

Teen Gambling

The prevalence of gambling has desensitized our kids to its consequences.

It's "Casino Night" at the local high school. The flyer sent home to parents reads, "Bring your family for a night of food and fun and raise money for our school." But is exposing kids to the world of gambling and betting a good way to raise funds? Or is it contributing to the advancement of a dangerous trend?

Walk the halls of most high schools and you'll find teens gambling before, during and after school. It is estimated that 4 percent to 6 percent of all adolescents are pathological gamblers, and even more gamble occasionally. Whether it is playing craps, cards, the lottery, dice or pool—or betting on sports events—it all begins as harmless fun.

But what may surprise you is that teens are more susceptible to gambling than adults. This is because of their impulsivity, peer-pressure influences, egos, desire to win, lack of understanding of the consequences of gambling and feelings of invincibility.

The prevalence of gambling in America has desensitized our kids to the devastating consequences of addiction and financial ruin. From an early age, kids learn that winning is what counts. During adolescence, a competitive spirit coupled with a fragile identity, ego formation and little fear of consequences can lead to risk-taking behavior.

Gambling offers quick money and a way to be "in" with those who see no harm in such activities. Every win reinforces the

activity. For those at risk for addiction, “harmless fun” ends in bondage.

Usually those who become addicted are intelligent, impulsive, high-energy, good students who are risk-takers, perfectionists and possibly users of drugs and alcohol. Parents are often unaware of the problem because these teens appear to have their acts together.

But it’s not hard to identify the signs of a gambling problem. They are:

A preoccupation with gambling

Inability to control the habit

Use of gambling to escape and avoid life problems

Continuation of gambling even when money is lost

Denial and lying about the extent of the problem

Involvement in illegal activities to finance the habit

Loss of relationships, jobs and educational or career opportunities

Pleas for money from others when losses escalate and desperation sets in.

Pathological gambling usually follows a progression. Winning and bragging about it characterize Phase 1, the winning phase. In Phase 2, the losing phase, the person blames losses on bad luck and continues gambling. Money problems from losses begin to accrue.

In Phase 3, the desperation phase, debts become so high that the teen sells his valuables, increases illegal activity, and withdraws from others, feeling remorse, panic, guilt and shame. He may become suicidal and turn to alcohol or drugs as an escape from bad feelings and life problems.

The good news is that treatment is available for teen gamblers. In many cases, alcohol and drug addiction problems are also present and must be addressed. In at least one treatment model, the 12-step recovery model, teens are encouraged to turn to God and surrender their problems and lives to Him.

Ultimately, the teen must realize that indulging in impulsive acts always has consequences and that “luck” is not a biblical concept. Our lives are purposeful only when directed by God.

Surrender is the key. As we surrender to His higher purposes and take responsibility for our behavior, He guides and directs our lives.

Psalm 37:23 reminds us that chance isn’t a part of the Christian life. “The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in His way” (NKJV).

There are no shortcuts in the refining process God takes us through when forming our character. And it is not until after we realize that only the things of God can satisfy the deep yearnings of our hearts that we will be less inclined to turn to other things.

Taking a chance with God is no gamble at all. He tells us that when we are weak, He is strong. And only He can transform a loss for His glory.