



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 their identity”. Those looked after are vulnerable to radicalisation and child sexual exploitation (CSE), but they are also at risk of becoming involved in gang activity and criminal exploitation, such as ‘County Lines’ because of:

- Low self-esteem and 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 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 those at risk of gang-related harm. Safeguarding needs to focus on those who are on the edge of becoming involved in gangs as well as those who are already actively involved and it is important to recognise that a young person may be both a perpetrator and a victim. Research shows that the more a young person is involved in a gang, the less likely they are to talk about it. However, if they do talk about gang involvement, Foster Parents and other professionals should always take what they tell 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, family 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 may be female and the latter are often subservient and used to carrying or hiding weapons or drugs. Girls are very vulnerable within the gang hierarchy, as initiation rituals or threats from one gang to another can involve sexual violence. Research shows that they 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 who are easier to coerce and intimidate, being targeted. Once involved, both male and female members can become bound into the gang through a fear of retaliation if they leave, or the risk of violence from opposing gangs.

What do Children and Young People 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 do not define those we care for by their past experiences or current behavior. They need to be encouraged to discuss their hopes and aspirations, as well as their fears and worries. It is vital that we praise them for their achievements, making sure that we are there for them no matter what. Due to the seriousness of gang violence, statutory and voluntary agencies are now working cooperatively to tackle the problem by trying to influence others before they are pulled into involvement with County Lines or gang activity.

AFA view gang activity, criminal exploitation, CSE, trafficking and radicalisation very seriously, and Fostering Social Workers can provide information on the services and support available to protect children and young people.

Should a Foster Parent 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, CE and radicalisation, AFA’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 Foster Parents should refer to AFA procedures for Missing Children. See also AFA e-safety procedures.

For Further information see

<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/crime-law/gangs/>

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/gangs-criminal-exploitation/>

<https://www.catch-22.org.uk/offers/gangs/>

<https://www.victimsupport.org.uk/you-co/types-crime/violent-crime/gangs-and-street-violence/>

<https://www.powerthefight.org.uk/>

Connected Policies or Guidance

Name of policy / Guidance	Relevant for
Record Keeping and Confidentiality Policy	All staff and Foster Parents
Safeguarding Policy	All staff and Foster Parents
Children Missing from Care Policy	All staff and Foster Parents
Safeguarding Children from Criminal Exploitation including ‘County Lines’	Foster Parents and Fostering Social Workers
Foster Parent Handbook	Foster Parents and Fostering Social Workers