

Student Gambling

Gambling is an addictive behavior that's often hidden but erodes students' quality of life.

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Alex began sports betting at the age of 13. He quickly found himself making increasingly large bets to compensate for past losses. As his gambling increased and his debts grew, he found it more and more difficult to focus on schoolwork. He was often truant from school. The school made attempts to contact Alex's parents, but Alex erased phone messages and intercepted letters. To cover his betting losses, Alex began stealing money from his family's business, friends, and family members. Not until family members realized money was missing did they begin to realize that Alex had a gambling problem (Gupta & Derevensky, 2000a).

Gambling has been long recognized as an adult pastime that is characterized by thrills and risks. In recent years, however, it has increased significantly among adolescents, who have grown up in a society where it is legal and widely accepted. Movies, TV shows, and increased access to gaming through the Internet have helped embed gambling in modern youth culture.

For many people, such gambling activities are relatively harmless, but for others, simple games of chance can become a serious, life-improving addiction. Although much youth gambling occurs off campus, school environments can unintentionally contribute to gambling behavior either through permissiveness or lack of awareness. Administrators can help reduce problem gambling by establishing clear policies and incorporating gambling into existing efforts to prevent risky or undesirable behavior.

What Is Youth Gambling?

Typically, youth gambling activities include sports betting, poker, dice, bingo, non-casino slot machines, cockfights, games of skill (such as basketball, golf, and pool), horse or greyhound racing, pitching quarters, Internet

gambling, raffles, scratch-and-win tickets, state-run lottery games, and pull tabs.

Problem or compulsive gambling is a progressive addiction characterized by:

- Increasing preoccupation with gambling
- A need to bet more money more frequently
- Restlessness or irritability when attempting to stop
- "Chasing" losses (increasing bets to make up for previous losses)
- Loss of control that is manifested by the continuation of gambling in spite of mounting negative consequences.

Problem gambling causes disruptions in psychological, physical, social, and educational or vocational areas of life. It can result in poor concentration, low grades, absenteeism, and social and behavior problems in school.

Is Gambling Illegal?

Gambling age requirements differ from state to state, as do laws regarding types of gaming (e.g., casino gambling versus playing the lottery). In general, gambling is illegal for anyone under 18, but administrators should know the local regulations. They also need to know whether and what gambling is taking place on campus. Is the regular card game at lunch being played for money? Are students betting on Friday night football? How widespread is that Final Four pool? What are the stakes? Who is organizing it? Banning illegal gambling is obvious. A greater challenge for schools is tracking student behavior and establishing reasonable policies that prevent potentially harmful but legal behavior.

Gambling and Addiction

Gambling shares some similarities with other addictions. Like substance abusers, problem

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gamblers are unable to stop or control their behavior, are preoccupied with their addiction, and need to increase the frequency and severity of the behavior to achieve a satisfactory high. Problem gambling differs from substance abuse in that it is often a hidden addiction: a gambler can lose a great deal of money before anyone else realizes there is a problem.

Gambling often has a severe, long-term financial impact on a gambler's life that is not common with substance abuse. Once an adolescent decides to stop drinking, he or she is on the road to recovery, but recovering gamblers usually face significant pressure to repay or recover their losses. This can exacerbate the addiction, creating even more of a need to chase losses in an attempt to alleviate the debt. And although problem gamblers do not generally suffer the damaging physical effects (e.g. overdose, liver damage, and impaired judgment) of substance abusers, they do experience the social consequences of deception: loss of trust by friends and loved ones.

Why Youth Engage in Gambling

Adolescents gamble for fun, to socialize, to win money, and to experience the thrill of the risk-win scenario. They also gamble to escape from problems at home or school; to avoid feeling disconnected; and to alleviate feelings of depression, loneliness, or other unpleasant moods. Youths may have an increased propensity to gamble because of easy access through the Internet, a need for immediate gratification, and a desire to increase social standing (Vitaro, Arseneault, & Tremblay, 1999; Ladouceur, Boudreault, Jacques, & Vitaro, 1999). Some "successful" youth gamblers even reach a status similar to star athletes. Addicted gamblers care about nothing else while they are gambling. The game, even more than the winnings, becomes their mission. According to Gupta and Derevensky (2000b), for students with serious problems, "A good day is walking into a gaming room with \$20, playing all day, and losing all their money. A bad day is when the \$20 only lasts 10 minutes" (p. 4).

Prevalence

Canadian studies of students in grades 7 through 11 (Ladouceur et al., 1999) and grades 4 through 6 (Ladouceur, Dube, & Bujold, 1994) indicate that approximately 87% of students have gambled at least once in their lifetimes. In another study, 47% of students in grade 7 in Massachusetts had purchased lottery tickets during their lifetimes and nearly 3% had purchased lottery tickets between 6 and 19 times during the month prior to the study (Shaffer, 1994). A study of Florida youth showed that 11.5% of adolescents reported being weekly gamblers (Shapira, Ferguson, Frost-Pineda, & Gold, 2004). In an analysis of United States and Canadian youth gambling studies, Shaffer and Hall (1996) found that between 4.4% and 7.4% of adolescents exhibit problem and pathological gambling behaviors. Secondary school students gamble more frequently than they engage in any other potentially addictive behavior (Gupta & Derevensky, 1998).

