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# Adolescent gambling : What should teachers and parents know?

The potential dangers, risk factors, and warning signs to look for are described together with strategies to help young people with a problem.

***It has been noted that adolescents may be more susceptible to problem gambling than adults, and in the UK, up to one in twenty children may have a gambling problem.***

Adolescent gambling is a growing problem in society today. It appears to be related to high levels of problem gambling and other delinquent activities such as illicit drug taking and alcohol abuse.<sup>1</sup> It has been noted that adolescents may be more susceptible to problem gambling than adults. In the UK, up to one in twenty children may have a gambling problem.<sup>2</sup> This figure is two to three times higher than that identified in the adult population.<sup>3,4</sup> On this evidence, young people are clearly more vulnerable to the negative consequences of gambling than adults.

A typical finding of many adolescent gambling studies has been that problem gambling appears to be a primarily male phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> It also appears that adults may to some extent be fostering adolescent gambling. For example, a strong correlation has been found between adolescent gambling and parental gambling.<sup>3,4,6</sup> This is particularly worrying because a number of studies have shown that when people gamble as adolescents, they are then more likely to become problem gamblers as adults.<sup>3,4,7</sup>

Similarly, many studies have indicated a strong link between adult problem gamblers and later problem gambling amongst their children.<sup>3,4</sup> Other factors that have been linked with adolescent problem gambling include working class youth culture, delinquency, alcohol and substance abuse, poor school performance, theft and truancy.<sup>1,3,4,8,9</sup>

One consequence of the recent upsurge in

research into adolescent gambling is that we can now start to put together a "risk factor model" of those individuals who might be at the most risk of developing problem gambling tendencies. Based on summaries of empirical research, a number of clear risk factors in the development of problem adolescent gambling emerge. Adolescent problem gamblers are more likely to :

- ▶ be male (16-25 years)
- ▶ have begun gambling at an early age (as young as 8 years of age)
- ▶ have had a big win earlier in their gambling careers
- ▶ consistently chase losses
- ▶ gamble on their own
- ▶ have parents who gamble
- ▶ be depressed before a gambling session
- ▶ have low self-esteem
- ▶ use gambling to cultivate status among peers
- ▶ be excited and aroused during gambling
- ▶ be irrational (i.e. have erroneous perceptions) during gambling
- ▶ use gambling as a means of escape
- ▶ have bad grades at school
- ▶ engage in other addictive behaviours (smoking, drinking alcohol, illegal drug use)
- ▶ come from the lower social classes
- ▶ have parents who have a gambling (or other addiction) problem
- ▶ have a history of delinquency
- ▶ steal money to fund their gambling
- ▶ truant from school to go gambling

There are also some general background factors that might increase the risk of becoming a problem gambler.<sup>10</sup>

Common factors include :

- ▶ broken, disruptive or very poor family
- ▶ difficult and stressful situations within the home
- ▶ heavy emphasis on money within the family
- ▶ the death of a parent or parental figure in their childhood
- ▶ serious injury or illness in the family or themselves
- ▶ infidelity by parents
- ▶ high incidence of abuse ( verbal, physical and/or sexual)
- ▶ feeling of rejection as a child
- ▶ feelings of belittlement and disempowerment

This list is probably not exhaustive but incorporates what is known empirically and anecdotally about adolescent problem gambling. As research into the area grows, new items to such a list will be added while factors, signs and symptoms already on these lists will be adapted and modified.

### How to spot a problem child gambler

Gambling has often been termed "the hidden addiction". The main reasons for this<sup>4,10</sup> arise from the problem with the identification. This is because :

- ▶ there are no observable signs or symptoms like other addictions (e.g. alcoholism, heroin addiction etc.)
- ▶ money shortages and debts can be explained away with ease in a materialistic society
- ▶ adolescent gamblers do not believe they have a problem or wish to hide the fact
- ▶ adolescent gamblers are exceedingly plausible and become adept at lying to mask the truth
- ▶ adolescent gambling may be only one of several excessive behaviours

Although there have been some reports of a personality change in young gamblers many parents may attribute the change to adolescence itself (i.e., evasive behaviour, mood swings etc. are commonly associated with adolescence).

It is quite often the case that many parents do not even realize they have a problem until their son or daughter is in trouble with the police. Griffiths<sup>4</sup> reports there are a number of possible warning signs to look for although individually, many of these signs could be put down to adolescence.

However, if several of them apply to a child or adolescent it could be that they will have a gambling problem.

