

# *Safeguarding Your Child From Gangs:*

Gangs are becoming more common, and their appeal to young people is growing. Many children are at risk for joining or being influenced by gangs. Parents and guardians face a major challenge: how to keep their kids out of gangs. The following information was written to help you meet that challenge. Click on a link, or scroll through the page to find info to your questions:

## **How Much Do You Already Know About Keeping Your Child Safe From Gangs?**

Take the following test; then check your results with the answers at the end of this web page.

Answer these questions: **TRUE or FALSE**

Today's gangs are no more violent or deadly than gangs were in the past.  
TRUE or FALSE

Gangs generally do not enlist children under age 12.  
TRUE or FALSE

Gaining money is the main goal of gangs.  
TRUE or FALSE

Gangs are at work only in large inner-city areas.  
TRUE or FALSE

Gangs give children attention and status they may not get at home or elsewhere.  
TRUE or FALSE

Children who use alcohol or other drugs are at greatest risk for joining a gang.  
TRUE or FALSE

Use of hand signals may be a sign that a child is in a gang.  
TRUE or FALSE

In an area where there are many gangs, parents can do little to keep their kids out of gangs.  
TRUE or FALSE

## **What Are Gangs?**

Gangs are groups of people who form an allegiance for a common purpose and commit violence, unlawful or criminal activities. Today's street gangs may claim control over a certain territory in their community, and create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation there. Gangs are often involved with narcotics, which bring them profit.

## **Facts About Gangs**

We all want the best for our children. We want them to grow up healthy and secure. We want them to have the opportunity to reach their highest potential. But violent street gangs can destroy a child's bright future in many ways. Some parents and guardians may consider gangs innocent, rebellious groups. However, gangs are very dangerous, and they are growing in alarming numbers.

"At least 400,000 youths are currently in gangs nationwide." FBI statistic cited in 1996 report to Senate Judiciary Committee by Senator Dianne Feinstein.

"Unless we act now to stop young people from choosing a life of violence and crime, the beginning of the 21st century could bring levels of violent crime to our community that far exceed what we have experienced." Attorney General Janet Reno.

"Gangs have been a major cause of the growth in violent crime in the past decade." Vice President Albert Gore, 1994.

For the sake of our children, today's gangs are not to be taken lightly.

Many of these groups:

Act in ways that harm public health and public morals, and drive out businesses.

Reach into nearly every city and town, and into every high school in the country today.

Make people in their city, town, or neighborhood feel fearful and endangered.

Are recruiting children at record rates.

Have drug trafficking as their main occupation.

Come from many ethnic groups and in many cases are networking across the country.

Are composed primarily of boys, but 10% of gang members are girls and the number is growing.

### **Who Joins Gangs?**

Gang Members generally range in age from 13-21 years old, but can be as young as 9 years old. Those who join gangs often have low self esteem, feel unloved at home, do poorly in school, and have a hard time making decisions and communicating with others. Many come from single parent homes. Most gang members are boys, but 10% of all gang members are girls and the number is growing.

### **What Are The Key Dangers of Gangs?**

Gang activity is dangerous to gang members and to their families. It is dangerous to neighborhoods, towns, and cities. It affects society as a whole.

In order to join, new members go through an initiation, which can range from fighting other gang members to participating in thefts, gang rapes, drive-by shootings, or even murders.

Gang members use alcohol and drugs.

Gangs deal drugs and try to sell them on the street, even to young children. Worse yet, they trick children into trying drugs to get them "hooked."

Gang members get badly hurt or killed during gang fights and criminal acts.

Families of gang members often become targets of violence when gangs are feuding.

Gangs rely on weapons, especially guns. Anyone, not only gang members can be injured in a gang related crime or a fight between rival gangs.

Gangs gain control over an area by using force and making people afraid. The area becomes their turf, where they sell drugs and commit other crimes.

Where there are gangs, the crime rate rises. Crimes range from damaging public property and selling and using drugs, to committing murder.

Gangs look down on the school system. Youths in gangs do poorly in school or drop out entirely.

A large number of persistent and dangerous juvenile gang offenders become even more serious adult offenders.

