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Children and Gambling

A recent national study estimated that nearly 70 percent of Americans aged 14 to 19 years gambled in the past year. They wagered money on poker, sports, the lottery and a variety of other games.

Young people gamble nearly as much as adults but play different games. Here are some snapshots of youth gambling:

- Two students playing basketball in the gym after school bet a dollar on who will make the first three-point shot.
- A 10th-grader forms a betting pool for wagers on football.
- A high-school senior uses his parents' credit card to gamble online.
- Students play poker on Saturday nights for pennies or for a bigger pot.
- An eighth-grader tries to buy a lottery ticket with leftover change from buying a pint of ice cream at the local convenience store.
- Twelve-year-olds make wagers with friends on video games.
- A group of high-school seniors drive to a casino hoping to sneak in despite the age restriction.



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Why Do Young People Gamble?

Young people gamble for some of the same reasons as adults. They want to have fun and win money. One interesting difference is that adolescents are more likely than adults to see socializing with friends as a reason to gamble. Risky and exciting activities often attract teenagers.

Do Young People Have Gambling Problems?

Studies show anywhere from 2 percent to 7 percent of young people experience a gambling addiction, compared to about 1 percent of adults. An estimated 6 percent to 15 percent of youth have gambling problems that are less severe, while 2 percent to 3 percent of adults fall into that category. Boys are more likely to experience a gambling problem than girls.

Although it might seem like a new problem, the rate of gambling problems among youth has not changed much during the past 25 years.

Are There Warning Signs?

The most noticeable signs of problems among youth are:

- A low mood or feelings of anxiety. Young people tell researchers that gambling relieves their sense of helplessness or depression. This relationship between psychological problems and excessive gambling is important. A recent national study found that among adults with a gambling disorder, about 75 percent experienced other mental health problems before their gambling problems emerged.
- Stealing money.
- Appearing preoccupied. Young people might neglect chores at home and school work.

Keep in mind, however, that all of these behaviors could indicate other difficulties such as alcohol and drug use.

Talking with Children about Gambling

Talking with Children about Gambling was developed in consultation with the Division on Addiction at Cambridge Health Alliance, a teaching affiliate of Harvard Medical School.

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GAMBLING

Research shows that parents have the power to make a difference in how their kids respond to risky activities. When asked, most children say their mother or father is the person they respect the most.

Researchers say the following are the best ways to steer youth from risky behaviors:

Start early

Don't wait until adolescence to talk about gambling or other risky behaviors. Children often begin gambling during grade school. Parenting practices will be most effective if started during the "tween" years, ages 9 to 13.

Listen

If your children don't think they'll be heard, they won't come to you with tough questions or problems. Creating an open environment for conversation will help you learn what's going on in their lives. Since we know that large numbers of young people already gamble, start by asking, "So, what types of gambling are kids doing?"

Educate yourself and your kids about gambling

Find out about the laws in your state that prohibit minors from placing bets. Most states require gamblers to be 21 or older. Learn the laws governing local racetracks, casinos and bingo halls. Most gaming establishments are very strict about minors.

While legal provisions are in place to prevent underage gambling online, opportunities to gamble still exist, and easy access to the Internet poses a risk for young people. Monitor your child's Internet activities and online financial transactions.

Look for opportunities to discuss the risks of gambling

The next time you see a news report about a lottery ticket winner or a big winner at a casino, take the opportunity to talk to your kids about the reality of chance. Young people need to learn that winning is unlikely. Teaching your children about the odds will give them the tools to make better decisions when faced with peer pressure to gamble.

Know what behavior is normal

The average adolescent is more impulsive, aggressive and emotionally unstable than the average adult. Adolescents like to take risks. They react strongly to stress and are vulnerable to peer pressure. They tend to overestimate the short-term payoff and dismiss the longer-term consequences of what they do.

Set rules

The research is clear. Families with specific, consistent and reasonable rules have fewer problems with risky behaviors. Make sure that your children understand your concerns and rules about gambling.

Monitor your children's activities

Know your children's whereabouts. Know their friends. But try to avoid making them feel controlled. Research shows that adolescents who feel controlled by their parents are more likely to participate in risky activities. You can learn more about what they're doing if your kids trust you. Family meals are a great way to keep in touch with your child about his or her everyday activities.

Be involved

Parental involvement is one of the factors that can keep adolescents from engaging in risky behaviors. For example, young people report they play cards and other games for money at school. Perhaps you can ask teachers and school counselors to look out for these activities. Or, you could encourage the teachers to include probability and randomness in mathematics classes. Resources for adding these subjects to the curriculum are available at www.icrg.org.

Help your child develop coping skills

Gambling often is an example of an unwise coping strategy used to escape from problems or bad feelings. Effective coping strategies can substitute healthy for unhealthy behaviors. They focus on solving underlying problems instead of covering them up or avoiding them.

Understand the role of the family

Many teenagers who gamble excessively have told researchers their first experience with gambling occurred with family members. In fact, research shows a connection between adolescent problem gambling and a family history of gambling problems. Think about how your attitude toward gambling and your own gambling behavior might influence your children. Be careful not to send mixed messages. For example, think twice before you send your teenager on an errand to buy a lottery ticket, or before you bring your child to a bingo hall.

YOU CAN HELP

Where Do You Find Professional Help?

Look for a licensed or certified health care provider. These providers include psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors and social workers. Look for someone who specializes in children and adolescents. Your child should be assessed for a range of problems. For example, your child might try to escape from depressed feelings by gambling. It will be difficult to solve the gambling behavior if the depression is not treated. Good sources of referrals include your health insurance provider, your pediatrician and your state's department of health. Recovery from gambling addiction is possible.

For More Resources

The International Center for Responsible Gaming has devoted part of its website (www.icrg.org) to resources for parents concerned about youth gambling.

If you or someone you know has a gambling problem, call the national problem gambling helpline at 1-800-GAMBLER.