Gang Involvement – Is it an issue for your family?

Boys and girls getting involved in street gangs and other criminal activities is a serious problem. It can have devastating effects on families, schools and communities. Joining a gang can lead to other dangers like drugs, violence and coming into contact with the justice system.

To help you determine if your child is involved in a gang, here are some signs to watch for.

**Warning signs of gang involvement**

- Changes in appearance (e.g., shows a new interest in wearing one or two specific colours of clothing)
- Odd pen marks, unexplained injuries, bruises or burns on arms, hands and body
- Gets a tattoo
- Starts using hand signs
- Money becomes a priority – your child asks for money more often, steals money or has more money than usual
- Has unexplained gifts (e.g., cell phone)
- Carries a weapon (e.g., knife, brass knuckles, etc.)
- Changes in friends, interests and activities (e.g., stays out too late or all night, doesn’t introduce new friends)
- Skips school
- Becomes more secretive
- Draws graffiti symbols and unfamiliar names on books, folders or bedroom walls
- Shows signs of drug or alcohol use
- Displays pro-gang attitudes (e.g., starts to like gangster movies, violent videos, music, etc.)

Please note: Some changes, such as being secretive, can simply be a part of typical child development. Other actions, such as carrying a weapon, are not typical and should raise immediate concerns.
**PREVENTION**

Here are some tips for parents on preventing children from joining a gang:

1. **Seek help for your child or teen**
   - If your child makes a bad choice and is in trouble, don’t hesitate to ask for help. Contact your local community agency, Friendship Centre, school or government office to see if they offer support programs for parents and families.

2. **Find parenting supports**
   - All parents can use help. There are resources in many communities that offer parenting classes (ex: community agency, parent-child coalition, Friendship Centre, family resource centre). Cultural-based programs can also be very helpful to some parents and families. Ask your local school or community centre if they know where a local parent support class is offered.

3. **Stay connected to your child**
   - Spend time with your child (ex: play games, tell stories, look at books, go for a walk). Get to know your child’s friends and their families.

4. **Spend time at your child’s school**
   - Children typically spend more time at school than at home. Stay connected to the school. Get to know your child’s teacher and other staff members. If you can, volunteer at the school. Walk your children to school or make sure they walk with a friend. Do homework together. If your child is having trouble at school, talk to your child, teachers and school counselor. If the problem continues, speak to the principal.

5. **Encourage positive activities**
   - Help your child get involved in activities after school and on weekends. There are many community centres, Friendship Centres, Boys and Girls Clubs and other resources throughout Manitoba that offer free recreation programs. Contact your local community centre, school or Band Office to ask about recreation programs in your area.

6. **Talk to your child about gangs**
   - Explain to your children how dangerous gangs are. Let your children know that gangs can not only hurt them – they can also hurt other family members. Tell your child not to hang out with gang members, go to parties organized by gangs, use hand signals or wear gang clothing.

7. **Be a positive role model and mentor**
   - Set a positive example for your child. Positive role models can have a major impact on what children think and how they behave. Is there a person in your neighbourhood that your child trusts and looks up to who could be a mentor? Positive role models and mentors can include parents, teachers, advisors or other trusted adults who care about your child.

8. **Talk to your child about drug abuse**
   - Talk with your children about the dangers of drugs. Teach them that gang members use drugs to try and lure children into their gangs. If someone is pressuring them to try drugs, teach your children to say no. Kids whose parents talk to them about drugs are less likely to begin using them.

**TIPS!**

- **Prevent your child from joining a gang**
- **Start while they're young**
- **You can make a difference**

**Children get involved in gangs for a number of reasons.** Often they will join a gang to feel like they belong or fit in. They may not feel that sense of belonging at home or at school. Others feel scared in their neighbourhood, and believe that joining a gang will protect them. For some young people the need or desire for money can be hard to turn down.

**Gangs – What is the attraction?**

- Many parents know the dangers of joining a gang, but don’t know how to talk to their kids about it. They may feel their words won’t have any impact on the child’s behaviour. The truth is, though they may not appear to be listening, children do hear what parents say. And parents can influence how their children behave and the choices they make.

- Most parents can use help. There are resources in many communities that offer parenting classes (ex: community agency, parent-child coalition, Family Resource Centre). Cultural-based programs can also be very helpful to some parents and families. Ask your local school or community centre if they know where a local parent support class is offered.

If you think your child may be involved in gang activity, you need to be more aware than ever before. Be nosy, if that’s what it takes to get information. Remember, your child could be in danger.

**Visit www.gov.mb.ca/crystalmeth/index.html to view the handbook, or call toll free 1-866-626-4862 to receive a copy.**

**Website:** www.gov.mb.ca/health/mh/links.html#addictions. **Or call:** Addictions Foundation of Manitoba 1-866-638-2568 (Winnipeg); 1-866-767-3838 (Brandon); 1-866-291-7774 (Thompson); 946-9400 (Winnipeg); 269-3430 (St. Norbert); 536-8395 (Winnipeg).