### **Why do Kids Join Gangs?**

Kids join for many reasons, and each case is individual. However, reasons include; excitement and fun, a sense of belonging, companionship, peer pressure, attention or status, financial gain, intimidation, protection, and a failure to realize what being in a gang means. Living in a gang infested area or having a family member in a gang increases the possibility of a kid joining one.

### **Why Some Kids Join Gangs:**

Kids become members of gangs for many reasons. Studies show these are the key ones:

Identity, Attention, and Status

Gangs may offer kids a powerful group identity and a kind of recognition they cannot get at home or elsewhere.

Protection

If there are many gangs in an area, joining one of them may offer protection from rival gangs.

Feeling of Belonging

Gang activity may offer a feeling of being a part of a "family" that is missing in the child's home. The child becomes loyal to the gang's values, rather than those of the home.

Intimidation

Threats and violent beatings may be used to force youths to join.

Excitement

Gang activity may seem attractive to kids who are bored, lack interests and direction, or do not feel good about themselves. The media has glamorized gangs in music, movies, and video games. This adds to the excitement associated with them.

#### Peer Pressure

Kids are pressured to join gangs if others around them are gang members.

#### Financial Benefit

Kids see being in a gang as an easy way to gain money and new possessions.

#### Lack of Knowledge

Kids, especially young ones, do not realize the true dangers of being in a gang.

### **What Risk Factors Lead to Gang Membership?**

Among the risk factors are:

lack of adequate community youth support systems and too much unsupervised time.

poverty

lack of self worth

poor decision making and communication skills

domestic violence at home

media that glorifies violence

parent denial of gang problem

Gang membership could also be considered a form of survival, if living in a gang infested community.

### **Is Your Child At Risk?**

No child can be totally safe from gang influences.

Gangs exist in all ethnic groups, all parts of the country, and all income levels.

Risk factors include:

Living in an area with a high level of gang activity.

Lack of a positive support system at home.

Violence against family members

Denial by the family that the child is under a gang's influence.

Exposure to TV shows, movies, and/or music that glorifies violence.

Lack of alternative activities, such as community youth programs.

Low self-esteem and/or a sense of hopelessness about the future.

Difficulty making decisions and communicating with others.

Too much unsupervised free time.

A lack of respect for authority (parents, teachers, law enforcement officers).

Experience using alcohol or other drugs.

Growing up in a single-parent family or with other family members who belong or belonged to gangs.

### **TIPS:**

Be a good listener to your child and help them develop their self esteem.

Watch for negative influences; meet and greet friends and parents of friends.

Communicate with them about their hopes and dreams as well as their fears and concerns.

Be a role model, show your children how to deal appropriately with conflicts and problems.

Discuss the importance of school and good grades. Emphasize good study habits.

Establish rules and set limits. Be consistent and fair in punishment.

Volunteer at child's school.

Demand accountability for time spent, money and clothes.

Spend quality time with children.

Show respect for child's feelings.

### **What Are the Dangers of Being in a Gang?**

Gangs often have guns and drugs, exposing kids to the dangers of both. Members can be seriously hurt or killed during gang fights or criminal acts. Gang membership can also hamper education, since schools are viewed negatively by gangs. Extensive police records limit future employment opportunities. Families of gang members also face danger for their own safety from feuding gang members.

### **How Big is the Problem?**

Many experts (and kids themselves) believe the gang problem is growing, with gangs networking across the U.S.A. rather than being confined to certain communities as in the past. And older gang members recruit younger ones to do the criminal acts, including drug trafficking and shootings. The average age of a shooter in a gang is now 9-11 years old.

## **Help Your Child Refuse Gangs**

A child's self-esteem is nurtured in a supportive home where he or she feels safe, loved, and valued. A child with positive self-esteem is more likely to avoid dangerous situations and be less open to gangs. Building self-esteem must begin at a very early age and continue throughout childhood.

## **Help Your Child Develop Self-esteem**

Support your child's goals and ideas, even if they differ from your own.

Encourage your child to make independent choices.

Give your child a chance to contribute to the family. Assign chores or jobs that your child is old enough to do.

Focus on your child's good points. Praise positive behavior.

