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# Parents can help prevent gangs!



McGruff® the Crime Dog here. Let's face it, gangs are a big problem – and not just in cities. Gangs now exist in the suburbs and small towns of every state – maybe even where you live. And while we don't like to think about it, any child may be vulnerable. So what can you – a parent – do to help prevent kids from associating with gangs? Take some tips from me, and let's "Take A Bite Out Of Crime!"

As a parent, you have a lot going on. You maintain a home, you may work one or more jobs outside the home – all while raising a family. Unfortunately, as you try to make sure your child is safe at all times, there may be a gang looking to pull your child into a less safe life. But there is no need to live in fear! Concerned parents like you can provide the most effective ways to counter gangs. By understanding gangs and talking to your child about them, you can do a lot to help keep your child safer.

## What is a gang?

In general, a gang is a group with a leader whose activities are either criminal or, at the very least, threatening to the community. Gangs can hurt, and sometimes kill, people. Sometimes they destroy property, deal in drugs and weapons, or steal. Gangs cause fear in the neighborhood, which in turn drives out businesses and residents. Gangs can take over communities.

Gang members can come from all ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. Although gangs can be centered around race or ethnicity, many have members of all races. Most gang members are male, and while most are in their teens and twenties, many are as young as 8. Others may be in their thirties or forties, or may be even older.

## Why do kids join gangs?

Kids give different reasons for joining gangs, but the most common are to feel important and to be part of a group. They join for excitement, to earn money, and to be with friends. Many kids give in to gangs just so they can walk around the neighborhood without fear of being attacked. And for some kids, being part of a gang is a family tradition.

Although it may seem strange to people who obey the law, kids join gangs because the group meets basic human needs and offers socialization skills they did not get at home or at school. The better you understand and try to meet your child's needs, the less your child will go elsewhere to fulfill those needs. That's why it is so important for all parents to be aware of gangs and the possibility that gangs may try to influence your child.



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## What are the signs that my child might be in a gang?

As a parent, you may not be aware that your child is involved with a gang. Even if your child is not involved, you may be surprised to know how much he or she knows about gangs or tries to imitate gang members (imitators are known as “wannabes” and may be mistaken for a gang member by a rival gang). Watch for these patterns in your child:

- changes types of friends
- changes dress habits, including getting tattoos and/or wearing the same color combinations (for example, professional sports team clothing) all the time
- uses strange hand signals, a new nickname, or unfamiliar slang vocabulary
- writes or has gang symbols on books or clothing or in drawings
- is secretive about activities and/or ignores curfews

- has extra cash from unknown sources
- possesses a weapon
- shows declining interest in school, family, and hobbies
- has been arrested or detained by police

If you notice any of these things, you should not automatically assume your child is in a gang, nor should you accuse him or her of being in a gang. Rather, use these signs as an incentive to sit down and talk with your child about the dangers of gangs.

## How can I prevent my child from joining a gang?

- Show your child lots of affection, and spend time together every day.
- Know the activities in which your children are involved, and help them get involved in the arts, athletics, or whatever activities interest them. Take an active role in their interests.
- Get to know your child’s friends and their families.
- Emphasize the importance of education, and help your kid do his or her best in school. Don’t let your kid drop out!
- Praise your children for doing well, and encourage them to use their abilities to the fullest.
- Let your child know that he or she doesn’t need a gang! Talk with your child about your values and why gangs are dangerous. Listen to your child.



## What can the community do to help prevent gangs?

In addition to your efforts, the community can – and should – play a very important role in preventing kids from getting tangled up in gangs. The more aware a community is, the better prepared it is to deal with gang problems. As a parent, you have the power to motivate other parents, the police, community agencies, and schools to get more involved. So take action!

- Create positive alternatives. Are there afterschool and weekend programs, such as sports or tutoring, for kids in your community? Do the schools offer their facilities after hours?
- Work with other parents. Talk to and support each other. What do they think?

- Find out the extent of your community’s gang problem, and ask local agencies to help out. Band together with the police, community groups, businesses, and schools. Also contact priests or ministers, counselors, PTAs, YMCAs, YWCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, scouts, and similar groups. And don’t forget to include community kids in your efforts!
- Join a neighborhood watch, or start your own if one doesn’t already exist in your area. Inform the police of any graffiti or suspicious behavior. Put together and distribute a newsletter about what the neighborhood is doing to combat gangs. Stop gangs before they start! Don’t let them destroy your neighborhood!

*Encourage your kids to get involved in athletics, the arts, or whatever positive activities interest them.*



### *Grffiti and gangs*

*Is there graffiti in your neighborhood? It may be the work of a gang or gangs. Gangs use graffiti to mark their territory and send warnings to rival gangs. If the neighborhood lets the graffiti stand, gangs see that as giving in to them. They think they can control your community. So paint over graffiti as soon as possible and as often as needed (with the property owner’s permission, of course). This sends the message to gangs that they are not welcome in your neighborhood, and their actions will not be tolerated!*

*Some communities even have graffiti removal programs in which volunteers will remove the graffiti for free. Call your local police to find out.*