

Gangs



What do you think of when you hear the word “gang”? A small, neighborhood group of kids who break some windows—or a sophisticated operation that’s part of a larger national (or even international) crime ring?

Although gangs have been around since the early 1900s, today, gangs are different. They’re more organized—more violent—and more active in recruiting younger children. And gangs are not confined to a few large cities. Today, gangs are found in all types of communities, from cities to suburbs to small towns.

Because gangs are spreading in influence, and because gangs are found in so many communities, parents need to get the facts. Here’s what you need to know about the tough issue of gangs.

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What is a gang?

A gang is an organized group of youths who come together to engage in criminal activity. They usually have:

- A name and a symbol.
- A dress code, a special language and hand signals.
- A particular area that they claim as their “turf.”
- A clear leader.
- Some type of initiation.



Who joins gangs?

Children who have trouble getting along with parents and fitting into the structure of school are more likely to join a gang. Gang members come from all kinds of families and communities. Members may live in low-income areas or in million-dollar homes.

Some gangs are made up of people from a single ethnic group. Others are organized by neighborhood or by school. Girls, as well as boys, can be members of gangs. Gang members may be as young as nine or 10 and as old as 30 or 40. Most gang members are between the ages of 10 and 20.



Why do kids join gangs?

Boys and girls who join gangs are usually looking for something they cannot find at home, in their school or in the community. Kids may also join for:

- Financial gain.
- Excitement.
- Security—especially if they feel their neighborhood is not safe.
- A feeling of importance.
- A sense of belonging.

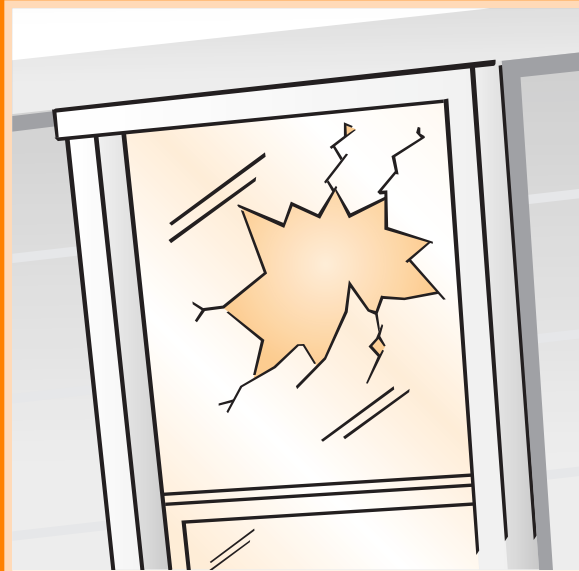
There are many ways to join a gang. New gang members may:

- “Walk in”—simply announce they want to become members.
- Be “jumped in”—forced to withstand a beating for a specific amount of time.
- Be “sexed in”—girls forced to have sexual intercourse with one or more gang members.
- Be forced to commit a crime or an act of violence.

How can I tell if my child is a member of a gang?

The following may be signs of gang involvement:

- Staying away from home for several nights.
- Staying away from school for days at a time.
- Abrupt changes in personality and physical appearance.
- Wearing a particular color and avoiding other colors.
- Adopting emblems.
- A sudden need for money or having large amounts of unexplained cash.
- A sudden drop in grades.
- Drawing graffiti on notebooks, backpacks and other items.



How can I tell if gangs are operating in my community?

Look for the following signs of gang activity in your community. Usually if gangs are present you will see more than one of these signs:

- **Graffiti.** Graffiti marks a gang's turf. Rival gangs may "cross out" another gang's graffiti. A "cross out" may indicate that some form of retaliation may take place.
- **Colors.** Gang members often wear identifying colors on bandannas, clothing, hats, shoes and other attire.
- **An increase in vandalism.**
- **An increase in drug activity.** Gangs often finance activities through drug sales.

If you are concerned about gang activity in your community, check with your child's school and your local police.

How can I keep my child out of a gang?

- **Spend time with your child.** Kids who resist joining gangs have a sense of security and belonging.
- **Help your child find positive things to do after school.** Help your child get involved in athletics, community or religious activities, music or a part-time job.
- **Be suspicious.** If you have a feeling that something may not be right, trust your instincts.
- **Get involved.** Work with school and community groups that combat gang activity.
- **Be informed.** Keep up with your local news. Attend parent meetings at your child's school. Get to know teachers, school administrators and other parents.

Gang members often say having just one adult who cared would have kept them out of a gang.

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