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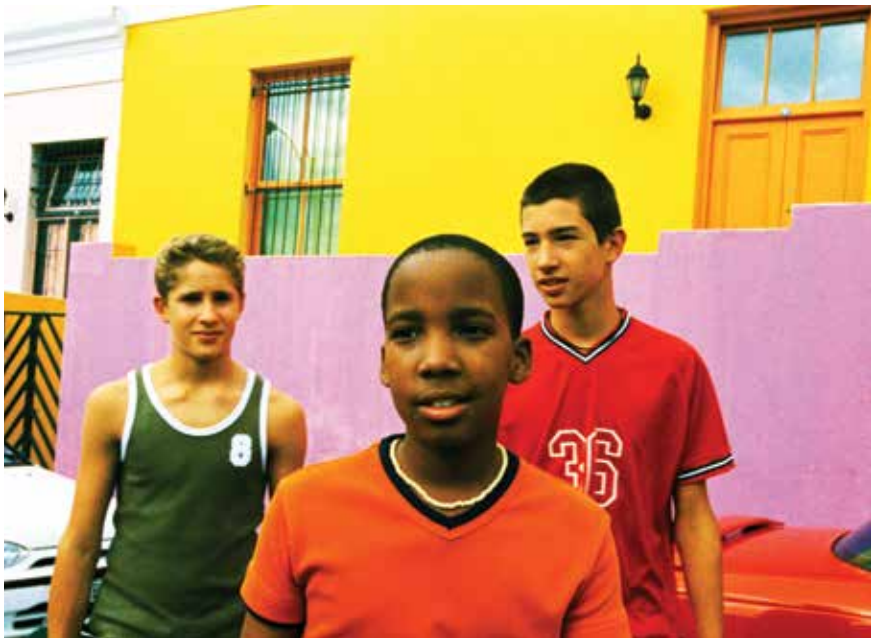
CHANGING COURSE

Preventing Gang Membership



Chapter 5. How Should We Identify and Intervene With Youth at Risk of Joining Gangs?

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How Should We Identify and Intervene With Youth at Risk of Joining Gangs?

A Developmental Approach for Children Ages 0-12

Nancy G. Guerra, Carly B. Dierkhising and Pedro R. Payne

- **Youth who grow up in poor, marginalized urban communities are more likely than other children to join gangs; however, only a relatively small minority of children in these neighborhoods join a gang.**
- **The most common age for gang-joining is 13 to 15 years old, and boys are more likely than girls to join a gang. Joining a gang should be understood as part of a life course that begins from the time a child is born (or even before).**
- **The early risk and protective factors (for children ages 0-12) for gang-joining are very similar to those for aggressive and delinquent behaviors; these behaviors increase the chances that youth will join gangs, particularly in neighborhoods with many gangs.**
- **Important risk factors for children ages 0-5 include hypervigilance to threat, cognitive impairments, insecure attachment to a caregiver and early aggressive behavior. For children ages 6-12, important risk factors include poor school performance, social information-processing skill deficits and antisocial beliefs, poor parental monitoring, and negative relationships with peers, including being rejected and victimized by peers.**
- **Protective factors for youth growing up in high-risk communities include higher levels of social-emotional competence, academic success, secure attachment and effective parenting.**
- **Only a handful of programs are specifically designed to prevent gang-joining from a young age; however, because of what we know about risk and protective factors — and how they overlap with other problems — prevention programs designed around other risky behaviors may also help prevent youth from joining a gang.**

In Brief

Gang-intervention strategies often focus on adolescents, but to help prevent youth from joining a gang, it is important that practitioners and policymakers address the developmental needs of youth from birth (or even prenatally) to age 12. In the U.S., age 12 corresponds roughly with both the start of adolescence and the transition from elementary school to middle school. Because it can be a crucial *turning point* for youth when lifestyle decisions are made, it is extremely important to begin prevention early in life — before harmful lifestyle decisions are made and before transient behaviors in childhood, such as aggression, turn into habits that are hard to break.

