

ADVICE AND GUIDANCE TO PARENTS AND CARERS

**ABOUT SERIOUS YOUTH VIOLENCE,
KNIFE CRIME AND GANGS**



City of Westminster



INTRODUCTION

We know that the vast majority of young people live positive lives and are not involved in gangs or knife crime. However, there are a small number of young people who do become involved and this can be a concern for parents and carers. It can have a significant impact on families, communities, as well as themselves. You can help your child by looking out for signs of their involvement and talking through the issues with them.

This toolkit is designed to help provide a glossary of facts, practical advice to look for signs of your child's involvement, as well as tips on how to speak to your child and how you can seek further help or support.

THE FACTS

Here are some facts to help you feel more confident when talking to your child:



Getting caught with a knife:

If you get caught with a knife, even if it was for your own protection or if you were carrying it for someone else, you will be arrested and prosecuted.



Keeping safe:

Some young people carry knives to protect themselves and 'keep safe.' But if you carry a knife you are much more likely to use it and to get stabbed yourself.



No 'safe place' to stab someone:

A wound in the arm or the leg can still be life threatening. Young people have died from wounds to the leg because an artery was severed.



Stop and search:

Police can and will search anyone they believe is carrying a knife, other weapon or they believe serious violence could take place



Joint enterprise:

If someone is killed by a knife in your presence, you could be prosecuted even if it's not you who uses it. You could be sent to prison for murder, in what is referred to as 'joint enterprise'.



Stabbing an artery:

If a knife punctures an artery, you can bleed to death within a minute.



Prison:

Getting caught with a knife can mean a prison sentence, even if the knife has not been used.



Alcohol:

Alcohol lowers inhibitions and increased the chances of taking a risk. Alcohol is a factor in 80% of weapons related injuries.



Criminal record:

If you have a criminal record, you might not be accepted into a college or university, get a job, or travel to countries like the USA, Canada or Australia.

THE LAW

Below outlines the laws around carrying a knife and offensive weapons:

- It is an offence to carry a knife* in a public place (such as a road or in a school) or to carry any article which has a blade or is sharply pointed.
- It is also an offence to carry an offensive weapon in a public place. This includes any article made, adapted or intended for causing injury as detailed below:
 - **Made:** Made to cause injury, such as a knuckle duster or bayonets
 - **Adapted:** Something innocent that has been adapted to cause injury, such as a broken bottle or a chair leg with nails
 - **Intended:** Anything else, such as an umbrella or pen that is intended by the person to be used to cause injury to others
- Carrying a knife includes: in your hand, a pocket, in the boot of your car or if someone else is carrying a knife for you.
- Exceptions include if you are carrying the knife as part of your job, such as a tool for a trade. However, forgetfulness, ignorance to the law or general self defence are not reasonable excuses if you are caught carrying a knife.
- It is an offence to use any knife in a threatening way (even a legal knife)
- It is also an offence to sell a knife to anyone under 18. If you are concerned that your child has been sold a knife, you can contact the Citizen's Advice Bureau to report the trader to Trading Standards.

* Unless it has a folding blade 3 inches long or less. A list of illegal knives can be found here: [gov.uk/buying-carrying-knives](https://www.gov.uk/buying-carrying-knives)



UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD

Why would young people join a gang?

There are lots of reasons why young people might join a gang, which as a parent you may not understand. Some of the reasons are listed here:

- Respect and status
- To gain friends
- A sense of belonging
- Excitement
- To find a substitute family
- Power
- Protection
- Money
- Peer pressure
- They might not know they are part of a gang

For lots of young people, being part of a gang gives them a sense of belonging and identity. In adolescence it's normal to start separating from your family with peer groups becoming more important than before. Gangs can take advantage of this and make young people feel part of a different 'family' so they might not want to leave. Even if they do, leaving or attempting to leave can be a really scary idea. They might be frightened about what will happen to them, their friends or their family if they leave. Often young people will not consider themselves to be part of a 'gang' but just that they have strong commitment to their 'friends'.