Let your child know you expect good efforts and hard work in everything.

Teach your child that trying hard counts. Praise your child's efforts as well as achievements.

Set reasonable limits and follow through on them. That way, your child learns to handle limits.

Ask for your child's opinions and decisions on family matters.

Express your feelings and encourage your child to do the same. Try not to judge or criticize your child's feelings. Make it clear that you love your child as he or she is.

## **How Can You Help?**

Stay informed, involved, and aware. Help your children choose to refuse gang membership by becoming more involved in their lives., by building their self esteem at home, and by working to combat the gang problem in your community. Be Aware of possible signs of gang involvement.

## **Signs of Possible Gang Involvement**

Sudden poor school grades and disinterest in school.

Withdrawal from family activities.

Use of unknown vocabulary (gangs have many slang words).

Sudden change in friends.

Evidence of drug abuse.

Sudden affluence.

Use of hand signs.

Desire for extensive privacy.

Having a new nickname.

Developing a bad attitude towards family, school and authorities.

Purchase or desire to buy clothing off all one color or style.

Wearing altered headwear (gang members often put gang information on the inside band of ball caps).

Changing appearance with special haircuts, eyebrow markings or tattoos.

Use of gang graffiti on folders, desks, walls, and buildings.

Staying out later than usual.

### **Protect Your Children**

For their own safety, tell children:

Don't wear clothing in colors or style that is gang related.

Don't associate or attend parties with gang members or Wannabe gang members.

Don't hang out on street corners where gangs are active.

Don't approach individuals in cars who seemingly want information.

Don't take part in writing graffiti or hang around walls marked with it.

### **What Can You Do?**

**Become informed-** Find out about gang activity in your community. Learn how gang members dress, speak, and behave. Attend informational meetings and read articles related to gang activity.

**Get Involved-** Become active in your children's education and in your community. Organize or join neighborhood watch groups. Discourage gangs from hanging around your area. When incidents occur (i.e.: vandalism, loitering and drug activity) report them to law enforcement officials at once.

**Know Your Children's Friends-** Know who your children are hanging out with and how they and your children spend their free time. If children choose friends that are mostly with gangs, they are probably involved or will become involved in gangs, too.

**Communicate-** Develop open, frequent communication with your children. Be positive, allow your children to come to you to discuss any topic or problem. Tell your children that you love them. Allow them to express themselves.

**Spend Time Together-** Plan activities the whole family can enjoy. Expose children to different places outside of your neighborhood, such as parks, museums, the beach, and the mountains. Let children know you want to be with them.

**Set Limits-** Don't let children stay out late or spend a lot of unsupervised time in the streets. (Most gang members start with curfew violations.) Don't allow children to write gang names, symbols or any other gang graffiti on their books, papers, clothes, bodies, walls or any other place.

**Teach Good Values and Responsibility-** Help children develop respect for other's property and pride in the community. Give them responsibility at home and reward them for a job well done. Teach them to set positive goals for themselves, to hold high standards, and to prepare for a positive future.

**Monitor Media-** Children on the average see 8,000 murders on TV by the time they are ten years old. Watching violence on TV makes viewers become insensitive to it. Music and video games also glorify violence. Know what your children are seeing, hearing, and playing. Say no to violent media.

**Encourage Healthy Activities-** Encourage children to be involved in athletics and other health oriented group activities so they can gain a sense of belonging in that way. Take elementary students to college/high school games to promote an interest in sports. Host gang-free parties for children old enough for them.

**Be a Role Model-** Set a good example. Deal with anger in a healthy way, so children can learn from you. Limit your intake of alcohol, and don't do other drugs. If you have a problem, get help. If necessary, work on your own self-esteem or anger control. Keep stress manageable.

**Say No to Gangs-** Develop an anti-gang environment at home. Don't let children dress in gang style clothing. Read articles to children about gangs and help them see the natural consequences of actions.

**Avoid Denial-** Many parents refuse to recognize their children's gang involvement until it is too late. Be alert to signs of possible gang membership.

## **Help Your Child Say "NO" To Gangs**

### **Have the Right Attitude**

Don't think: "A gang's going to get my kids, and I can't stop it." Recognize that you play an important part in keeping your kids out of gangs.