Early prevention is also important because risk factors during early ages can set in motion a cascade of problems that essentially shut the door to future prevention opportunities and increase risk for later problems, including delinquency, violence and gang-joining. We know that children are at risk for joining

a gang from an early age if they are hypersensitive to threat because they regularly see shootings in the neighborhood, have fallen behind in school because they can't read, or live in neighborhoods where gangs and "easy money" seem to go hand-in-hand. Because risk factors for gang-joining and other related problems start so early in life and cut across different contexts — such as communities, families, schools and peers — it is important for prevention efforts to address these many influences simultaneously through multiple coordinated strategies.

The best solution is to intervene early to prevent or overcome risk factors associated with gang-joining. A compatible strategy is to identify young at-risk teens who may be considering joining a gang but have not yet become actively involved.

In this chapter, we highlight a newly developed, innovative program for families that targets these young teens: Gang Intervention for Teens (GIFT). GIFT provides home visits and family counseling for parents of 11- and 12-year-old youth who are acting out in school and show signs of gang involvement. A joint effort between schools, law enforcement and public health, GIFT is an example of a gang-membership prevention strategy that is based on solid data regarding risk and protective factors.

Teenage boys who live in poor, inner-city neighborhoods can become "street-socialized" — as an aggressor or as a victim — to norms of violence.[1] This risk is even greater for boys who belong to gangs. Studies have shown that self-reported gang members are more often shot, shot at and involved in violent assaults than nongang members.[2] This is true for both boys and girls who claim full gang membership as well as for those who claim only an affiliation with gangs (that is, a loose connection but not actual membership).[3]

Of course, most children growing up in poor communities do *not* become gang members. Research suggests that 6 percent to 30 percent of youth from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods actually affiliate with or join a gang during their lifetime. Involvement typically begins between the ages of 13 and 15, and most gang members stay involved for only one to two years.[4] It is this subgroup of youth — those who join gangs — that commit most crime and are put at the highest risk for serious injury and death.

Because gang involvement begins in the early teenage years, it is critical for prevention programs and policies to start early, before young people join gangs. In other words, a 13-year-old does not wake up one day and decide out of the blue to join a gang: The decision is a consequence of a particular life environment, behavior and way of thinking that leads a child to adopt the gang lifestyle later on. A child whose parents are in a gang, who falls behind in elementary school, who hangs around with aggressive friends, and who lives in a neighborhood with many gangs was started on this course from a very early age.

To illustrate this downward spiral, imagine a boy who is born in a high-gang, high-violence neighborhood to a poor, young mother and a gang-involved father. Imagine that his mother did not receive adequate prenatal care and that his father went to prison shortly after his birth. His mother struggled to make ends meet, tried working multiple jobs, and had little time or patience for her child. There were no books in the house, and his mother was always too tired or too stressed to talk to him or play with him. He often heard gunshots on his block and actually saw some fights and shootings, leading him to be very jumpy and easily startled (sometimes referred to as hypervigilance). Unfortunately, the young boy also had very poor verbal skills. When he began elementary school, he clearly was not ready to learn. His language development was delayed, and he had a hard time communicating with others. He fell further and further behind his classmates, making school frustrating rather than enjoyable. He started skipping school and hanging out with members of a neighborhood gang. He would get money from them for watching out for police, hiding guns and holding drugs — all before he was 10 years old.

It is not difficult to imagine how this young boy could soon become a full-fledged gang member. It is also not difficult to understand how many different events — witnessing violence in his neighborhood, inadequate support from his family, problems in school, and the lure of an antisocial peer group — contribute to the decision to join a gang. For some youth, joining a gang is not just one possible course: It may be the only course they can see with their young eyes and limited vision.