The signs include :

- ▶ no interest in school highlighted by a sudden drop in the standard of schoolwork
- ▶ unexplained free time such as going out each evening and being evasive about where they have been
- ▶ coming home later than expected from school each day and not being able to account for it
- ▶ a marked change in overall behaviour (that perhaps only a parent would notice). Such personality changes could include becoming sullen, irritable, restless, moody, touchy, bad-tempered or constantly on the defensive
- ▶ constant shortage of money
- ▶ constant borrowing of money
- ▶ money missing from home (e.g., from mother's purse or father's wallet)
- ▶ selling personal possessions and not being able to account for the money
- ▶ criminal activity (e.g., shoplifting in order to sell things to get money for gambling)
- ▶ coming home hungry each afternoon after school (because lunch money has been spent on gambling)
- ▶ loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy
- ▶ lack of concentration
- ▶ a "couldn't care less" attitude
- ▶ lack of friends and/or falling out with friends
- ▶ not taking care of their appearance or personal hygiene
- ▶ constantly telling lies (particularly over money)

However, many of these "warning signs" are not necessarily unique to gambling addictions and can also be indicative of other addictions (e.g. alcohol and other drugs). Confirming that gambling is indeed the problem may prove equally as difficult as spotting the problem in the first place.

Directly asking an individual if they have a problem is likely to lead to an outright denial. Talking with them about their use of leisure time, money and spending preferences, and their view about gambling in general is likely to be more effective.

The following highlight some early warning signs of a possible gambling problem, some definite signs and a thumbnail profile of a problem gambler.

### Early warning signs of a gambling addiction

- Unexplained absences from home
- Continual lying about day-to-day movements
- Constant shortage of money
- General increase in secretiveness
- Neglect of studies, family, friends, health and appearance
- Agitation (if unable to gamble)

- Mood swings
- Loss of friends and social life
- Gambling seen as a legitimate way of making money

### Signs of a definite gambling problem

- Large debts (which are always explained away)
- Trouble at school or college about non-attendance
- Unexplained borrowing from family and friends
- Unwillingness to repay borrowed money
- Total preoccupation with gambling and spending money on gambling
- Gambling alone for long periods
- Constantly chasing losses in an attempt to win money back
- Constantly gambling until all money is gone
- Complete alienation and rejection from family and friends
- Lying about the extent of their gambling to family and friends
- Committing crimes as a way of getting money for gambling or paying off debts
- Gambling overriding all other interests and obligations

### Profile of the problem adolescent gambler

- Unwilling to accept reality and has a lack of responsibility for gambling
- Gambles to escape deeper problems (and the gambling environment may even be a substitute for parental affection)
- Insecure and feels inferior to parents and elders
- Wants good things without making an effort and loves games of chance
- Likes to be a 'bigshot' and feels it's important to win (gambling offers them status and a way of defining achievement)
- Likes to compete
- Feels guilty with losses acting as a punishing behaviour
- May be depressed
- Low self-esteem and confidence
- Other compulsive and/or addictive traits

Finally it is worth noting some of the 'trigger' situations and circumstances that a gambling problem might first come to light. Bellringer<sup>10</sup> highlights an array of situations that provide an opportunity to help the gambler focus on their need to change. These are :

- ▶ Acceptance by the gambler that control has been lost - *this is the step before they ask for help*
- ▶ Asking for help - *having realised for themselves that gambling has taken control over their life, they may reach out to those closest to them*

- ▶ Observation of too much time spent in a gambling environment - *such observations by friends or family may provoke discussion as to how this is affecting the life of a gambler*
- ▶ Getting in to financial trouble / Accumulation of debts - *this might be a crisis point at which problem gambling might raise its head for the first time*
- ▶ Uncovered lies - *realization that the gambler has been caught lying may lead to admissions about their gambling problems*
- ▶ Dwindling social circles/ Losing close relationships - *these observation may again lead to problem gambling being discovered by family or friends*
- ▶ Discovered crime - *This is usually a real crisis point that the family may discover the truth for the first time*
- ▶ Homelessness - *being thrown out of the family home may be the trigger for problem gamblers to be honest for the first time about the mess they are in*

### What can parents do?

Discovering that you are the parent of an adolescent problem gambler can be highly stressful - particularly as it is often a problem that parents feel they have to face on their own. Before getting involved with their children parents have to understand the problem as well as the 'process' of problem gambling.

By the time a young gambler acknowledges they have a problem, the family may have already gone through a lot of emotional turmoil including feelings of anger, sadness, puzzlement and guilt. Parents should try and get in touch with a helping agency as soon as possible (details at the end of this article).

The following list of points are appropriate for parents either during or as a follow-up to their initial contact with a helping agency.

- ▶ Remember that you are not the only family facing this problem
- ▶ You may be able to help your child by talking the problem through but it is probably better if a skilled person outside the family is also involved
- ▶ Keep in mind that it is a serious matter and that the gambler cannot "just give up"
- ▶ Take a firm stand; whilst it might feel easier to give in to demands and to believe everything they say, this allows your child to avoid facing the problem
- ▶ Remember that your child likes to gamble and is getting something from the activity quite apart from money
- ▶ Do not forget that gamblers are good at lying - to themselves as well as you
- ▶ Let your child know that you believe it is a problem even though they may not admit it
- ▶ Encourage your child all the time as they have to be motivated to change
- ▶ Be prepared to accept that your child may not be

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motivated to change until they are faced with an acute crisis

