc) s/he is similar to that of the people hanging around with?
- Does s/he have unexplained physical injuries?
- Does s/he use graffiti style 'tags' on possessions, schoolbooks, walls or buildings?
- Has s/he started adopting certain codes of group behaviour: ways of talking and acting which are in line with other young people in their group - use of hand signs? – ways of talking about other groups / other neighbourhoods
- Have you found a weapon hidden amongst your child's possessions?

As a parent/carer, you should also be aware that:

- Girls can also be involved as gang members, or as associates (i.e. sisters, friends, girlfriends of gang members).
- Gangs will often have websites or profiles on **networking websites** such as Myspace or Bebo – be aware of what your child is viewing. Chat rooms and texts can be used to bully young people to join gangs and to organise crime and violence.
- Many individuals become members through peer pressure, bullying and intimidation.
- Those involved in gangs are more likely to carry or use **knives** and **firearms** or deal drugs. They may be drawn into committing crimes of robbery, assault and drug offences and take risks with their physical and sexual health and personal safety to prove themselves. They are also far more likely to become victims of crime and risk serious injury or even death.



IF YOUR CHILD IS ALREADY INVOLVED

If your child is already involved in a gang - Your child may be scared or unwilling to talk about this. But it is important that they know you want to listen and support them and it's important to be clear that your child does have a choice, even when they think they may not.

Your approach will be more effective if you:

- Stay calm and rational, however upset you are.
- Ask questions, rather than making accusations or statements.
- Listen carefully to what they say without interrupting them.
- Really try to understand the situation from their point of view and why they have joined.
- Ask them what you can do to help, rather than telling them what they have to do.
- Point out the risks and potential consequences of carrying, or worse still, using a gun or knife. Carrying a gun or a knife is dangerous to others and against the law. It also puts the carrier at risk of harm if the gun or knife is used against them.
- Try to come to an agreement about what they should do next, rather than issuing instructions or ultimatums.
- Work with them to find alternatives.
- Seek help from local community organisations or youth services. They can offer mentoring, mediation, exit programmes and other ways to help them leave the gang. (See useful contacts on back page)
- Consider contacting the assigned safer schools police officer or community support officer – know who they are.

Profile of reformed ex-gang member

PJ, aged 17 started 'bigging up' his patch when he was 12 and was getting into fights. Home life was difficult and he was hanging out with the gang as they were more like family. At 14 the gang were using knives and stabbings were common. "Every problem starts at home. Either you're being neglected or you've been spoilt." He says that if he had a relationship with his father, he would never have got involved in gangs. It was after talking to youth workers that he made his decision to renounce his gang lifestyle.

The tragic case – the one who didn't get out

Dwayne, aged 27 became involved with his first gang at the age of 13, as he felt he needed to belong to something. His older brother was already in a gang and had been his 'role model'. By 14, he was carrying a knife and committed burglary and robbery. By the age of 16 he was dealing drugs for 'easy income' and by the time he was 18, he was carrying a gun and continued to fight other gangs over territory and drugs. At 24 he committed armed robbery and at 27 he committed murder. He is now serving a life sentence in prison.

WHAT THE LAW SAYS

There are currently no laws banning gang membership or certain gangs. Instead the law focuses on criminal behaviour.

- In courts however, if an offender was part of a group or a gang, this may lead to a longer sentence.
- It is illegal to carry any knife if there is intent to use it as a weapon, even if it belongs to someone else.
- It is illegal to keep any prohibited firearm, or to carry any firearm – including an imitation – in public, even if you are carrying it for someone else.
- The sentence for unlawful possession of a prohibited firearm is 3 years for 16-17 year olds and 5 years for adults.
- The sentence for possessing a knife in a public place without a good excuse has been increased from 2 to 4 years.
- Police can and will search someone if they believe they are carrying a gun, knife or other weapon.
- Police and school staff can also search young people for weapons at school.
- Carrying a gun or knife could mean being arrested, going to court and ending up with a criminal record that will affect the rest of your child's life. Having a criminal record can prevent him getting a job, going to university or college, or even travelling abroad.
- Drugs such as cannabis, cocaine and ecstasy are illegal to have, or carry.

If you would like to find out more information about the law, visit our website at www.direct.gov.uk/gangs You can also get in touch with your local Neighbourhood Policing team who will talk to you in more detail about the law and gang-related crime. You might want to arrange for them to talk to your child or ask the school to arrange a talk.

To find out who your **Neighbourhood Policing team** is go to www.neighbourhoodpolicing.co.uk or telephone your local police.



USEFUL CONTACTS

Parent-line Plus – gives advice on all aspects of the parenting role and is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Calls are free.

Web: www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Tel: 0808 800 2222

Mothers Against Violence – offer advice and support to those who may feel their child is at risk or involved in gun/gang/ knife crime.

Tel: 08450 662 4867

Street Pastors – an interdenominational church response to neighbourhood issues; engaging with people on the streets and in night-time venues to care, listen, talk and offer practical help.

Web: www.streetpastors.org.uk

Tel: 020 7771 9770

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)

– able to offer advice when a child is experiencing bullying. The line is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Call free on:

Tel: 0808 800 500

Email: help@nspcc.org.uk

Web: www.nspcc.org.uk

Anti-Bullying Alliance – Advice on bullying. Tel: 020 7843 6000

Childline – offers a free 24 hour helpline and counselling service for children

Tel: 0800 1111

Victim Support – a national charity which helps people affected by crime.

Go to: www.victimsupport.org

Neighbourhood Police – to find details of your local team and find out more about the work they are doing in your area, type your postcode at

www.neighbourhoodpolicing.co.uk

Crime stoppers – a free, confidential service where you can report information about a crime anonymously.

Call free on 0800 555 111

Web: www.crimestoppers-uk.org/

Local Authority/ Council – Connect to your Local Authority and find out about local parent groups and activities for young people in your area. They can also refer you to parenting support programmes.

www.direct.gov.uk/en/DI1/Directories/Localcouncils/index.htm

For more information on local contacts for your area, visit our website:

www.direct.gov.uk/gangs