Here is how one boy, Sanyika Shakur — also known as "Monster Kody Scott" — describes his experience:

> I first sensed my radical departure from childhood when I was suspended a month before [elementary school] graduation … not allowed to go on the grad-class outing for flashing a gang sign [in a class picture]. [The principal] was appalled and accused me of destroying a perfectly good picture. … I wasn't listening and, besides, my mind had been made up [to join a gang] weeks prior to my having gotten caught flashing the sign on the panorama picture. How I expected to get away with flashing on a photograph is beyond me! But, too, it points up my serious intent even then. For I was completely sold on becoming a gang member.[5]

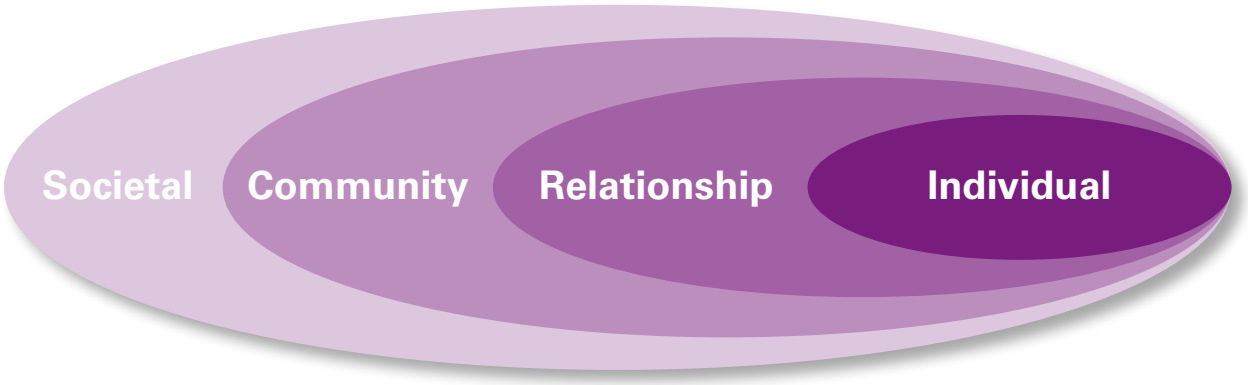
Although Shakur was barely 12 years old when he joined a gang, his decision represented the culmination of his experiences to date and reflected what he saw, at the time, as the best path for his future: a path that began somewhere much earlier in his development. His initiation was a rite of passage — a formal ritual marking the transition from child to man — that solidified this path in life, at least at that moment. But how did he get "completely sold" on becoming a gang member when he was only 12 years old? What could have been done earlier in this young man's life to change his destiny?

The answer to these questions is both simple and complex. The simple answer is: Start early and prevent risk. The complex part is determining *how* best to do this across different ages and the various contexts of community, family, school and peers.

As the figure below illustrates, children's individual development is embedded in and influenced by relationships in which they are involved, community opportunities and resources, and societal norms and practices. The influence of these different contexts also varies by age — for very young children, for example, families are the most important context; peers gain more influence later on.

To prevent youth from joining a gang, it is important to understand the most important risk factors — by

Levels of Social Influence on Youth Violence: The Social Ecological Model



SOURCE: Dahlberg LL, Krug EG. Violence — a global public health problem. In: Krug EG, Dahlberg LL, Mercy JA, Zwi AB, Lozano R, eds., *World Report on Violence and Health.* Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, 2002.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: GANG INTERVENTION FOR TEENS PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH RAUL VERGARA AND JOE DELGUIDICE

Although early prevention is the best strategy for preventing youth from joining gangs, it also is important to reach out to young teens who, for whatever reasons, are still on a path to gang involvement. Because youth join gangs around age 12 or 13, programs should reach youth during these *turning points,* when they may be contemplating joining a gang. To highlight this concept — reaching youth during a specific developmental turning point — we interviewed Sergeant Raul Vergara, with the Riverside County (CA) Gang Task Force (RCGTF), and Commander Joe DelGuidice, Assistant Director of the RCGTF and a member of the Riverside County District Attorney's Office Bureau of Investigations.

