

# Worried about gangs and knife crime?

## The risk of joining gangs

Gang members are more likely to be involved in group violence, drug use and other illegal behaviour – and a criminal record lasts for a lifetime. It can stop someone getting into university or college, getting a job, or travelling abroad. It can cost lives.

Research has shown that even if a person leaves the gang, the consequences can last well into adulthood. A former gang member is at a significantly higher risk of being incarcerated and receiving illegal income, less likely to have finished school and more likely to be in poor health, receiving government assistance or struggling with drug abuse.

## Why young people join gangs

There are many reasons a young person might join a gang. The reasons make sense to them, even if we as adults can't understand them.

- Respect and status
- Friendship
- A sense of belonging
- Excitement
- A substitute family
- Power
- Protection or safety
- Money
- Peer pressure

## How to tell if your child is in a gang

There are signs you as a parent or guardian can watch out for that may mean your child is involved in a gang. However, many of them can be normal teenage behaviours and it is important not to jump to conclusions or make accusations.

- A new group of friends
- Ignoring or no longer spending time with old friends
- Withdrawing from the family
- New nickname
- Dropping positive activities like sport
- Urgent or secretive calls or texts
- Frequent mention of a friend who seems to have a lot of influence on them
- Specific dress style
- Graffiti-style tags on possessions

- Speaking with new slang or in an aggressive tone
- Poor school results, loss of interest in or skipping school
- Unexplained money or new possessions
- Unexplained physical injuries
- Listening to music with violent content or which glorifies gang culture
- Staying out at night or going missing

## **How to stop your child becoming involved in a gang**

### **Regular, open communication is important**

Your child needs to see you as a person they can come to if they experience problems or pressure from friends. Talk about gangs directly, explaining the dangers of being in a gang, and the serious consequences of violent or illegal behaviour. If it helps, use reports in the news, or storylines on television programmes as a starting point. Your son or daughter may know more than you think and will have opinions.

### **Be a role model**

Teach by example – how to cope with pressure and how to deal with conflict without the use of violence. Look for ways to discipline children that do not involve harshness, anger or violence.

### **Be involved**

Get involved in your child's school activities. Know your child's friends and their families, and always know where your child is and who they're with. Be aware of what your child is doing on the internet. Don't be afraid to discuss any concerns with the school or with other parents – you can work together to watch their behaviour.

### **Offer alternatives**

Encourage your child to get involved in positive social activities such as sports. This can give young people a sense of belonging and encourage them to behave in a socially responsible way. You might also encourage them to think about their future employment. 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.

## **What to do if you think your child is involved in a gang**

It is very likely your child will be scared or unwilling to talk about the situation. It is important that they know you want to listen and support them. Most importantly, let them know that they have a choice.

Stay calm and rational when talking about the issues and listen carefully to what they have to say. Avoid anger and accusations. It's important to really try to understand the situation from their point of view.

Rather than issuing instructions or ultimatums, come to an agreement together about what to do next.

## Girls and gangs

Girls can be affected by gangs, but their involvement may be harder to spot. They might be gang members, or they may be connected to gang members (sisters, girlfriends, friends, cousins, daughters), and so be at risk of emotional, physical and sexual violence. They may be asked to hide weapons or drugs or be targeted by male gang members in acts of revenge or gang initiations.

Many girls who are involved with gangs may believe that what they are being pressured, forced or choosing to do is acceptable, even normal. They may not realise that what is happening to them is wrong, or they may be afraid of what might happen if they tell anyone.

Some signs that a girl you know might be involved with a gang include:

- Changes in physical appearance (for example wearing more 'adult' clothes, or wearing baggy clothes and makeup or, conversely no make-up when they have previously worn it)
- Unexplained money or possessions
- Getting involved in fights
- Committing crimes such as shoplifting
- Regularly staying out late or going missing from home
- Abusing drugs and/or alcohol
- Physical injuries (which may indicate violence from others and/or self-harming)
- Refusing to seek medical help for such injuries and becoming fearful and/or withdrawn and/or prone to unexplained outbursts of anger

## What the law says

Gangs are often involved in violence and other criminal activity. If your child is involved, even if they did not actually commit a crime, they can be charged. For example, if your child provided support or encouragement to a fellow gang member who committed a robbery or injured someone, they too can be charged with the same offence. This is called a joint enterprise.

- It is illegal to carry a knife in a in a public place, even if it belongs to someone else
- It is illegal to carry a folding pocketknife if the edge of the blade exceeds 3 inches
- It is illegal to carry a pocketknife if the blade can be locked
- It is illegal to carry any knife, including folding knives, if there is intent to use it as a weapon, even if it belongs to someone else

- The maximum sentence for possessing a knife in a public place without a good excuse has been increased from two to four years for 16-17-year olds and adults
- It is illegal to keep any prohibited firearm, or to carry any firearm including an imitation – in public, even if you are carrying it for someone else
- The maximum sentence for unlawful possession of a prohibited firearm is ten years. The minimum sentence is three years for 16-17-year old's and five years for adults
- Police can and will search someone if they believe they are carrying a gun, knife or other weapon
- Police and school staff can also search young people for weapons at school

For more information on what the law says about carrying weapons visit the [Gov.uk website](https://www.gov.uk)

Committing a crime and ending up with a criminal record will affect the rest of a young person's life. Having a criminal record can prevent a young person getting a job, going to university or college and even travelling abroad.

You should call 101 to report crime and other concerns that do not require an emergency response. Call 999 in an emergency.