

A Pro-Active Approach to Gang Prevention

People are often surprised to learn of the gang presence in McHenry County. It is not time to live in denial, however it is also not time to panic. It is true that some of our youth are involved in gangs and gang activity, but there are signs that parents can watch for and ways they can be pro-active in prevention and intervention efforts.

In working with gang involved youth over the years it has become clear that young people are attracted to gangs because gangs provide a lifestyle that meets specific needs. One “recovering” gang member I worked with was a recruiter for his gang and shared that it was his job to identify an individual’s needs that were not being met elsewhere and then come along side him and offer assistance in those areas. He stated that if the child was being bullied, he provided protection. If he had poor social skills and had a difficult time making friends he became his friend. If he was shy and uncomfortable talking to girls he would introduce him to girls and role model appropriate interaction. If he was angry or depressed, he was there to offer drugs to help ease the feelings. If he was bored, he was there to offer excitement.

What this young man said, and what I believe to be true, is that if the family was not there, he was. His message to parents was “Know where your kids are, who they are with and what they are doing. Take care of your kids, or I will”. He shared that many times parents would drop their children off at the mall for the day, assuming they spent their time shopping. In reality, he met them there, took them off for a “good time” and returned them to the mall in time for their parents to pick them up.

While it is clearly essential that parents stay involved with their children as this young man suggested, it is obviously impossible to be with them at all times. It is therefore essential that as caretakers we are aware of signs to look for in efforts to keep our children safe and away from the influence of gangs.

The following are signs to be aware of, however keep in mind that any of these signs does not in and of itself indicate that your child is involved with a gang. These are simply early warning signs suggesting that there may be a problem that requires your attention.

- Change in peer group
- Becomes secretive and vague about activities
- Drop in grades and or school attendance
- Aggressive behavior with authority figures
- Practices/writes graffiti
- Uses street nicknames to describe self/others
- Uses gang/street slang
- Dresses predominantly in one particular color

What you can do:

- Know where your children are, know their friends and enforce rules
- Do not allow your children to wear or display any type of gang identifiers
- Occupy your children’s free time
- Maintain open communication with your children
- Spend time with your children
- Set limits
- Participate in the education of your children
- Share with your children your firm stand against gang activity
- Set a good example and be an active parent
- If you see a problem, don’t wait - get help!*