Young women and young men are often affected differently by gangs. For young women their involvement may be harder to spot – or for them to recognise. They may be asked to hide weapons or drugs, or be targeted by male gang members in acts of revenge or gang initiations. All of this tends to go on 'behind closed doors'. Girls who are linked to gang members (sisters, girlfriends, friends, cousins, daughters) as well as female gang members themselves, are at risk of emotional, physical and sexual violence. Again young women might not consider these friends to be gang involved, or if they do, they might not think that what they are doing is important or exploitative.

Why would young people carry a weapon?

There are many reasons for children to decide to carry a knife or weapon. This list is not exhaustive but gives some examples:

- Fear of being a victim of knife crime – it could have been a specific threat, or a perceived fear
- General self-defence – the 'just in case' reason
- They don't know it is wrong or illegal
- To intimidate others (by way of protection)
- Peer pressure
- To earn respect
- Street cred
- They may feel disenfranchised
- Involvement in criminal activities



GROOMING

What is grooming?

Some people form relationships with young people to use them for their financial gain through drug dealing or to participate in sexual activities. People who do this want young people to think they are a friend, or a boyfriend or girlfriend. They want to gain their trust to obtain power over them. They might also use bribes, threats, humiliation and even violence to get power over them. They use that power to force the exploited child to move and sell drugs, and to have sex, or do sexual things with them, and sometimes other people. These are forms of exploitation and are crimes.

Online grooming is when someone builds an online relationship with a young person and tricks them or pressures them into doing something sexual. This can happen on social networking websites, instant messaging, photo sharing apps, chat rooms, dating apps and online gaming sites.

Exploitation happens to both boys and girls and can be difficult to spot. Often people think they're in a good relationship, even after things have turned bad. Children being criminally exploited often feel they have no other option but to continue working for their exploiter and often find themselves in debt slavery. It can be hard to spot when someone is using or controlling you.

What are controlling behaviours?

- Someone is checking their phone and controlling who they talk to
- Someone is telling them what to wear and how to dress
- They are being told where they can and can't go
- They are being told to send a nude selfie to someone
- They are being pressured to commit crime
- They are being pressured to have sex
- They are being physically attacked

PRACTICAL TIPS

Below are some practical tips to help you to understand whether your child needs help or support.

Most young people live positive lives and some behaviour can just be typical teenage behaviour. However, the tips below may help you to recognise whether your child is at risk.

- Keep engaged with your kid's lives and social media
- Know where they are and who they are with – do they have a new circle of friends?
- Are they in a relationship with or hanging out with someone/people that are older and controlling?
- Are they becoming less engaged with you?
- Are they receiving more calls or texts than usual?
- Do they suddenly have lots of money/lots of new clothes/new mobile phones?
- Do they have unexplained injuries?
- Do they seem very reserved or seem like they have something to hide?
- Do they seem scared?
- Are they self-harming?
- Are they skipping school?
- Know what you have in the kitchen and in toolkits
- Keep an eye out for any online purchases and what is delivered to your home
- Increasing drug use or being found to have large amounts of drugs on them
- Are they always going missing from school or their home?
- Are they travelling alone to places far away from home?

Of course, there could be all sorts of reasons other than 'gangs' why children and young people exhibit any of the above behaviours and the checklist above is the kind of thing that most parents will be aware of and watching for. You know your child and what are significant changes for them. Remember the most protective factors for your children will often be their family/carer relationships. If you are worried you can contact the numbers on the 'Where to find support' page at the end of this guide.



HAVING THE CONVERSATION WITH YOUR CHILD

Getting started:

Find the right time for your child, when it is quiet and you can have some privacy. The conversation needs to take place wherever they feel safest. If home is crowded, you could talk in the car, walking the dog or on the way to the shops. Be available and ready to listen. Reassure them that they can be honest with you and let them know you are not there to judge them.

Believe you can make a difference

- Your child might not tell you much but what you say, think and feel is important to them.

Listen

- While we often want to 'resolve' our children's problems, this is complex and takes time. Listening is the most important step – for both of you. Even if they aren't saying much, make sure you 'hear' them.
- Don't rush to give advice that they might not be ready to hear.
- Your child may be reluctant or scared to talk at first – it's a difficult subject.
- Be patient and try not to react straight away to what they tell you. Let them talk as much as they want to first.
- Encourage them to share their fears and worries.
- Sharing your own fears can help – tell them how much you worry about their safety and their future.