### **Be A Good Role Model**

Don't abuse alcohol or other drugs. If you have a problem with drugs, violence, or anything else that interferes with family life, get help. Honor your word and expect your child to do the same.

## **Safeguard Your Child**

Know the "Three W's."

- **Where** your child is,
- **What** he or she is doing,
- **Who** he or she is with.

## **Be Involved In Your Child's Life**

Show interest in your child's schoolwork, hobbies, and friends.

Work to build open, ongoing communication with your child.

Listen without being quick to judge.



Set aside time for positive family activities.

Monitor what your child watches and listens to, especially television shows, music, and movies that promote gangs or are full of violence.

Encourage your child to spend time wisely studying, doing chores, or participating in sports, hobbies, art, scouts, or volunteer groups.

### **Teach Good Values And Responsibility**

Emphasize strong family values, including respect and responsibility. Show by your example how much you value these traits.

Be consistent about discipline.

Hold your child answerable for his or her behavior.

Teach your child respect for authority.

Establish clear limits and rules; expect your child to follow them.

### **Talk To Your Child About Gangs**

Most gang members are 13 to 21 years of age, but they can be as young as 9. Teach your child about gangs while he or she is still in elementary school. Talk with your child about the dangers of gangs and the reasons people join them. Help your child learn that he or she has the inner strength to make the right choice.

### **The Subject, and What to Say (Parent to Child) Good Groups vs. Bad Groups**

"Good groups get together to do good or positive things."

(Examples: scouts, sports teams, art/craft clubs, food drives, neighborhood cleanups.)

"Gangs are bad groups because they break the law and do things that hurt people."

"Avoid gang members. Don't hang out with gang members or go to parties where they will be present."

### **Gang Members Break Laws**

"People in gangs may damage property, use drugs, steal, and carry weapons. Doing any of these things can get you arrested."

### **Gang Membership Is Dangerous**

"Some gang members get hurt or killed in fights between gangs and in committing criminal acts. Sometimes they hurt or kill innocent people."

### **Gang Control Over Freedom**

"When you join a gang, you lose all personal control. You can't leave when you want."

### **Gang Members May Bully You**

"Gangs may scare you or try to hurt you to make you join. If this ever happens to you, say 'NO', leave fast and tell me what happened.

### **Help To Keep Gangs Out Of Your Community**

#### **Report Gang Activity**

Contact school or police officials about dangerous and/or illegal things you see. These might include:

Graffiti

Houses with many people going in and out at all hours of the day and night.

Groups of youngsters using alcohol or other drugs.

Drug dealing.

Groups of teenagers hanging around school grounds.

Groups of youngsters carrying weapons.

#### **Get Involved**

Establish "safe school zones" with stiff punishments for crimes committed within the zone.

Remove gang graffiti.

Join or form community groups that report suspected gang activity.

Work with neighbors to provide safe park areas and to keep them clean and crime-free.

Attend gang-awareness workshops. Invite your neighbors, too.

Support or help establish programs that provide kids with positive activities, such as scouts, sports, recreation, and art programs.

### **Help to give the message that gangs will NOT be tolerated in your community!**

#### **Is Your Child In A Gang?**

Gang Members share a name; form of identification (e.g., clothing, colors), "turf" or territory, and code talk (e.g., hand signs, graffiti, slang). The signs below could mean your child is in a gang. Remember; none of these are sure signs of gang involvement.

#### **Street Talk**

Gangs use a mixture of English and street slang. These words are meant to be difficult for "outsiders" to understand.

## Hand Signals

Each gang has its own set.

## Graffiti

Gangs use graffiti to mark or "tag" their territory. They also often mark their belongings.

## Clothing Styles

All members may wear the same style of clothing or may wear all accessories on either the right or left side, including hats, jewelry, shoelaces, gloves, belt buckles, and so on.

## Colors

Clothing may be all in one or two colors. The colors also appear on hair ornaments, nail polish, and belongings.

## Symbols

The signs in the gang's graffiti may also appear on their belongings, skin (tattoos), and may be cut into their hair.