It is important to note that the Gang Intervention for Teens (GIFT) program has not yet been formally evaluated. We have chosen to highlight the program because of its innovative focus on influencing a young person's *decision* to join a gang. Also, unlike traditional delinquency-focused programs, the goal of GIFT is to prevent youth from joining gangs by identifying youth *immediately at risk of gang-joining,* and by targeting some of the risk factors that we discuss in this chapter and that are discussed in other chapters in this book.

As of September 2008, there were 391 documented gangs and more than 10,620 gang members in Riverside County; to respond to this pressing need to decrease gang activity — including keeping youth from joining gangs in the first place — the RCGTF was created. Here is a summary of our interviews with Sergeant Vergara and Commander DelGuidice.

What was the idea behind creating a new task force?

The goal was to have a countywide gang task force rather than small local task forces operating individually throughout the county. The RCGTF was designed with a three-pronged approach: prevention, intervention and suppression operations. It consists of 25 different federal, state, county and local law enforcement agencies, including the Riverside County District Attorney's Office, the Riverside County Sheriff and the Riverside County Probation Department.

We understand that you, Sergeant Vergara, spearheaded the expansion of the prevention component into Moreno Valley, a section of Riverside County.

Right. After two years of operation, we decided to expand prevention operations in Moreno Valley. Our pilot prevention program — called GIFT, Gang Intervention for Teens — was based on identifying middle school kids, beginning at age 11 or 12, who were at risk of joining a gang. It consists of four distinct phases: training, identification, home visits and documentation. In Phase One (training), gang task force officers work with school resource officers (SROs), school staff and district administrators on the goals and implementation plan of the program. A unique aspect of this program is the participation of the SROs. Because they're on school grounds, SROs are in a position to witness student fights or altercations and monitor shifts in peer groups. In fact, SROs gain valuable surveillance information about the students and their behavior patterns.

Why is that so important for prevention?

Understanding students and their behavior patterns is crucial. In Phase Two of GIFT, gang task force officers, assisted by school officials and SROs, identify at-risk juveniles. We focus mainly on children who are "on the fence" of joining a gang. For example, if a kid begins to hang out with identified gang members who they were not associated with before, they are targeted for intervention. SROs also regularly conduct large town-hall-type meetings and forums at the schools. Through these multiple techniques, they look for signs of gang association and try to identify at-risk students.

After at-risk kids have been identified, what are the next prevention strategies?

We use a personalized approach to really reach these kids by conducting home visits. This is Phase Three of the GIFT program. During these visits, members of the RCGTF and SROs sit down with the parents of the at-risk youth and provide personalized gang-awareness education. This includes showing parents what to look for in their children's behavior that may indicate an association or an attraction to the gang subculture. The students and their siblings are present during these home visitations, where they are counseled about the dangers and pitfalls of the gang lifestyle. At the conclusion of the visit, the parents are given information pamphlets containing referrals to county, state and federal resources that may provide assistance to meet the parents' particular needs in dealing with their children. Based on anecdotal feedback to the SROs, parents feel empowered by this information and report that they are better able to monitor their children, now that they know what to look for.

Explain more about the education-of-parents component of GIFT's prevention strategy.

Many parents are unaware of the full extent of their children's activities — especially as they relate to gangs. Many parents do not recognize the signs and indications of gang affiliation because they do not know what to look for. The home visitation teams often have to explain to parents that certain tattoos and markings, hand signs and gestures are associated with gang activity. Many of the tattoos are in areas of the body not readily visible. Parents have not seen these tattoos or markings because they never see their

children with their T-shirts off. Similarly, notebook drawings and scribblings may be dismissed as innocuous doodles. The officers note that, by educating the parents about common gang signs and activities, the parents are more adept to appropriately monitor their children for these risk factors. An important next step would be to provide more extensive parent training.