Be Positive

- Show them they are being listened to. Reassure them that the vast majority of young people don't carry a knife and aren't part of a gang.
- If they are fearful of someone or something specific, tell them that it can be dealt with without the need for them to carry a knife.

Stick to the facts

- They might not think you know what you're talking about so a little preparation can really help.
- Use the facts and law information in this toolkit to help you.

Be clear about false 'bravery'

- Raise the point that walking away from confrontation or a fight is the braver thing to do.
- If someone pulls a knife on them, the safest, wisest thing to do is to walk away.
- In ten years time, nobody will remember they walked, but if they 'stand their ground' the consequences could last a lifetime or even end someone's life.

The impact

- Help them reflect on how their actions could affect the people that care for them the most.
- Using a knife or being involved in a gang could place others at risk.
- If they were injured, who would be affected?

Be realistic

- Your child may feel you have no experience of knife crime, gangs or the challenges they face.
- Are there any examples from your own childhood that you can draw upon?

Try a different approach

- Is there someone else that your child trusts who could help you to have the conversation?

Suggest alternatives

- Find out about safe, fun activities for children and young people in your local area.

Get help and support for yourself

- It may be that you learn some worrying things about your child and the things they're involved in.
- Try not to overreact but don't feel you have to deal with this on your own – help is available (see the support and advice section of the toolkit).



NON-VIOLENCE RESISTANCE (NVR)

What is it?

Non-Violence Resistance is an approach that helps parents and carers develop strategies to manage children's challenging, destructive or violent behaviour while building or rebuilding the relationship. Some of the information below may help you when speaking to your child.

Key NVR principles

De-escalation strategies – "Strike when the iron is cold!"

Try not to escalate the situation by identifying when the best time is to talk. Anticipate possible escalations before they happen. Delay your response. You decide when and how to finish a discussion with your child.

Parental presence

Have a physical, emotional, moral presence in your child's life both inside and outside the home, so that he/she will make good decisions when they are not in your presence.

Supporters

Break your silence and talk to friends, family, professionals about your struggles in managing your child's challenging behaviour.

Reconciliation gestures

Surprise your child with a gesture that will let him/her know that you love them and recognise their need to feel safe and sense of belonging. Do it despite any negative behaviour.

Baskets

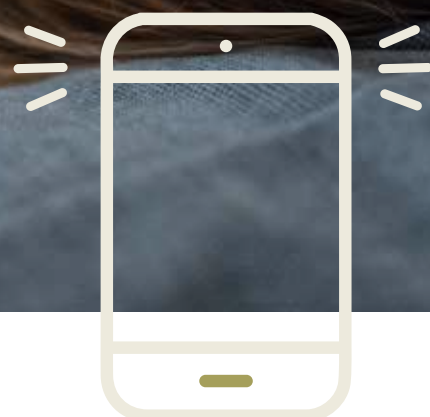
Prioritise the challenging behaviours you are going to focus on. It can feel overwhelming, so organise them, such as 1-2 behaviours you are going to focus on, behaviours that are important that you can negotiate as well as behaviours you will ignore for now. Lastly, make a list of the special things you like about your child and do your best to remember them.

Look after yourself

Parents take time out to do something for themselves like indulge a favourite treat, bubble bath, watch a favourite movie, go out with a friend/partner for coffee.

Westminster City Council run 12 week programmes in the principles of NVR.

Please visit: [westminster.gov.uk/parenting-groups-and-courses](https://www.westminster.gov.uk/parenting-groups-and-courses) for further information.



COUNTY LINES

What do we mean by County Lines?

County Lines is a serious issue where criminal gangs set up a drug dealing operation in a place outside their usual operating area. Gangs will move their drug dealing from big cities (e.g. London, Manchester, Liverpool etc.) to smaller towns in order to make more money. The 'lines' refer to the phones that are used to sell the drugs through.

