

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

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Children and Gangs

Gangs are groups of children, adolescents and young adults who share a common identity and are involved in wrongful or delinquent activities. Most gang members tend to be adolescents or young adults, however, recent trends indicate that children are being recruited into gangs at a much earlier age, some when they are in elementary school. Traditionally, gang activity has been confined to cities but gangs are no longer just in large cities, they also exist in smaller towns and rural areas. Gangs can include people of every gender, race, culture and socioeconomic group.

Some children and adolescents are motivated to join a gang for a sense of connection or to define a new sense of who they are. Others are motivated by peer pressure, a need to protect themselves and their family, because a family member also is in a gang, or to make money.

One of the worst effects of gang membership is the exposure to violence. Gang members may be pressured to commit a crime to become part of the gang. Consequences of gang membership may include exposure to drugs and alcohol, age-inappropriate sexual behavior, difficulty finding a job because of lack of education and work skills, removal from ones family, imprisonment and even death.

Risk factors that can lead children and adolescents to join a gang include:

- Growing up in an area with heavy gang activity
- A history of gang involvement in the family (family members who are current or former gang members)
- A history of violence in the home
- Too little adult supervision
- Unstructured free time, particularly during after-school hours and on the weekends
- A lack of positive roles models and exposure to media (television, movies, music) that glorifies gang violence
- Low self esteem
- Sense of hopelessness about the future because of limited educational or financial opportunity
- Underlying mental-health issues or behavioral disorders, such as oppositional defiance disorder (ODD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Parents can help to decrease the risk that their child will become involved in a gang by:

- Closely monitoring where their child is and what they are doing

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- Involving them in extracurricular activities such as afterschool programs, or athletics, art, community organizations or religious groups.
- Meeting their children’s friends and their parents.
- Not allowing children to wear, write, or gesture any gang-associated graffiti, markings, signs, or symbols.
- Educating your child about the potential negative consequences of gang involvement and criminal behavior
- Letting your child know that gang members can end up injured, dead or in jail

There are many signs that parents and guardians can use to tell if a child is involved in a gang. These include:

- Having unexplained money, items, or clothing
- Wearing clothing of all one type, style, or color, or changing appearance with special haircuts, tattoos or other body markings
- Using of hand signs, special slang or words with hidden messages, or having gang graffiti on walls or personal items
- Associating with known gang members
- Withdrawing from family, not obeying curfews, worsening attitude with adults and peers
- Using or possessing drugs
- Carrying weapons

If you have concerns that your child is involved in a gang, it is important to discuss it with them. Confronting a child who is suspected of gang activity is not easy. Parents and children may fear gang retaliation. They may worry about giving up protection or money that they receive because of their child’s gang involvement. Parents may have to deal with the legal consequences of their child’s past behavior. However it is important to intervene to protect your child from drugs and violence and criminal activity. If you suspect your child is involved in gang activity, access agencies in your community for help. You can involve your child in other activities and limit unstructured time. Many communities have local gang prevention task forces. Police departments have Juvenile Officers who are willing to meet with parents to with early gang intervention. Juvenile Officers are familiar with gang behaviors and repeat offenders, and can tell you if your child is on dangerous path. A trained mental health professional can help parents evaluate and treat mental health problems that may have contributed to gang involvement.

For additional information see Facts for Families:

[ADHD #6](#)

[Conduct Disorder #33](#)

[Oppositional Defiant Disorder #72](#)

[Discipline #43](#)

[Fighting, Biting #81](#)

[Firearms #37](#)

[Role Models #99](#)

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[Violence on TV #13](#)

[Violent Behavior #55, #01](#)

[Music/Music Videos #40](#)

Recommended Websites for further information on gang prevention and identification:

National Gang Center: <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/>

National Youth Gang Center: www.iir.com/nygc

US Department of Justice: <http://www.ojjdp.gov/programs/antigang/>

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You may also mail in your contribution. Please make checks payable to the AACAP and send to **Campaign for America's Kids**, P.O. Box 96106, Washington, DC 20090.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 8,500 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

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