What happens after these home visits?

The SROs prepare detailed reports based on the home visitations, including information about the nature of the referral, the number of siblings in the house, whether or not parents have discovered gang paraphernalia in the child's room, basic information about the parents or legal guardians, intervention actions, whether the parents were cooperative during the home visit, specific gangs that youth may become involved with, and type of resource materials issued to the parents. The reports also summarize what occurred during the home visit and whether or not the child already claims to be a gangster. Although this phase of the GIFT program is still in development, the information in these reports will be used to monitor program progress and to measure the effectiveness of the program.

What challenges have you encountered in implementing prevention strategies such as those used in the GIFT program?

In terms of operations and logistics, GIFT currently uses regular duty-time wages. Materials and supplies are relatively inexpensive, but the primary cost is the time that officers are out implementing this intervention versus carrying out their regular duties. Because the home visitation is conducted mostly in the early evening when parents are back from work, the RCGTF has to use overtime wages or employ flex time.

How do you know if GIFT is working?

Determining the success of any program is always an important challenge. Although GIFT has not been formally evaluated, we do know that the program incorporates strategies that help cultivate positive and beneficial community-police relations. Once parents understand why we are there — that we are trying to prevent the kids from joining gangs — we have never had anybody shut the door in our face. That has never occurred once in the 200 or so homes we've visited. Now, people may be hesitant to let us come in, but once they do, it really breaks down the barriers. One time, for example, one of our officers was visiting parents to talk about preventing a child from joining a gang — and he was the same officer who arrested and helped incarcerate the older sibling for homicide. When the parents saw the same officer trying to prevent the tragedy from happening to the younger sibling, they began to see that officer in a different light.

What other outcomes are you seeing?

Officers have also been able to solve additional crimes by obtaining criminal intelligence as a result of their home visits. At times, crucial information is learned about other violent crimes due to the willingness of parents and children to open up and trust some of the gang task force officers. We believe that this willingness to cooperate stems primarily from the relationships that are being forged through the home visitation program. Plus, our SROs have helped us learn so much about gang signs, symbols and the gang lifestyle among families they visited.

What other prevention strategies does GIFT use?

At this point, GIFT uses a single home visit, where information about gang activities and agency referrals are provided. Although this is a lot better than what we had been doing, we know there is room to enhance the program. We need to develop a risk-driven logic model that incorporates both identification and intervention for youth at risk of joining gangs. We would also like to have a full-time SRO in each of the eight regions who's dedicated to coordinating GIFT. That person would be in charge of the liaison duties between the law enforcement agencies and the school districts as well as regular and intensive follow-up of at-risk youth on their caseload. We also see the need for increased access to mentoring and remedial programs for identified youth — and, as we learn more about unique risk factors for gang-joining, it may also be possible for the SROs to address these through additional focused activities, perhaps using an extended home visitation strategy with a more structured curriculum.

Do you have plans to formally evaluate GIFT?

We would like to see this program formally evaluated. Our goal is to prevent youth from joining gangs, and we need to know whether that is happening. We should also be aware of other valuable outcomes. For example, building relationships between the police and the community may empower families to be more proactive in preventing their children from joining gangs — and we need to capture these new relational dynamics when evaluating the effects. It's not just the specific prevention strategies we are using, like parental education and referrals, but the bond that we are forming with the community. We go in and basically talk to families from the heart, breaking down those barriers that separate us, so families see you as a human being — where, perhaps, in other situations in law enforcement, that just doesn't happen.

age and across contexts — from birth through age 12. However, because very little research has focused specifically on gang-joining from a very young age, we must rely on lessons drawn from research on related problems, such as aggression, violence and delinquency.