Risk Factors

Youths who have certain personality characteristics, such as extreme impulsivity, extroversion, sensation-seeking behaviors, or low self-esteem may be at higher risk for developing



Conversation Starters

Your school psychologist can help address gambling problems in your school. Start a conversation about:

- Training on gambling addiction and school-based interventions that might be helpful.
- A brief needs and awareness survey in the school. Ask your mental health personnel to help include teachers and students in the survey development, review results, or facilitate focus groups with students.
- Current policies for monitoring and restricting gambling activities on school grounds and updating or developing new policies on the basis of the survey results and committee recommendations.
- Finding and incorporating problem gambling information into current addiction prevention curricula.
- Confirming the intervention, referral procedures, and supports for students who have or may be at risk for gambling problems.

Signs & Symptoms

Behavioral Changes

- Unexplained absences
- Dropping grades
- Asking for/borrowing money from peers
- Withdrawal from the family
- Behavior changes (e.g., daydreaming, anxiety, moodiness, less participation, fatigue, changes in sleeping and eating patterns)
- Lying, cheating, or stealing in school
- Spending unusual amount of time reading newspapers, magazines and periodicals having to do with sports
- Selling personal belongings
- Unexplained large amounts of money or other material possessions (e.g., cars, clothes, jewelry)

Gambling Specific Behaviors

- Playing gambling type games on the internet
- Intense interest in gambling conversations
- Using gambling jargon in conversations (e.g. *bookie*, *point spread*, *underdog* or *favorite*, exaggerated use of the word *bet*)
- Bragging about winnings

a gambling problem (Dickson, Derevensky, & Gupta, 2002). Research suggests that more males than females are problem gamblers (Dickson et al.). Youths who are problem gamblers are likely to have a parent with an addiction (e.g., gambling, alcohol, or drugs) or have parents involved with illegal activities. Parents of youths who are problem gamblers often lack knowledge about problem gambling among adolescents. As with many addictions, youths who are problem gamblers have higher rates of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts (Dickson et al.). It is important to remember that the effects of risk factors vary from individual to individual. Students who have multiple risk factors may never enjoy gambling, and students who have no risk factors might develop serious problems.

Prevention and Intervention

Schools can implement an independent prevention program or include problem gambling awareness and prevention in existing drug and alcohol abuse prevention programs. Life skill classes can be an effective means to raise awareness, perhaps during a discussion of money management. Discussions of probability and the role of skill and luck can occur in math classes. Simply adding the topic of gambling to information about addictions for students and parents improves their understanding that gambling can be harmful behavior.

Whether incorporated or independently implemented, effective prevention models should include:

- Activities or information that increase knowledge among students, staff members, and parents about youth gambling problems
- Experiences that help modify and change the attitude that gambling is always a harmless behavior
- Discussions to help change faulty beliefs concerning the role of skill and luck and the illusion of control during gambling
- Demonstrations and hands-on exercises to gain an understanding of statistical probability and superstition
- Opportunities for students to learn successful coping and adaptive skills that

prevent becoming a problem gambler (Dickson et al., 2002).

The Role of School Administrators

Policies regarding allowable gaming and gambling prevention should reflect the needs of the school community. Unlike most other addictions, many behaviors that can lead to youth problem gambling are often viewed as harmless and are legal. Administrators must assess the school climate for its support of gambling activities and get a clear understanding of the extent to which it is occurring on campus and in the community. Significant gambling activity, whether conducted in or out of school, is ultimately likely to affect a student's school experience.

Prevention and intervention activities should include:

- Educating teachers, mental health professionals, coaches, parents, and students about the adverse effects of gambling. (Local councils on problem gambling may be able to provide training sessions.)
- Identifying appropriate referral sources for students who are problem gamblers and their families. The school psychologist, social worker, or counselor may be able to provide initial services and then refer the student and his or her family to an outside resource.
- Evaluating and enforcing the school's policy on gambling.
- Reconsidering after-prom and other activities, such as "Casino Night" and "Poker Night," that have gambling as their main theme. Although after-prom events minimize alcohol and drug abuse, gambling-related events may encourage other harmful addictions.
- Identify and intervene with students whose behavior suggests they may have or be at risk for developing a gambling problem.

Conclusion

Gambling is more accepted than ever as a pastime for adults and youth. With the widespread proliferation of gambling opportuni-

ties has come an increase in youth gambling problems. Schools have the opportunity to educate students and parents on the risks of gambling, create school environments that do not contribute to problem gambling, facilitate identification of and referral for youth problem gamblers, and recognize the effects of problem gambling on families. **PL**

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Web Sites & Resources

Gamblers Anonymous (GA)
www.gamblersanonymous.org

Greater Area Toronto YMCA
www.ymcatoronto.org/gambling

International Centre for Youth Gambling
www.youthgambling.com

National Council on Problem Gambling
www.npgaw.org

Oregon Addiction Services
www.oregon.gov/DHS/addiction/gambling.shtml

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