

Gang Prevention and Schools – The Ultimate Parent & Teacher Guide on How to Prevent Kids from Joining Gangs (2008)

Twelve years to Gang Prevention

Law enforcement and gang intervention practitioners know that studies on gangs and kids who join them tell us that most kids join gangs between the ages of 12-15. If that is the case, then the hopeful message for parents is that we have a twelve year window of opportunity to work in to produce happy, healthy children that will never have the desire to join a “second family” (gangs). When we break these twelve years down even further, we are really looking at three critical time frames for parents to work in the fertile ground of child development:

- **Infant – 2 years old - Work on your child’s view of themselves:** Infants, toddlers and pre-school children in and of themselves have no concept of gangs, let alone the desire to join gangs. Thus, the parents are not competing with the lure of the “streets”, media or peer pressure during these early formative years of a child’s self-image. Parents have every advantage to “plant, cultivate and grow” in their children the character, self-esteem, sense of self-worth, confidence and all the other aspects of healthy human development with no outside competition.
- **2 years – 5 years - Work on your child’s view of respect for parental authority:** These are critical years for balancing the healthy individual self-image with the proper discipline and respect for “others” that produces a healthy respect for parental authority, guidance, family loyalty and sense of community.
- **5 years – 12 years – Work on your child’s view of their role in the community:** Heavy parental investment of time and money in helping children to discover their talents, develop their skills, and dream about their individual purpose, destiny and positive contribution to their family and community.

The importance of these time frames for child development cannot be overlooked or over emphasized in terms of preventing kids from joining gangs or any negative lifestyle. Studies on child development tell us that the first five years of a child’s life are the most important as far as establishing the roots of character. Parents have such an advantage during these crucial years to lay a foundation from which a child will mature into a healthy, wholesome, happy individual equipped with the character to make the right choices and lead a positive life that avoids the paths to gangs and other negative lifestyles. In her book, *“How Children become Violent – Keeping your Kids out of Gangs, Terrorist Organizations, and Cults”*, author Katherine Seifert, Ph.D., says:

“Over the last three decades as a criminal justice and psychotherapist professional, I saw countless patients with either severe mental illnesses or histories of grotesquely violent behavior. As I asked them questions and delved into their pasts, it became clear that many, if not all, had experienced some level of childhood trauma in the form of neglectful, painful, or violent upbringings...could there be some link between childhood trauma and the inability to lead normal, productive lives, and have more empathy for others?...the majority of violent and sexual offenders...had histories of childhood abuse, neglect, traumatic loss of parents without sufficient

substitute caregivers...I found that the reason my patients could not conform to the rules of society was because of unaddressed traumatic childhoods..."

The Parent as a Gardener

To help parents grasp the skills needed to produce healthy, happy children, I like using the metaphor of a gardener. A gardener must not only be knowledgeable, but skillful in cultivating both the soil and seeds that produce the healthy life and growth of the plant. For our purposes here I will talk about the basic tools and ingredients needed by the gardener in growing his garden and relate these to the skills needed by parents in raising, or nurturing the growth of their children.

1. **Hands** – When dirt is soft and fertile, one only needs to use the hands to dig a hole to plant the seeds. I liken this to the fertile condition of the heart of an infant and the importance of touch, affection, kissing, hugging, and all the physical ways we handle an infant to give them a sense of security, care and the intuitive message of self-worth.
2. **Seeds** – The seeds are what contain the life, but in and of themselves cannot produce that life within without the mixture of the soil, water and sun. Likewise; the soil, water and sun cannot produce life without the seeds because none of them contain the life within. The life is in the seeds. I liken “seeds” to the words of parents. We must understand how very powerful our words are and the affect they have on a child’s life for the bad or the good. The scriptures say; “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18.21), and in many other places they teach the principle of the power of our words to affect change for the good or bad. Thus, we parents must learn to be very conscious of how we speak to our children, not only when they have done well, but more importantly during the times when they have done wrong. Here are some principles for parents to remember in speaking to their children in all circumstances:
 - a) When children do the wrong thing, parents must do and say the right thing
 - b) Try to pause and think before you speak words that you will need to apologize for later
 - c) Catch y
 - d) our kids doing good (not just the bad) and never assume you can complement their good behavior too much
 - e) Daily words of encouragement are needed as much as daily meals
 - f) Always praise in public – especially around friends and relatives
 - g) Always (or as much as possible) correct in private
 - h) Express positive words of acceptance, rather than negative words of, “but it could have been better if...”, or, “next time you should”, etc.
3. **Water** – Anyone who has ever grown a plant knows that in order for a plant to grow and look healthy, the roots must be watered on a consistent basis. Dry, wilted and dying plants can always be revived with a healthy and consistent dose of watering the roots. I liken the roots of a plant to the soul of a child. The soul is the seat of our emotions, our thinking and our will, or ability to choose. The parent is the gardener of the soul of each of their children. They must take care to consistently “water the soul” so as not to allow it to dry, wilt and die. Some psychologists call this “soul sickness”. Others might refer

to it as depression, withdrawal, shyness or shame. Whatever one calls it, it is not healthy. There are many ways to water the soul, here are just a few:

