

Kids and Gangs

A Guide to Gang Prevention for Parents

Information adapted from "Drug Free Children and Teens"
by the National PTA.

Whether you realize it or not, your children can be at risk to join gangs. The reasons that kids join gangs are complex and varied. However, as a parent, you have a lot more power to keep your children from joining gangs than you may think. The time to begin is now, whether your child is 5, 10, or 15 years old.

YOUR CHILDREN NEED GOOD SOCIAL SKILLS

Children and teens who have good skills to deal with other people are less likely to join gangs or be involved in negative behavior. To build self-confidence and respect for others in children, parents need to teach them the following:

- **Honest communication.** Children need to learn to express feelings such as anger, joy, love, and fear. They must believe it is okay for them to express these feelings without being teased or punished. Since children learn by example, you also must express your feelings honestly. Be a good listener. This helps teach your children to be good listeners, too.
- **Cooperation.** Children must learn to cooperate, negotiate, and put themselves in another person's shoes. Practice by talking about what TV programs to watch or where to go on vacation. Praise your children for cooperating, especially when they are able to work out a compromise.
- **Personal responsibility.** Teach your children to be responsible for their actions. Give them family jobs for which they are responsible. Make sure they are able to handle the tasks. Gradually increase their responsibilities. Let them know that even if they do not get it right at first, what counts is that they are trying hard and learning from experience.
- **Ability to make decisions.** Instead of solving problems for your children, give them chances to think about solutions for the problem. Help them think about the choices they have, and the consequences for each choice.
- **Ability to give and receive unconditional love.** Love your children for who they are, regardless of what they do or how well they do in school, sports, or other activities. Even if you are angry at them, let them know that you still love and respect them. Help your children learn that they can feel angry at someone and still love them.

YOUR CHILDREN NEED A BALANCE BETWEEN LOVE AND DISCIPLINE

Children may join a gang to gain a sense of belonging. To show your children that they are loved and valued:

- Spend time alone with each child. It doesn't matter what you do, as long as it helps you get to know each other better.
- Plan family time. Make time for your family to play, eat meals together, and take trips (even to local parks or activities), keep family traditions, and have family meetings to talk about plans, feelings, and complaints.
- Listen to your children and ask their opinions. Help your children talk with you without fear of punishment. Even 5-year-olds have a lot to offer if you give them a chance. Do not talk down to your children. Even though adults are older, children's thoughts and feelings deserve respect.
- Talk to your children about ways to deal with pressure from friends. Help your children make up some simple ways to respond to peer pressure. For example, if your child is challenged by a peer who says, "If you are my friend, you would," your child can respond, "If you were my friend, you wouldn't ask." Then, he/she should walk away.
- Set firm limits with your children and teens. Set a few simple rules in your home. Children and teenagers need to know clearly what is expected of them, and the consequences for acting otherwise. Do not rescue your children from the consequences of their decisions.

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT THE DANGERS OF GANGS

Learn about gang activity in your area. Talk to your children about the negative things that gangs do, and how they can affect your child, their friends, your neighborhood, and your family.

- Do not allow your children to dress in gang-style clothing. Explain to your children that these clothing items can put them in danger, and that you will not purchase them or allow them to be worn. If you are not familiar with these items, contact your local police department for more specific information about gangs in your area.
- Point out violent messages on television and in movies. Violence is not a solution for problems. Talk to your children about ways that they can solve their problems without fighting or violence. Demonstrate these strategies in your own life.
- Get to know your child's friends and the friends' parents. Be aware of their attitudes towards drugs, alcohol, and gangs. When children start to feel pressure to use drugs or join gangs, it usually comes from their friends.
- Start educating your children at an early age. While 5-year-olds may not understand about the effects of joining a gang, they can learn to say "no" to negative behavior. Give your kids consistent messages about the negative consequences of gang activities. Teach your children about recreational activities that they will enjoy, as well as hobbies and interests. These things can replace gangs as something for kids to do.

Information adapted by Michelle Arciaga, and reprinted with the permission of the Salt Lake Area Gang Project, Salt Lake City, UT.