



Fairfax County Gang Prevention Guide

As a child's parent or family member or an adult in the community, you have a major role to play in protecting children from harm — including preventing them from joining a gang or participating in gang activities.

Use this tool to help navigate the difficult conversations we all need to have with our children.

We are all in this **together.** 

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Gangs in Fairfax County

What is a gang?

A gang is a group of people who use a group name and get involved in illegal activities. Crimes among gangs can include drug dealing, theft, assault, rape, prostitution, and murder. These gangs rob children of their chance for a good future.

Are there gangs in Fairfax County?

Yes. Gangs operate in thousands of communities across the United States, including many places in Virginia. Fairfax County is one of them. The Fairfax County Police Department has identified more than 80 gangs here.

Gang Recruitment

Gangs start recruiting children as young as age 9. They most often recruit boys, but girls also can be targeted. Nationwide, about 1 in 10 gang members are female.

How do gangs recruit young people?

Gangs tell youths what they want to hear. For example, children may be told that gangs will:

- Make them part of a “family.”
- Give them a lot of money or nice things.
- Keep them safe from other gangs.
- Offer them fun and excitement.

In addition, gangs often tell girls that they are beautiful and tell boys that girls will like them if they join the gang.

Why do young people join gangs?

Young people most often join gangs to fill a need to be loved and accepted. Some may be seeking money, protection, excitement, or to increase their self-esteem. Friends or family members who are already gang members may encourage or pressure them to join.

Young people are more likely to become gang members when they:

- Do not feel connected with family members, the community, schools, or churches or other houses of worship.
- Witness or are affected by violence against family members.
- Do not feel good about themselves.
- Do not receive positive support at home or in school.
- Have too much unsupervised free time.
- Have a hard time making friends.
- Are bullied.
- Lack good decision-making skills.

Recruitment Tricks

Young people can be recruited without knowing it. For example, a gang member becomes “friends” with a youth. The relationship seems innocent at the start. Soon, the gang member introduces the youth to other gang members. These gang members slowly attempt to get the person to perform illegal tasks.

This is one reason why it is so important to talk to youths about what is happening in their lives.



Gang Prevention

How can I help keep children out of gangs?

The best way to prevent children from joining a gang is to provide them with support and alternative activities. Children are far less likely to join gangs if you:

- Sign them up for positive group activities they enjoy, such as school clubs and teams and after-school sports.
- Plan family activities as simple as a meal, walk, or community center outing.
- Get to know their friends and those friends' parents.
- Set and enforce limits.
- Make sure they understand that you are against gangs.
- Listen to their concerns.
- Teach them how to make good decisions.



Signs of Gang Involvement

These actions suggest that a child may be getting involved with a gang:

- Developing a bad attitude toward family, school, and authorities.
- Changing friends and spending time with people who are not a good influence.
- Suddenly having more money or things.
- Experiencing a drop in school grades.
- Staying out later than usual.
- Wanting an unusual amount of privacy.
- Using a new nickname, unusual slang words, new hand signs, or gang graffiti (drawn on folders, books, etc.).
- Getting tattoos, shaving lines into their eyebrows, or wearing clothing of all one color or style.
- Carrying objects that can be used as weapons.

What's the best way to talk to a child about gang-related issues?

The most important thing you can do is to be a good and active listener. Being an active listener means you:

- Ask open-ended questions like “What happened?” instead of questions that can be answered with a yes or no.
- Periodically repeat or restate what the child said. This shows you are listening and helps make sure you understood correctly.
- After repeating or restating, ask, “Is that right?” or “Is that what you meant?”
- Assure them that what they are thinking or feeling is normal, even if you don't agree with their opinion.
- Use “I” statements instead of “you” statements. For example, say, “I'm concerned that you are ...” instead of “You shouldn't be ...”



What To Do If ...

Whether you are interacting with a young child or teenager, you can make a difference as a parent, caregiver, or other adult in their life. Here are some examples of situations you may face and the best way to respond.