Risk Factors During the Very Early Years: Ages 0-5

There are no research studies of children in this age group that try to predict whether or not they will join a gang. On the other hand, there have been many studies examining early predictors of aggression, violence, delinquency, antisocial behavior and other youth problems. We believe, however, that early predictors of antisocial behavior correspond fairly well with predictors of joining gangs, particularly for children who grow up in high-crime neighborhoods with a strong gang presence.

Why consider risk for such young children, when other influences are likely to follow and shape their behavior? One important reason lies in the influence of very early developmental experiences on the wiring of the brain.[6] During the early years of life, biological "memories" are created through gene-environment interactions; in some cases, this begins as early as the prenatal period.

From an evolutionary perspective, the developing child learns to read relevant environmental features to adapt to the environment. Safe, stable and nurturing relationships with adults protect youth from adversity and enhance the long-term physical and emotional health of children. However, studies show that disruptions occur when a young child experiences threat, neglect, abuse or heightened stress.[7] This can lead young children to develop certain ways of thinking about relationships and situations that are likely to reflect a heightened sensitivity to threat or danger, lack of trust in others, and support for aggression and violence, particularly for children who regularly witness violence in their families or communities. Over time, children can learn to feel "at home" in settings where violence is acceptable — and this is an obvious path to gang-joining later on.[8]

What do we know about the most influential early risk and protective factors for antisocial behavior that should also be important for gang-joining? Several important *individual and family risk factors* develop from birth through age 5 that can increase risk for antisocial behavior. Some of the most important risk factors for ages 0-5 are:

- Hypervigilance to threat.
- Cognitive impairment, including verbal deficits.
- Insecure attachment to a primary caregiver.
- Early aggression and acting-out behavior.

These risk factors result from the interaction between a child's biological characteristics, his or her personality, and the most relevant developmental contexts; for very young children, these are the family and the community. We briefly discuss each risk factor as it develops in these contexts. Although we discuss these separately, we want to emphasize that these risks often overlap and cumulate.

Hypervigilance to Threat

Research shows that children who witness or are victims of repeated violence before age 5 are more likely to develop a heightened sensitivity to perceived threats. This can lead to a persistently active stress-response apparatus in the central nervous system, including an increased startle response. It can also lead children to develop ways of thinking that are overly sensitive to perceived hostility and threat, even when no threat exists. Children who live in violent neighborhoods are more likely to be aware of violence, hear gunshots, or witness violent events. Children who live in families with high levels of domestic violence, who receive excessive corporal punishment or who are victims of child abuse are more likely not only to witness violence but also to experience ongoing victimization. Indeed, the link between being a victim of early child abuse and later being the perpetrator of delinquency and violent crime is well-documented.[9]

Cognitive Impairments

Chronic poverty and disadvantage increase the likelihood that children will suffer from cognitive and learning problems such as poor verbal skills, inattention and lack of school readiness. For example, inadequate prenatal care for mothers, including poor nutrition (one potential consequence of poverty), has been shown to increase the likelihood that children will be born with lower birth weights and develop resultant neurological

problems and cognitive impairments years later. Lack of early stimulation and learning opportunities — often seen in children who are neglected or have few opportunities for preschool enrichment — can lead to changes in brain development that can affect behavior.

Insecure Attachment to a Primary Caregiver

It is very important developmentally for an infant to establish a secure attachment relationship with a caregiver. This requires a nurturing and responsive parent or caregiver who can meet the child's needs. Children who are insecure in these relationships are more likely to develop later aggression and violence. Researchers recently looked at 69 studies of the association between *insecure* attachment and subsequent aggression and violence. They found that children (particularly boys) with insecure maternal attachments and difficulty coping with separation were at elevated risk for later behavior problems and aggression.[10] This pattern of insecure attachment can also lead to *internal working models* of relationships that may limit a young child's ability to develop trusting and stable friendships and long-term intimate relationships later in life.[11]

