

A parents and carers' guide to gangs

Answering your questions on gangs and helping to keep young people safe.

How can you help keep your child safe?

As parents and carers we play an important role keeping young people out of gangs. But it can be difficult to know what to do to help protect them.

There are many things you can do to help prevent your child getting involved with a gang. The most important being to maintain a close relationship with your child and keep talking. Having a close relationship will help you recognise any changes in their behaviour and their activities.

What is a gang?

A gang is usually considered to be a street-based group of young people (members) that share an identity and are typically linked to a name. Members view themselves as a gang and are recognised by others as a gang. They may engage in a range of criminal activity, violence and lay claim over territory.

Why do young people join gangs?

There are many reasons why young people feel the pressure to join a gang. It could be they are bored and looking for excitement or are attracted to the status and power it can give them. They may also believe they can earn a lot of money. It could be a result of peer pressure or problems at home. Gang membership can make a child feel protected, respected and that they belong.

Who is most at risk?

Young people may be more likely to join a gang if they are socially isolated, have low self-esteem or are experiencing difficulties at home and want to feel supported, accepted or wanted. They may also appeal to young people who have poor relationships with adults, lack a positive family environment or who have experienced hardship, substance misuse or abuse.

Are there consequences of gang membership?

There are many consequences stemming from gang involvement, all with varying degrees of short and long term negative outcomes.

Young people who become involved in gangs face the increased risk of:

- dropping out of education
- teenage parenthood
- unemployment
- victimisation
- drug and alcohol abuse
- committing petty and violent crimes
- juvenile conviction and imprisonment



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How can I tell if they are in a gang?

The most common age that young people join a gang is around 15, but the early adolescent years (12-14) are a crucial time when young people are more likely to be exposed to gangs and may consider joining one. Today both boys and girls are equally as likely to join a gang and for the same reasons – although it can be harder to spot a girl's gang involvement.

As parents and carers we need to look for the warning signs and sudden changes in our child's lifestyle and behaviour.

Warning signs

At home

- Withdrawing from family activities
- Increased level of defiance
- Increased outbursts and excessive aggression
- In possession/access to large sums of money
- Possession of new expensive items
- Friends no longer visit the family home
- Developing an unusual desire for privacy
- Refusing to tell you where they are going and who with
- Concealing items such as weapons/knives

Ask yourself

- Do you hear your child talking and hear a word you don't understand? Take note of it and look it up online social media, do you know their social media names?
- Can you follow them on social media?
- Has their mobile phone usage changed?
- Do they suddenly have more than one phone?
- Have you spotted things missing from the family home?
- Do you know what is in their room?

Away from home

- sudden drop in school grades
- declining school attendance
- missing from home
- travelling outside of their area
- experimenting with drugs and alcohol
- suspected to be street living or staying with adults
- change in friends
- acquires a new nickname/street name
- a sudden change in their appearance
- non-accidental injuries, such as injuries to their hands
- avoiding going into certain areas
- tagging their belongings with symbols, letters, postcodes, street names or nicknames



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Displaying symptoms of trauma

Every young person will at some point become angry, but any excessive behaviour that impacts on the child and their family could indicate trauma. Some symptoms could include: overly controlling behaviour, difficulty concentrating, risky behaviour, unhealthy relationships, running away, unable to see a positive future or sleeplessness.

What can you do?

Talking and listening

The most important thing is to encourage your child to talk to you and for you both to listen to each other.

Share with them your concerns and highlight the risks of being involved in a gang so that they can understand. Encourage them not to associate with gang members.

Get to know your child's friends

When young people start to feel pressure to use drugs, drink alcohol or join gangs, it usually comes from their friends.

Know what they are doing online

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 favourite online activities, sites and online contacts.

Peer pressure

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

Find out what they know

Find a way to talk about gangs directly. If it helps, use reports in the news or storylines on television programmes as a starting point. Your child may know more than you think and will have opinions.

Offer encouragement, don't judge

Remember that they are growing up in a different time from you, facing unique challenges. Discuss their hopes and aspirations as well as their fears and worries. Praise them for their achievements and make sure they know you are always there for them.

Take time out together

Make time for your family to have fun, eat meals together and take trips.

Help is available

For more information regarding gangs, please visit the suggested organisations below:

- We are with you, <http://www.wearewithyou.org.uk/> – provides free, confidential support to people experiencing issues with drugs, alcohol or mental health.



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- ChildLine, <http://www.childline.org.uk/> – a free, confidential helpline dedicated to children and young people. Call 0800 1111.
- Crimestoppers, <http://www.crimestoppers-uk.org/> – free, confidential service where you can give information about crime anonymously. Call 0800 555 111.
- Early Help, <http://www.kent.gov.uk/earlyhelp> – helping families to address and resolve problems as early as possible.
- Fearless.org, <http://www.fearless.org/>– non-judgemental information and advice about crime and a place to give information about crime anonymously.
- Kent Police, <http://www.kent.police.uk/ganglifereality>
- NSPCC, <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/>– information and advice to people involved in gangs as well as families and friends who are concerned. Call 0808 800 5000.
- Safe4Me, <http://www.safe4me.co.uk/>– information and resources for parents and professionals to help young people stay safe and make responsible choices.
- Victim Support, <http://www.victimsupport.org.uk/>



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