Situation: You notice that a youngster or teenager in your care has something new you did not buy for them, such as a cellphone, a watch, or expensive clothing or sneakers. Also, when you ask where they are going, you are given a vague reply such as “Out with friends,” “To hang out with my boyfriend,” or just “Out.”

- **DO** ask for more details, such as how they got their new things. Ask which friends they are going out with, where they are going, and when they are coming back. Let them know they cannot go out with friends until you have met them and given permission. Set rules for them to be home by a certain time and to get your approval when making plans.
- **DO NOT** shake your head and let them walk out the door, and do not let their new things go unexplained.

Situation: You learn that, at school, a youth is skipping class, failing to complete homework, or getting in fights. A school administrator, teacher, family member, neighbor, friend, or classmate tells you they saw the youth hanging out with gang members.

- **DO** explain to the youngster or teenager what you heard. Ask what is happening. Listen to what they have to say. You can enforce penalties, but also offer support for their needs, such as more positive group activities they can participate in.
- **DO NOT** yell at or lecture them. Do not only enforce penalties. Also, do not focus on the trouble they may be causing for you, such as having to take time off from work to go to a school meeting.

Situation: You are concerned that a youngster or teenager in your care is hanging out with people who are leading them in the wrong direction. You work long hours and cannot supervise them until you return home at 8 p.m.

- **DO** talk to youngsters or teenagers about activities that interest them. Sign them up for after-school and weekend group activities that match these interests. Options include clubs, soccer teams, church youth groups, and recreation center programs. Have a trusted adult pick up the youth when the activity ends. When activities are not an option, find a responsible adult they can stay with or make them check in regularly with you or a trusted adult until you are home.
- **DO NOT** lecture the youngster or teenager about the dangers of gangs, their need to be responsible, and their choice of friends.

Gang Myths and Facts

Young people are recruited into gangs, or find them appealing, based on many things that are not true. Here are some ways you can respond when talking to them about gangs.

<u>MYTH</u>	<u>FACT</u>
<i>A gang will keep me safe.</i>	You will be more at risk of imprisonment, violence from rival gangs, or even fighting in your own gang over money and power. Many people get attacked over what seems like a small thing, like saying something that is taken as an insult.
<i>A gang will give me a better life, because I will get money and nice things.</i>	Any money you get won't last long. You'll live in constant fear of getting caught, be more likely to end up in prison, and reduce your chances of getting future jobs.
<i>In a gang, someone will always have my back.</i>	Gang members are all about money, not loyalty. You are a friend only as long as you are useful to them. They will pin the blame on you to avoid getting in trouble themselves, because they can just recruit someone new to replace you.
<i>Gang life is exciting.</i>	You will always be looking over your shoulder out of fear of being caught, injured, or killed.

For More Help

Fairfax County and other regional programs offer many ways to learn more about how to talk to youths, teach them how to make good decisions, and prevent them from joining gangs.

These include:

- Fairfax County Gang Prevention, at fairfaxcounty.gov/gangprevention
- Fairfax County Gang Prevention Hotline, at **1-866-914-GANG (4264)**
- Northern Virginia Family Service's Intervention, Prevention and Education program, at **571-748-2549**
- Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force, at **703-GET-HELP (438-4357)**
- Fairfax County Public Schools Student Safety and Wellness Office, at **571-423-4270**
- Fairfax County's Three to Succeed, at fairfaxcounty.gov/health-humanservices/3-succeed

For a full list of resources, visit fairfaxcounty.gov/gangprevention/resources.



Fairfax County is committed to nondiscrimination on the basis of disability in all county programs, services, and activities. For information, call **703-246-2901, TTY 771**.

La Central Fairfax on Facebook

For more tools and resources to help you make a difference in a young person's life, follow **@LaCentralFairfax** on Facebook — your go-to community resource.

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