Early Aggression and Acting-Out Behavior

Children develop certain styles of behavior very early in life. Without prevention efforts, an aggressive 3-year-old is likely to become an aggressive 13-year-old. In fact, early aggression and acting-out behaviors are among the best predictors of later behavioral problems. This association has been documented in many studies in the U.S. and internationally. Retrospective studies of youth in gangs have found that youth who remained in gangs for longer than one year were also more likely to have displayed very early signs of aggression, oppositional behavior and hyperactivity than those who left the gang.[12]

Prevention During the Early Years

Given the importance of family life for early child development, prevention programs for infants and young children typically provide enrichment for children and enhance family functioning and parenting skills. These programs are designed to prevent early aggression and associated factors (such as hypervigilance to threat), provide cognitive enrichment opportunities, and help families interact more positively with children.

For example, the Family Development Research Project (FDRP) worked with families with economic disadvantage and limited education from before a child was born to age 5. The FDRP was based on principles of child development and consisted of frequent home visitation, family problem-solving, and child empowerment and educational activities. Parent training emphasized the development of appropriate interactive skills, prosocial interaction modeling, and involvement in educational activities. This type of program reduces risk factors and simultaneously fosters protective factors. An evaluation study with a 10-year follow-up found fewer probation cases among participants compared with the control group.[13] Other well-known preschool/parent partnerships, enrichment programs and family engagement programs have shown long-term effects on preventing delinquency and promoting adjustment.[14]

Another promising approach that has been shown to reduce risk for child maltreatment is early home visitation for high-risk families. These programs empower families and strengthen the foundation for children by providing support and training around prenatal and infant care as well as parenting skills to young parents.[15]

Risk Factors During the Elementary School Years: Ages 6-12

Studies of elementary school children have looked at risk factors for later antisocial behavior, delinquency and gang-joining. Although children's aggressive and acting-out behavior patterns tend to continue as they get older, other factors can increase risk for problem behaviors. It is also during this time that schools and peers become influential contexts in addition to the ongoing influence of families and communities. Four primary risk factors for problem behaviors, including gang-joining, stand out:

- Poor school performance.
- Social information-processing deficits and antisocial beliefs.

- Peer social status, including being rejected and victimized by peers.
- Poor parental monitoring.

These risk factors are also related to earlier problems that children may experience. For instance, a young boy with cognitive impairments and poor verbal skills is unlikely to be ready to learn when he enters school, leading to poor school performance. We briefly discuss each risk factor and how it is influenced by contexts during ages 6-12.

Poor School Performance

Low levels of school achievement and low attachment to school in elementary school predict gang involvement and other types of antisocial behavior later on.[16] For children who are unprepared to learn and enter elementary schools that have limited educational resources or remedial training, academic progress can be severely limited. As children fall further behind, they are less likely to feel connected to school and are more likely to engage in disruptive and aggressive behavior. If parents do not monitor their child's progress or become involved in their child's schooling — or the school does not intervene appropriately — children are likely to fall even further behind.

Social Information-Processing Deficits and Antisocial Beliefs

During the ages of 6-12, children also learn how to interact with their peers and solve social problems. They learn cognitive and social information-processing skills, such as thinking about the consequences of behavior. They also develop their own ideas or beliefs about right and wrong, and these tend to stabilize between the ages of 10 and 12.[17] If their friends support aggressive behavior, they are more likely to see aggression as appropriate. Thus, patterns of thought begin to take shape prior to adolescence as children build on their internal working models from early attachment experiences and develop their own characteristic ways of thinking and acting. These ways of thinking and acting can have an influence on which peers accept them.

