

CPYU Trend Alert:

Teen Gambling by Doug West

Today's teenager lives in a world sandwiched between childhood and adulthood. Bombarding teens on all sides are adult "forbidden fruit" temptations that are legally out of reach in terms of age, but considered, by many, to be normal "rights of passage" meant to be done "safely" and in "moderation." Gambling is one such example. Impressionable and impulsive teens are particularly vulnerable to the exciting, enticing and seemingly innocuous entertainment options presented by gambling.

Today's culture is increasingly accepting of, and receptive to, gambling. A Gallup poll conducted in 2003 found that 61% of teens believe gambling is "morally acceptable." The popularity of gambling as a cultural phenomenon can be seen in the proliferation and popularity of the many televised poker programs, usually featuring Texas Hold 'Em. Newspapers across the country are full of stories about teens, even children as young as ten, getting together for home poker games. Lottery jackpots and winners receive national attention on a regular basis. Almost every state endorses some form of legalized gambling in order to generate tax revenues. In addition to Las Vegas and Atlantic City, several Indian reservations around the country have built and run casinos. Now, thanks to technology, gambling is branching out onto the Internet, even as Congress attempts to legislatively curb and block its expansion.

The lure, of course, is the possibility of winning fast money. It should come as no surprise that teen gambling is on the rise and is the fastest growing addiction among teens, according to an A&E Investigative Report on teen gambling. Consider these eye-opening facts:

- The A&E report cites a federal study that estimates 7 million teens gamble (www.aande.com).
- Florida researchers found that 70% of 13-17 year old Floridians gambled during their lifetime, with an accompanying association with substance abuse, and an average initiation age of 12.5 (www.aacap.org).
- The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago reports that 28% of 16-17 year olds participated in private betting (www.norc.uchicago.edu).
- The Gallup Organization discovered that 26% of teens said they took part in some form of legal gambling, with 27% betting on professional sporting events and 18% on college games, and that 29% of teen gamblers made their first wager when they were ten years old or younger (www.gallup.com).
- The National Research Council estimates there are 5.7 million problem and 2.2 million pathological adolescent gamblers (<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/ngisc/reports/4.pdf>).
- The National Annenberg Risk Survey of Youth shows that in 2004, 10.8% of high school boys and 3.3% of high school girls report weekly card playing (up from 5.7% and 1.5%, respectively, in 2003) (http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/07_adolescent_risk/2005_03_gambling_among_teens.pdf).

Teen gambling, as with any other hobby or activity, is a function of time, access, attitude and funds. Teens who have the time are given ample "gateway" opportunities to be introduced to and indoctrinated into gambling. Typically it begins with simple card and dice games. Then, it can move on to lottery tickets, horse tracks, and fantasy sports league competitions. Many kids get involved in weekly football, baseball, and basketball pools that are popular in middle and high schools around the country. Clearly, the most menacing and pernicious opportunity for teens to gamble comes from the Internet because of its easy access, and interactive and anonymous nature.

Online poker rooms cannot legally set up shop within the United States, so the majority of them are based overseas. This leaves many poker websites unregulated by gaming commissions and can open the door for illegitimate activities. Because of such flaws, underage children and teens can use a credit card, create an online poker account, and quickly lose large amounts of money. Christiansen Capital Advisors reports that over 2,000 gambling websites took in nearly \$10 billion in 2004 alone.

Though playing poker for money on such websites is illegal within the U.S., they are brash enough to advertise their sites in magazine ads, television commercials and radio spots. They get away with this by setting up "shadow sites." For example, one such company, PartyPoker, will have two websites that look almost identical. One website is given the domain name *partypoker.net*. At this website, people of all ages can play online poker for free. Because this site is legal, and no gambling takes place, this is the website that is advertised in the media. However, the website *partypoker.com*, which has the same look and feel as *partypoker.net* is set up to allow for online poker with real stakes. Advertisements encourage players to "practice" on their *.net* site hoping that they will become enticed and play for real money on their *.com* site.

The risk of losing is often overlooked. The marketers of online poker sites know this and use it to their advantage. However, the danger of losing money, lots of it and fast, is real. Recently, the "clean cut" class president of a university in Pennsylvania was arrested for robbing a bank after accruing several thousand dollars in debt from playing poker online.

Teen attitudes are shaped by, and steeped in, the relativistic postmodern cultural landscape, which reflects a mindset that snubs absolute truth in favor of subjective feelings. Here, gambling is viewed not so much as a sin - as with the Las Vegas "Sin City" label - but as a matter of personal preference and choice.

Teens finance their gambling in many ways. They can wager allowances and wages, borrow or steal a parents' credit card and PIN number, or resort to dealing drugs and/or stealing to support their burgeoning habit. Novice and technologically savvy teens can bypass stated age restrictions on Internet gambling sites by using an alias or creating or assuming an identity to become virtual players.

What can we do to combat the growing teen gambling trend? First, raise awareness about the destructive realities of gambling where real people lose real money, and where casual, fun entertainment can become an obsession and addiction that ultimately consumes and ruins lives. Tell them that gambling is harmful, destructive, and wrong. If the potential for a problem exists, perhaps a visit from a reformed gambler who has overcome their sinful behavior with God's help might be helpful.

Second, set a consistent and biblical example. Parents play the primary role in modeling healthy and mature attitudes and behaviors for teens in regards to gambling. Youth workers and teachers can support parents and reinforce the message through the power of their example.

Third, know where your teens are, who they are with, what they are doing and what websites they are visiting. As with any other teen behavior, parental knowledge is a wonderful preventive prescription. And finally, if gambling becomes a problem or addiction, get them help. Check to see if any Christian counselors in your area are competent in dealing with issues related to gambling. You can also check out gamblersanonymous.com problemgambling.com, wannabet.org, or ncpgambling.com.

Popular Online Poker Sites

(many have both *.com* and *.net* domains)

- PartyPoker
- Poker Stars
- ParadisePoker
- PokerRoom
- PacificPoker or 888
- UltimateBet
- FullTiltPoker

**For more information on today's youth culture, visit the website of the
Center for Parent/Youth Understanding at
www.cpyu.org.**