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High Stakes

Teens Gambling With Their Futures

By Laura Paul

She started gambling when she was 7. Her parents, both alcoholics, thought it was cute to have a child playing poker games with the adults. Karen H., who doesn't use her full last name as a rule of anonymity through Gamblers Anonymous, has not gambled for more than 24 years. She is the executive secretary for Gamblers Anonymous International Service Office in Los Angeles, Calif.

Even though legal gambling is restricted to those over 18 years of age, an increasing number of teenagers borrow money, neglect themselves, miss class, pawn items and lie to hide their gambling addictions – and the Internet makes it easy.



A True Story

"I gambled as a teenager," Karen says. "I learned how to shoot dice, and I shot dice with the boys in the co-ed locker room at my junior high school. It was just the excitement. I took money out of my mom's purse to gamble."

Her gambling also manifested itself in seemingly less harmful ways. "[I] used to throw baseball cards up against a garage door with friends, and whoever got closest to the garage door got the baseball cards," she says.

Karen even got married in Las Vegas. She agreed to join Gamblers Anonymous as a way to pacify her husband, thinking she would quit gambling for a while and then go back to it. "My marriage was on the verge of disaster, but I did not care about anybody," she says.

She quit gambling when her children were 9 and 13. "I would be gone for a day – maybe two days – when the clubs started staying open all night, and I would do things I'm not real proud of like leave my 7-year-old," she says. "I'd drop her off at school and say, 'Now you wait here on the street corner for me. I'll be here to get you. You have a dentist appointment,' and I'd never show up to get her. Same thing with my son. They would be waiting for me on the porch when I got home. Sometimes it was raining. Sometimes I did not get home."

Karen says teenagers occasionally show up at Gamblers Anonymous meetings, but most are having too much fun gambling to give it up. She still is not sure why gambling became an obsession for her. "My parents were both alcoholics, and they died drinking alcohol," she says. "I think

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one of my reasons for gambling was to escape the reality of my life at that time. I realized I could have a better way of life. I do it one day at a time."



Gambling Statistics

Ed Looney of Clifton, N.J., the executive director for The Council on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey, Inc., says his organization has a compulsive gambling awareness program for teenagers. They use the "Safe Bet" video and have been going to schools since 1983. He says 12 percent of people have compulsive gambling problems and the numbers are increasing among teens.

"Every high school we go to there is gambling," Looney says. "Some of it is really out of control. When you get to the college level, that's when it's epidemic. When they first start gambling, they say, 'I bet I can beat you to the corner, I can make more foul shots than you can or

that the Giants win this weekend. It's nickel and dime, small amounts of money."

Betting Through Bookies

Looney says one of the most problematic areas for teen gambling is sports. They often start participating their sophomore year of high school. Teenagers who gamble are introduced to bookies, who give them an opportunity to gamble on games illegally as well as a credit line.

"They might get a credit line of \$25 or \$50 a game," he says. "He can bet on games all week, and then Sunday night he tallies up if I owe him the money or he owes me the money. It's not uncommon for kids in junior and senior high schools to have a bookie. Now they are dealing with organized crime. They are excited about it because they are betting on their favorite teams."

But just like in the movies, bookies can get violent, starting with verbal abuse and threats if the teenager does not pay up. To avoid the harassment, some teens steal jewelry from their mothers. Others might break into other homes or even begin selling drugs.

Gambling becomes easier for some teenagers once they enter college and have more space and freedoms as well as access to credit cards. "They also have Internet gambling," Looney says. "Now they are getting credit cards when they go to college. They can get a credit line and open up an account on Internet gambling and do the same thing from the quiet of their dormitory."

Profile of a Teen Gambler

Parents will not always be able to spot a teenager with a gambling problem. However some of the most obvious warning signs are financial problems. In addition, Looney says gambling teens let their school work slide, miss classes and don't stay focused. He says it's not uncommon for some college students to drop out without telling their parents.

Ironically enough, the profile of a teenager gambler might be someone a parent would want his or her son or daughter to date. He or she is usually a good student, highly motivated, excellent at math and popular. They don't like to lose, and that contributes to their compulsive gambling problem.

Looney says gamblers go through a phase where they feel lucky and special followed by a downward spiral that ends in a desperation phase where they can't stop gambling. "The critical thing not to do with an addict is to bail them out," he says. "They need to address that pressure in a

healthy way. They need treatment."

If a teenager does not receive treatment, he or she may be more likely to become involved in illegal activities or to commit suicide. According to Looney, more than 20 percent of compulsive gamblers think about suicide during their desperation phase. "Suicide becomes a real strong choice for many," he says. "The addiction comes before your wife, your kids, your best friend, your reputation. The addiction comes first."

All in the Family

Carol O'Hare, the executive director of the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling, says all gambling starts out harmless, and most people don't think a playful poker game will lead to a lifetime of impulse control problems.

"What distinguishes between social gambling and problem gambling has more to do with the individual than the games they are playing," she says. "You can't necessarily say if kids start out playing games as children that it progresses to gambling addiction. We may find there are some common characteristics among youth who gamble."



O'Hare says adults with a gambling problem need to understand that their problem does have an impact on their children and family. "It's not uncommon for them to say my dad was an alcoholic or a problem gambler," she says. "It's only logical then that we have to be concerned about the generation of adults right now with gambling problems. What then is the next generation impact for those kids?"

Oftentimes children of gamblers will not develop good coping skills or miss the emotional security that is so important during childhood. "As they get older they are subject to those same kinds of problems as the parents were," O'Hare says.

Parents can help, not just in leading by example. Although most teenagers do not want to get help for their problem, parents can set up short-term counseling and introduce them to [Gamblers Anonymous](#), a long-term support group for people of all ages and all walks of life.

To get a teen help with a gambling problem contact the national help line through the National Coalition on Problem Gambling at 1-800-522-4700 or visit [The Nevada Council on Problem Gambling](#) or [The Counsel on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey](#).

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About the Author: Laura Paul is a freelance writer.

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