In some cases children and young people who are registered as missing are being used in county lines. Gangs exploit the fact that they have run away from home and recruit these vulnerable young people to travel to areas away from their home town to sell drugs for weeks at a time. This can be a form of child trafficking as young people find themselves alone, in a dangerous unsafe environment being exploited to work – selling drugs.

They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move (and store) the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.

If you are concerned that your child is involved in County Lines, please contact Westminster's Integrated Gangs and Exploitation Unit at integratedgangsunit@westminster.gov.uk or call **0207 641 4051**.

WHERE TO FIND SUPPORT AND ADVICE

Citizens Advice: If your child has been illegally sold a knife, you can report this to Trading Standards on **03454 04 05 06** or visit: citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/get-more-help/report-to-trading-standards/

Childline: Your child can call Childline on **0800 1111** at any time if they are worried about their own safety or if they think someone they know is carrying or even using a gun or knife

Crimestoppers: You or your child can call Crimestoppers anonymously on **0800 555 111** if you want to report a crime that has already happened

Family Information Service: This is a free, impartial information service for parents and carers of children and young people aged up to 19 (up to 25 years for those with additional needs.) westminster.gov.uk/family-information-service

Family Lives: Gives advice on all aspects of parenting and is open 24/7. Calls are free on **0808 800 2222** or visit familylives.org.uk

Fearless: Your child can contact a young person friendly site online at fearless.org/en to report a crime anonymously

Integrated Gangs Exploitation Unit (IGXU): Westminster City Council's IGXU identify and work with vulnerable and exploited young people aged 10-24 involved in group violence or on the periphery of gangs to improve their life choices and reduce associations with gangs and reduce incidences of serious youth violence. If you think your child would benefit from support from the IGXU, you can either email integratedgangsunit@westminster.gov.uk or call **0207 641 4051**

Knife disposal: If you know a young person who wishes to dispose of a knife in Westminster, they can visit the **Recycling Centre** (adjacent to Queen's Park Library) **666 Harrow Road, London W10 4NE.**

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC): Their helpline provides information and advice to parents and others concerned about young people who may be involved, or affected by gang activity. Their helpline is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Freephone: **0808 800 5000**. Email: help@nspcc.org.uk Web: nspcc.org.uk/gangs

Parenting groups and programmes: Westminster Early Help and partners offer a range of parenting groups across Westminster, to suit family circumstances. westminster.gov.uk/parenting-groups-and-courses

Physical Activity, Leisure and Sport in Westminster: There are a full range of great value activities and services to help young people live a healthy and active lifestyle, from gyms and swimming pools to Parkour and much more. Web: westminster.gov.uk/active. Call: **020 7641 2012.**

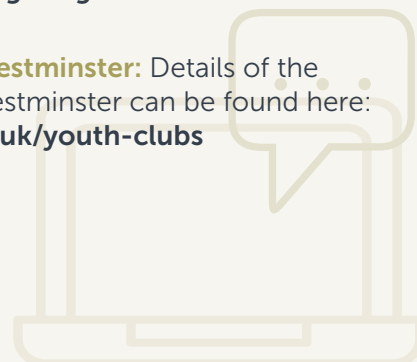
Police: To find details of your local team and find out more about the work they are doing in your area, type your postcode at www.police.uk. You should call **101** to report crime and other concerns that do not require an emergency response. Call **999** in an emergency.

Solace Women's Aid: A free anonymous service available to girls aged 13+ who have experienced rape, child sexual abuse and other forms of sexual violence. Call: **0808 801 0305.**

Victim Support: A national charity which helps people affected by crime. Web: victimsupport.org

Women and Girls Network: Advice and support service to girls affected by violence and abuse. Web: advance@wgn.org.uk. Call: **0808 801 0660.**

Youth clubs in Westminster: Details of the youth clubs in Westminster can be found here: westminster.gov.uk/youth-clubs







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References: This guide includes information from '*Parent's Guide to Knife Crime, Harrow, 2017*' by the Metropolitan Police Service; the *No Knives, Better Lives campaign* noknivesbetterlives.com; the *Home Office* and *Fearless* fearless.org.uk.