



## **NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH NEWS**

Volume 15, Issue 9

West Valley Senior Lead Office (818) 374-7630  
Sergeant Randy Hoffmaster - Sergeant Chris Rowland

September 2011

### **Joining a Gang: How to Help Kids Prevent it, How to Tell if They've Joined One, How to Help Them Out**

While youth gangs are nothing new -- they've been traced back to the early 19th century -- the demographic of a youth gang is something that is constantly changing. Many people stereotype gang members as urban, inner city males from racial minorities, but in fact gangs are a problem in suburbs as well as cities, for all races and for girls as well as boys.

There are about 750,000 gang members in the United States, according to estimates by the U.S. Department of Justice, and one-third of them are under the age of 18. And while it's still true that men account for the majority of gang members-more than 90 percent are male. Gang membership among women is becoming increasingly more common.

#### **What Exactly is a Gang?**

Every gang has its own requirements and characteristics, but the U.S. Department of Justice says that all gangs have one thing in common: "A group must be involved in a pattern of criminal acts to be considered a youth gang."

Similarly, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines a gang as, "A criminal enterprise having an organizational structure, acting as a continuing criminal conspiracy, which employs violence and any other criminal activity to sustain the enterprise."

Additionally, gangs typically:

- Develop around racial and ethnic lines
- Are typically male-dominated with some female members, though female gangs are on the increase
- Center on a specific territory
- Act as an organization that may be part of a larger group
- Display symbols associated with their gang through clothing, tattoos, graffiti, hand signals and language

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## **Why Kids Join Gangs**

According to a White House fact sheet for the new youth initiative aimed at protecting America's youth from gangs, an overwhelming number of violent U.S. criminals like those in gangs grow up in single-mother households with no father around. It's also been shown that kids who are involved with their family, school and community are less likely to be involved in risky behavior, like joining a gang.

This may explain why, generally, kids join gangs to feel like they belong and have a sense of purpose. In fact, kids join gangs for many of the same reasons that kids join any group, like a soccer team or Boy Scouts:

- Looking for a sense of self-worth, belonging and commitment
- Seeking structure and discipline
- Companionship
- A need for recognition, higher status and acceptance
- Excitement and something to do

Additionally, kids may join gangs because of a:

- Need for protection
- Family tradition
- Need for money (kids in gangs can earn cash from drug trades)

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## **How to Keep Your Kids Away From Gangs**

Since most kids who join gangs do so because they are looking for a social network, for a group to belong to, ensuring that your child gets plenty of love and support at home and through positive activities is the key in keeping them away from gangs.

Such was the case with David Danisa, a young man who could have easily fallen prey to gangs himself as friends around him joined steadily. Instead, Danisa and friend Jurell Spivey joined school programs and even got involved into keeping younger kids out of gangs.

"There are a lot of pressures in high school," says Danisa. "If you have people who are helping you out in programs, you start having more self-respect. You can fight through the hard stuff." And, to put it simply, after your day gets filled up with sports, volunteering and other activities, "You don't have time to do anything bad," Danisa said.

Aside from enrolling your kids in community or school youth programs from an early age, the following tips can also help:

- Encourage your child to think independently
- Take an active interest in his/her life: Be involved!
- Get to know your child's friends and encourage healthy friendships
- Teach your child coping strategies to deal with hard times
- Support your child with words and actions to instill in them a sense of self-esteem and personal responsibility
- Discourage too much exposure to media influences that glorify drugs, sex, gangs and violence to kids

## **RESEDA:**

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**Next Neighborhood Watch Meetings – Thursday, September 8, - 7:00 p.m.**  
**Thursday, October 6 – 7:00 p.m.**

**Ann Kinzle Community Room located in the L.A.P.D. West Valley Area Station**

## **Signs Your Child May Involved in a Gang**

- Red or blue or professional sports team baseball hats worn toward one side or backward
- Red or blue bandanas worn on the head, tied to a belt loop or sticking out of a pocket
- White T-shirts worn under plaid shirts, worn open or buttoned only at the collar
- Jeans or pressed Khakis (along with other items)
- Colored shoelaces
- One pant leg rolled up
- Baggy, oversized pants with boxers showing
- Teardrop or spider web tattoos on neck or next to thumb
- Tattoos or words on knuckles
- Gang names tattooed on body
- Hand signs used as a form of communication
- Drawing gang-related graffiti (crowns, stars, hearts, pitchforks, gang's name)
- Friends belong to gangs
- Using a nickname or "pet" name
- Spending lots of time away from home
- Doing poorly in school, or dropping out
- Sudden increases in material possessions
- Continually wearing the same clothing

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### **What Parents Can Do**

**Talk to them.** The best way to teach your kids right and wrong is for you, as parents, to talk to your kids on a **daily** basis. Instead of avoiding certain subjects such as gangs or other violent activity, go ahead and confront the issue. Explain to them the consequences of getting caught up in those groups. Be open to discussion with your kids and if they come to you with question sit them down and listen to them. Sometimes a lack of communication is what causes children to look elsewhere for guidance.

**Sign them up for sports/activities.** Many children find themselves hanging around gangs because of a lack of things to do or boredom. Instead of playing sports or other extracurricular activities they find themselves hanging around gangs to fill their time. See what your kid is interested in and then sign them up for that activity at a local park. This gives them something to do and they can find friends through these sports.

**Initiate a watch group.** As parents, one direct way you can help stop your children, and other children, from joining gangs is to start or be involved in neighborhood watch groups. These groups help keep an eye on activity in the neighborhood and report anything suspicious. This stops gangs from finding a safe place to loiter and hang around. Find or start a neighborhood watch group and help keep your neighborhood safe.

**Parents need to be involved more in their kids' lives. Many children find a lack of parental oversight and leadership as a way to go elsewhere for that leadership. This is where they find gangs as a place to be accepted and to find friends. Help stop this problem by being a part of your children's life and keeping them safe from any trouble.**

**Develop positive alternatives.** Are there after-school and weekend activities kids can enjoy? Can the school offer its facilities? Can parents organize clubs or sports? Can older kids tutor or mentor younger ones? Can the kids themselves help with ideas?

**Work with police and other agencies.** Report all suspicious activity; set up a Neighborhood Watch or a community patrol; let the police know about gang graffiti; get (and share) the facts on the gang problem in your community; find out what local services—non-profit as well as government—will work with communities to help avoid gang problems.

If you suspect gang activity in your neighborhood, contact the police immediately. Gangs often lead to crime problems, and the police should be made aware of any potential problem areas. For issue with gang problems in the Encino, Lake Balboa, Reseda or Tarzana areas please contact L.A.P.D. West Valley Area at (818) 374-3786.