## Some Common Gang Slang Words

**GANG BANGER:** An active gang member.

**HOME BOY or HOME GIRL:** Gang member.

**JUMP IN:** Gang initiation.

**NUT UP:** Angry.

**OG:** Original gang member.

**PACKING:** Gang member with a gun.

**RAG:** Color of a gang.

**SHOOTER:** A gang member who uses a gun.

**TAGGER:** Someone who uses graffiti.

**WANNABE:** Youngster who wants to be a gang member.

## Is Your Child Behaving Differently?

A change in your child's behavior may be a sign that he or she is involved with a gang. Your child may be in a gang if he or she starts to:

Skip school or miss work often.

Spend time with undesirable people.

Desire a lot of privacy.

Refuse to take part in family activities.

Stay out later than usual.

Drink alcohol or use other drugs.

Show unusual moods or patterns of behavior.

Suddenly have more money or other possessions.

## **Dealing With Gang Membership**

### **Things To Do If Your Child Is In A Gang**

Try to talk calmly with your child no matter how upset the possibility of gang membership makes you. Ask if he or she is in a gang, and why. Avoid being quick to judge. Recognize that gang membership is not just the child's problem, it's the family's problem as well.

Redefine the rules your child must follow and enforce them. Seek outside help if your child won't talk, is difficult to communicate with, or if you suspect he or she is lying.

If You Need Help Removing Your Child From A Gang's Influence, Here Are People You Can Contact

School counselor

Local police gang unit

School resource officer

Social service agencies

Health professionals

Clergy

Counselors

### **Check Your Child's Ability To Refuse Gangs**

When you have taught your child the safety skills mentioned above, he or she should be able to answer all these questions:

Tell me some groups that are good to belong to and some that are not.

What types of groups do you want to belong to? Why?

Why are gangs dangerous? What do they do?

What types of things can happen to gang members that would hurt them and their future?

Why do you think you should avoid gang members?

If someone tried to bully you into joining a gang, what would you do?

If someone tried to bully you into joining a gang, would you be scared to talk to me about it?

What would you do if you were invited somewhere and you knew gang members would be there?

Your child's answers to these questions will tell you a Great deal about what he or she has learned and what Skills you need to re-teach or spend more time on.

### **Answers To The Quiz:**

#### **How Much Do You Already Know About Keeping Your Child Safe From Gangs?**

**Today's gangs are no more violent or deadly than gangs were in the past.**

#### **FALSE**

Gangs today are more violent and deadly than ever. It is easier to get weapons, there are more fights for territory (called "turf"), and more young people are joining gangs.

**Gangs generally do not enlist children under age 12.**

#### **FALSE**

Gangs are recruiting children at a record rate. It's becoming common for them to enlist elementary schoolchildren age 9 or younger.

**Gaining money is the main goal of gangs.**

#### **TRUE**

The main goal of gangs is to gain money through drug sales and other criminal acts.

**Gangs are at work only in large inner-city areas.**

#### **FALSE**

Gangs no longer exist only in large inner-city areas. They have spread to nearly every city and town in the country as they look for new "turf" for drug sales and other crimes.

**Gangs give children attention and status they may not get at home or elsewhere.**

#### **TRUE**

Gang members tend to come from homes where they get little attention. They may spend too much time on their own and may feel "forgotten" in the midst of the family's problems.

**Children who use alcohol or other drugs are at greatest risk for joining a gang.**

**FALSE**

Drug and alcohol abuse may be one sign of a child's gang membership but it is not the greatest risk factor. The main risk factor is living in an area where there are gangs. The second is a home life where the child does not develop a sense of self or feel support from the family.

**Use of hand signals may be a sign that a child is in a gang.**

**TRUE**

Each gang has its own forms of communication: code talk, graffiti, and hand signs. Using hand signals may be a sign of gang membership.

**In an area where there are many gangs, parents can do little to keep their kids out of gangs.**

**FALSE**

Even in areas where there are many gangs, every child does not join them. Parents can make the difference by: having the right attitude, being good role models, safeguarding their child, being involved in their child's life, and providing a solid foundation for making good, positive choices.