- a) For the mind: read to and with the child, storytelling, drawing, coloring, music, movies and other forms of using the imagination to stimulate the creative genius within each child. Watering the soul also includes building upon the ability to think, analyze, reason, use logic and all other aspects of building intellectual capacity.
 - b) For the emotions: empathize, sympathize, cuddle, listen, and understanding. So many of the gang members I talked to expressed to me how sad they were that they could not talk to their parents, their parents did not “get it” (understand them) and never apologized when they were wrong, etc. Sometimes all our children need is a listening ear and a hug, rather than a talking head and physical distance
 - c) For the will: Fair but firm discipline, role models of trust, loyalty, self sacrifice, compassion for others, forgiveness, empathy, wisdom, knowledge, and all other attributes that help a child learn to make “right” choices that are consistent with the principle of the “golden rule” by loving their neighbors as they love themselves.
4. **Shovel** – the shovel is used to break up or till the soil in preparation to receive the planted seeds. I liken this to the parent being skillful in the use of discipline. Discipline is dealing with the heart of a child to prepare them to receive instruction, wisdom and understanding of a needed life lesson that they will benefit from later in life. The renowned child psychologist, Dr. James Dobson, speaks about the “strong-willed child” and the need for parents to learn how to “bend the child’s will without breaking their spirit”. Another way of understanding this skill is to think of a musician who must always be fine tuning their instrument each time they play it. With a guitar, if the musician pulls the string too hard it will break, if he does not pull it tight enough it will be out of tune. And no matter how many times an instrument is tuned up, it always needs to be tuned up before it can play at peak potential. This skill of “just enough” is what a parent must learn in the use of discipline.

The term "discipline" comes from the Latin word "disciplinare," which means "to teach." Many people, however, associate the word with only the idea of punishment, which falls short of the full meaning of the word. Discipline, properly practiced, uses a multifaceted approach, including models, rewards, and punishments that teach and reinforce desired behavior. Through discipline, children are able to learn self-control, self-direction, competence, and a sense of caring.

Principles for exercising discipline include:

- a) Removing privileges that a child enjoys doing
- b) Isolation through timeouts
- c) Verbal reprimand
- d) What about “spanking”? – Some will, some won’t – but for those who will, it must be properly done. How? – Here are a few guidelines:
 - Parents should explain what behavior the child is being spanked for

- With small children using the hand for one or two swats on the butt is sufficient. For older children (5-10) a designated paddle can be used for a swat on the butt.
- Parents should talk about the behavior later to bring understanding, reconciliation and closure.
- Slapping, punching, kicking, beating and any other form of physical force that is physically harmful to the child is abuse and never acceptable. What is proper spanking? Paddling on the butt - nothing more, nothing less.
- When should the use of spanking stop? – In general, once a child reaches the age of 12, or, “age of accountability”, other forms of discipline are better suited that recognize the growth and maturity of the child who is beyond the spanking stage.

I realize how controversial this issue is and many of you reading this will not agree with spanking children for any reason. Yet, we must respect the fact that many parents do in fact spank their children. Furthermore, many parents are under the false assumption that it is illegal to spank children, but it is not illegal (though some states are making an effort to outlaw it) and this needs to be clarified. What is illegal is physically abusing children. Spanking, in and of itself, should not be confused with physical abuse. Nevertheless, guidance is needed for those parents who do spank to ensure they understand the difference and practice discipline through spanking properly. To be sure, I am not making an argument for right or wrong on the issue, but rather making the case that if parents choose to spank, they should do it properly and we should not assume they are doing it properly, nor expect them to stop just because others are against it.

5. **Shears** – pruning shears are what a gardener uses to train a plant, shape a plant and cause the plant to grow back bigger and stronger seasonally. Again, this takes knowledge of the needs and peculiar growth patterns of each individual type of plant. Some plants need pruning during the winter, others need trimming all year long and so forth. Children are much the same way. No two are alike and a parent must tend to the particular needs and temperament of each child, thus sending a strong message of value for their individuality. This also speaks to the parent being aware of the different phase they are now in as a “coach” of their child watching from the sidelines of life and providing guidance from a distance, but always close enough to give counsel as needed.

Based on this understanding, below are six principles I teach young people and encourage all parents to use as guidelines for similar instruction with their children:

1. Teach children their life is not an accident
2. Teach children they have a significant role to play in society
3. Teach children their life is a reward to parents, not a burden
4. Help children discover the gifts and talents “hidden” in them – They don’t have to invent their life as much as discover it
5. Help your child develop their natural talents
6. Teach and prepare your child for their destiny in society

To purchase Richard’s book or for more information on how to use these parenting skills visit: www.RichardRRamos.com