- ▶ Leave the responsibility for gambling and its consequences with the gambler, but also help them to face up to it and to work at overcoming the dependency
- ▶ Do not condemn them, as it is likely to be unhelpful and may drive them further into gambling
- ▶ Setting firm and fair boundaries for your child's behaviour is appropriate and is likely to be constructive in providing a framework with which to address the dependency
- ▶ Despite what your child may have done it is important to let them know that you still love them. This should be done even if you have to make a 'tough love' decision such as asking them to leave home
- ▶ Do not trust them with money until the dependency has been broken. If they are agreeable, it is a helpful strategy for a defined short period of time to manage their money for them. In addition, help develop their financial management skills
- ▶ Encourage other alternative activities - try to identify other activities that the child is good at and encourage them in that
- ▶ Give praise for any achievements (however small); although don't go over the top
- ▶ Provide opportunities to contribute to the family or the running of the house to develop responsibility
- ▶ Try to listen with understanding and look at them with pleasure. Communication channels between child and parent can easily be blocked so simple measures can pay big dividends
- ▶ Bear in mind that as a parent you will need support too through this long process of helping the child. You will need the support of your family and may also need additional support from a helping agency

Having successfully broken a dependency on gambling, it is important to put in place measures that will help prevent gambling relapses. Useful strategies include the following (after Bellringer<sup>10</sup>):

- ▶ Place a limit on future gambling, or avoid gambling altogether
- ▶ Internalise learning and avoid reverting to ingrained reactions to difficult or stressful situations
- ▶ Watch for situations and circumstances that trigger the urge to gamble and be ready to face them
- ▶ Nurture self-esteem - work at feeling good about yourself
- ▶ Develop a range of interests that, preferably, meet similar needs to those that were previously being met by gambling
- ▶ Spend time and energy working at building good human relationships
- ▶ Reassess the significance of money and endeavour to reduce its importance in your life
- ▶ Continue to explore, on occasion, reasons why

gambling became so significant in your life

Other more general steps that gamblers should be encouraged to do include:

- ▶ Be honest with themselves and others
- ▶ Deal with all outstanding debts
- ▶ Accept responsibility for their gambling
- ▶ Abstain from gambling while trying to break the dependency
- ▶ Talk about how gambling makes them feel
- ▶ Take one day at a time
- ▶ Keep a record of 'gambling-free' days
- ▶ Be positive and not give up after a 'slip' or a 'lapse'
- ▶ Reward themselves after a gambling-free period
- ▶ Develop alternative interests

### The "good gambling" guide for adolescents

Parents and practitioners should also be aware that problems are likely to be avoided when the young gambler keeps in control of the situation and ensures that their gambling remains a social activity.

The following brief guide is aimed particularly for working with young gamblers but applicable to everyone. It will help ensure that gambling remains an enjoyable and problem-free experience.

It is wise to remember that:

- ▶ When you are gambling you are buying entertainment, not investing money
- ▶ You are unlikely to make money from gambling
- ▶ The gaming industry and the government are the real winners
- ▶ You should only gamble with money that you can afford to lose
- ▶ You should set strict limits on how much you will gamble
- ▶ To make profit from gambling you should quit when ahead
- ▶ Gambling should only take up a small amount of your time and interest
- ▶ Problems will arise if you become preoccupied with gambling
- ▶ Gambling within your means is a fun and exciting activity
- ▶ Gambling outside your means is likely to create serious problems
- ▶ You should not gamble to escape from worries or pressures
- ▶ The feeling of being powerful and in control when gambling is a delusion
- ▶ A gambling dependency is as damaging as other addictions
- ▶ Always gamble responsibly

Hopefully this article has highlighted a potential danger among children and adolescence. It covered risk factors, warning signs to look for, and strategies to help those with a problem. Through education and awareness, it is hoped that gambling problems will be viewed no differently from other potentially addictive substances and that schools will take the issue seriously.

Useful addresses for sources of help and information about youth gambling

**GamCare.** 25-27 Catherine Place, Westminster, London, SW1E 6DU. Tel: 0207-2338988/ Fax: 0207-2338977

e-mail: director@gamcare.org.uk www.gamcare.org.uk  
GamCare is the national centre for information, advice and practical help in relation to the social impact of gambling. It provides a national telephone helpline (0845-6000-133), and a face-to-face counselling service. It also produces a wide range of educational materials on gambling and problem gambling.

**Gamblers Anonymous/Gam-Anon.** PO Box 88, London, SW10 0EU. Tel: 0207-3843040 (helpline).

Gamblers Anonymous (GA) is a self-help fellowship who have over 200 groups throughout the country. Gam-Anon is the 'sister' organization to GA and provide support and advice to partners and parents of problem gamblers. Literature available on request.

**Gordon House Association.** 186 Mackenzie Road, Beckenham, Kent. BR3 4SF Tel: 0208-7783331.

The Gordon House Association provides residential facilities for male problem gamblers over the age of 18 years. There are a limited number of beds although a second hostel is now open in Dudley (West Midlands).

**Parent of Young Gamblers** Tel: 0121-4432609

This is a telephone only helpline which provides verbal advice and information about youth gambling.

**Local counselling services** may also be able to help. Check your local telephone directory for details or speak to your GP.

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