



## **Safeguarding Children from Involvement in Gang Activity**

A gang has been described as a “relatively durable group who have a collective identity and meet frequently. They are predominantly street-based groups of young people who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is integral to the groups’ identity.” Children looked after are vulnerable to radicalisation and child sexual exploitation, but they are also at risk of becoming involved in gang activity and becoming involved in criminal exploitation such as ‘County Lines’ because of:

- Low self-esteem,
- Low resilience,
- Attachment difficulties,
- Family or friends who are involved in gang activity,
- An acceptance of exploitation, violence (including domestic violence), misuse of alcohol and drugs arising from past experience of abuse and/or neglect,
- An increased likelihood of contact with young people who are actively involved in gangs if they are currently in secure or residential units.

The problem of gang involvement is a multi-agency issue; working in partnership and information sharing is vital to safeguarding children and young people at risk of gang-related harm. Safeguarding needs to focus on those young people who are on the edge of becoming involved in gangs as well as those who are actively involved. It is important to recognise that a young person may be both a perpetrator and a victim. Research shows that the more a child is involved in a gang, the less likely they are to talk about it. However, if a child does talk about gang involvement, carers and professionals should always take what the child tells them seriously. Some indicators of gang involvement are:

- sudden loss of interest in school accompanied by a decline in attendance or academic achievement,
- becoming emotionally “switched off”, but also showing signs of frustration and/or rage,
- starting to use new or unknown slang words, unusual ways of talking or hand signs,
- staying out unusually late or regularly breaking an agreed curfew,
- sudden changes in appearance - dressing in a particular style or ‘uniform’ similar to that of other young people they are mixing with,
- no longer wanting to attend leisure, sport or social activities,
- unexplained physical injuries and refusal to seek medical treatment,
- talking about another young person who seems to have a lot of influence over them,
- associating with known or suspected gang members,
- expressing aggressive or intimidating views towards other groups of young people, some of whom may have been friends in the past,

- avoiding or being scared to go into certain areas,
- concern about the presence of unknown youths in their neighborhood.

Most gang members are male, although there are female gangs and gang members. They are often subservient and used to carry or hide weapons or drugs. Girls are very vulnerable within the gang hierarchy, as initiation rituals or threats from one gang to another often involve sexual violence. Research shows that girls are reluctant to identify or report their attackers or seek medical treatment. Female gang members are often involved in recruiting other girls in their school or social network, with younger girls being targeted as they are seen as easier to coerce and intimidate. Once involved, both male and female members can become bound into the gang through the fear of retaliation if they leave, or the risk of violence from opposing gangs.

### What do children need?

Discussions on this topic need to be sensitive and non-judgmental. Young people may be facing dangerous and potentially fatal challenges, just because they enter the 'wrong territory' or reject the prevalent drug culture. It is important that we don't define the children and young people we care for by their past experiences or current behavior. Young people need to be encouraged to discuss their hopes and aspirations, as well as their fears and worries. It is vital that we praise children for their achievements, making sure that we are there for them no matter what. Due to the seriousness of gang violence and activity, statutory and voluntary Agencies are now working cooperatively to tackle the problem, trying to influence children before they are pulled into criminal activity such as County Lines.

AFA view gang activity, child sexual exploitation, trafficking and radicalization very seriously, and Placement Managers can provide information on the services and support available to protect children and young people.

Should a carer or a member of staff have concerns that a child or young person is involved, or is likely to become involved in gang activity, AFA safeguarding procedures should be followed. As with CSE and radicalisation, the Agency's Safeguarding Lead must consider, on a case by case basis whether to make a referral to the Local Authority for a multi-agency assessment to be carried out. Where a child is missing, staff and carers should refer to AFA procedures for Missing Children. See also AFA e-safety procedures.

### For Further information see

[www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) (Safeguarding children and young people who may be affected by gang activity).

### Connected Policies or guidance

Name of policy / Guidance	Relevant for
Record Keeping and Confidentiality Policy	All staff and carers
Safeguarding Policy	All staff and carers
Children Missing from Care Policy	All staff and carers
Safeguarding Children from Criminal Exploitation including 'County Lines'	Foster Carers & Placement Managers
Foster Carer Handbook	Foster Carers & Placement Managers

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