Peer Social Status, Including Being Rejected and Victimized by Peers

When children enter school, they spend a good deal of time with their peers. Aggressive children who are quick to fight, and slow to negotiate and solve problems, are more likely to be rejected by peers.[18] Rejection can then lead to increased aggression, and the cycle continues. This is also true with victimization — victimized children often fight back and take their anger out on others. Many bullies report having been victimized earlier by siblings or peers.[19]

Poor Parental Monitoring

As children become more involved in school, their focus shifts from the family to peers and school activities. This is also a time when parents become less involved in their children's daily activities, as the majority of youth's time is spent in school and with peers, making it more challenging to monitor children's activities (for example, who they are with, where they are going, what they are doing). Low levels of parental monitoring have been associated with risk for a range of delinquent behaviors.[20] Parental monitoring can reduce the risk of youth associating with deviant peers, such as gang members. Several factors influence the ability of parents to monitor their children effectively. Parents who are economically disadvantaged and/or working multiple jobs may have less time and resources to monitor their children's activities adequately or pay for their children to participate in supervised activities. Some schools and community organizations address this by providing safe places for youth after school, where they are monitored and have the opportunity to engage in positive activities.

Prevention During the Elementary School Years

As children get older, risk factors can accumulate. The evidence is clear that the more risk factors and the more developmental contexts in which they occur, the greater the likelihood that a youth may join a gang. For example, youth with seven

or more risk factors are 13 times more likely to join a gang than youth with zero or one risk factor.[12]

Sometimes risk in one context can be offset or reduced by protective factors in another context. For example, children who have family problems but do well in school may be less affected by family risk. The most promising prevention programs reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors in multiple contexts, including family, school and community. As University of Washington professor Karl G. Hill said, "There is no single solution, no 'magic bullet' that will prevent youth from joining gangs."[12] Clearly, because families are a consistent influence on children's development over time, family-based programs should be a high priority. In addition, the best programs are those that are multicontext and are provided over an extended time.

Policy Issues: Next Steps and Future Directions

What have we learned about how best to prevent children from joining gangs while they are still young, between birth and age 12? Here are some of the most important issues to understand:

- Multicontext, multicomponent programs should be implemented in poor, urban neighborhoods with a large gang presence. These should begin from before children are born and continue throughout childhood because children between ages 0 and 12 are developing beliefs about right and wrong, trying on different behaviors, learning how to solve problems with others — and what they learn becomes "hard-wired" into their brain circuitry.
- An important first step is to identify at-risk mothers — poor, single mothers, especially those with a history of criminality or gang involvement — and ensure that they receive adequate prenatal and postnatal care. Evidence-based prevention programs, such as nurse-home family partnerships, should be extended to these families. These programs also should emphasize the importance of early learning and school readiness and provide parents with books and other resources to stimulate their children's development. Additional resources through enhanced preschool enrichment programs should be provided, as many programs have been shown to prevent antisocial behavior.
- Early school engagement is critical to healthy child development. Adequate resources should be directed at the early grades when children are learning important literacy and numeracy skills so that they do not fall behind or disengage from school. Early remediation is more cost-effective than the long-term costs of school dropout and lack of productivity.
- Social-emotional learning and social problem-solving skills should be emphasized in elementary curricula. These skills have been found to improve social information-processing deficits by promoting accurate assessment and interpretation of social interactions and prosocial problem-solving, and by addressing delinquent beliefs that accept antisocial behavior. These skills are critical for youth to establish healthy peer relationships and deter them from deviant peers.
- Even with the best early prevention programs in place, some youth may fall through the cracks and consider joining gangs. For these youth, it is important to intervene in the early teens, before they have made a firm decision to join a gang.

In conclusion, strategies and programs to prevent gang membership must start early and be developmentally appropriate to set children on a positive path. These strategies should be designed to improve family functioning and connections with schools, facilitate involvement with socially appropriate peers, and reduce bullying and victimization. Such programs have the potential not only to prevent gang membership but also to improve a range of health and social outcomes related to positive adjustment and well-being for children and youth. Although a child's developmental course begins to take shape very early in development, it is also possible to "redirect" youth who are lured by antisocial lifestyles through early identification programs for young teens such as the GIFT program described in this chapter. An important next step for programs like this is to augment home visits with more sustained preventive interventions to help youth and their families.

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Endnotes

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