

Gangs Hurt Kids

By Chris Dewey, Chief of Police

Remember being a middle school student? Feeling awkward? Dealing with a changing body, changing emotions, changing priorities? What would you have done to feel accepted—to have a group of people who would always protect and care for you? Some kids would do just about anything.

Anyone who knows (or has been) a pre-teen or young teenager knows that these years are an extremely impressionable time. Young people want to fit in with their peers, and as a result, they can make choices that follow them for the rest of their school years and even into adulthood. Young people who excel at academics, are socially adept, engage in activities they enjoy, and have the support of family and friends can often handle the pressures of middle school. However, those who struggle in school, are socially awkward, and have trouble developing healthy relationships sometimes look to drugs and other dangerous activities to escape, or to be included and accepted. Joining a gang can seem very appealing.

The Gang Resistance is Paramount (GRIP) program began its ninth year of instruction in Ukiah Unified School District (UUSD) classrooms during the 2013-2014 school year. The GRIP program is a school-based curriculum that addresses gang prevention, drug and alcohol use, peer pressure, and bullying prevention throughout Mendocino County. Bullying is similar to gang activity in that both of these abusive activities use intimidation to control others. Gang members frequently act as bullies towards others; they also prey upon victims of bullying for gang recruitment by offering “protection” to less powerful youth. Research has shown that bullying negatively impacts both the bully and the victim. Many are aware of the impact on the victims of bullying, but did you know that youth who are bullies are likely to be arrested at least once before they are 24 years old? And, statistics indicate that 40 percent of bullies will have three or more criminal convictions.

This school year, the GRIP program has begun collaborating with the community in new ways to bring more opportunities to UUSD fifth grade students. GRIP is working directly with Project Sanctuary to introduce more bullying prevention curriculum into the lessons. GRIP has always taught the importance of resisting negative peer pressure; the program is now teaching a lesson that creates more awareness of the negative effects of bullying.

Rather than being victims or standing aside, the GRIP lessons encourage students to become “upstanders.” An upstander is someone who refuses to join in when someone is being bullied, and someone who does not support the bullying behavior by laughing or silently standing by. Research shows that if even one person speaks up on behalf of a victim of bullying, the behavior has a greater chance of stopping.

The GRIP program continues to serve all UUSD fifth graders, and during its nine years has reached approximately 3,500 students. This means that nearly all students in local middle schools have now benefited from the fifth grade GRIP curriculum. Middle school administrators and our own police records indicate that even though there is still fighting on middle school campuses, large, multiple-subject fights occur less often than they did before GRIP. Data released from our local probation department and juvenile hall indicate a trend of fewer youth being arrested for gang-involved activities during this same time period.

GRIP curriculum is delivered in Mendocino County thanks to a joint effort of schools, parents, county agencies, nonprofit agencies, and law enforcement agencies. GRIP has received financial support to serve Ukiah-area classrooms from the Ukiah Police Department (UPD), the Mendocino County Sheriff’s Office, and the Mendocino County District Attorney’s Office.

As parents, many of us struggle with our pre-teen and teen-aged children. The relationship becomes strained and it might be tempting to disengage. Your influence now can change the course of your child’s life. Here are warning signs that your child may be involved in gang activity. Your child:

- Admits to hanging out with kids in gangs
- Shows unusual interest in one or two particular colors of clothing or a particular logo
- Has unusual interest in gangster-influenced music, video, movies, or websites
- Uses unusual hand signals to communicate with friends
- Has specific drawings or gang symbols on school books, clothes, walls, or tattoos
- Comes home with unexplained physical injuries (fighting-related bruises on hands or knuckles)

- Has unexplained cash or goods, such as clothing or jewelry

Young people want to fit in with their peers, and as a result, they can make choices that follow them for the rest of their school years and into adulthood. As state and federal budget cuts reduce many services that address the social needs of students in schools, it is even more important to preserve the programs we have in our community. If you are interested to learn more about how you can support the GRIP program, please contact Redwood Children's Services, or the Ukiah Police Department.

As always, our mission at UPD is simple: to make Ukiah as safe as possible. If you have any suggestions or comments about how we can improve, please feel free to call me, complete our online survey, or leave a crime tip on our website: www.ukiahpolice.com. Parents and community members who would like more information about efforts to reduce bullying in our schools can contact UPD's School Resource Officer, Vince Morse (leave a message for him at 472-5768), or the GRIP program managed by Kristin Frith at Redwood Children's Services at 467-2010.

###

Chris Dewey is the Ukiah Police Department Chief of Police.