

EDITORIAL

Adolescent gambling

Gambling, once thought to be an adult activity, has become an extremely popular pastime among adolescents around the globe. The worldwide expansion of traditional and non-traditional forms of gambling, as well as the accessibility, convenience, availability, diversity, and proliferation of gambling opportunities, is indicative of its popularity and social acceptance. Whether engaged in wagering on games of personal skill, playing poker amongst friends, purchasing a lottery ticket, playing electronic gambling machines, sports wagering, or participating in casino type games, gambling's popularity among the young is on the rise.

The past two decades has witnessed an unprecedented growth in gambling opportunities and venues easily accessible to adolescents. Gambling continues to undergo a major transformation. With the worldwide economic downturn, governments have become even more interested in expanding gambling, given its significance as a major source of revenue generation. The negative associations of sin and vice attributed to gambling have been replaced by the positive attributes of gaming (the industry prefers to use the term gaming vs. gambling)—a socially acceptable form of entertainment. A new word for an ancient vice.

Along with the increased availability, accessibility, and new technological forms of gambling (mobile and internet gambling) that have capitalized upon the interests of adolescents, youth gambling continues to rise and so too have the number of youth experiencing significant gambling-related problems.

The rise and proliferation of gambling/gaming has not been without concomitant problems. Although the World Health Organization and the American Psychiatric Association have identified pathological gambling as a legitimate psychiatric disorder, a common misconception is that such disorders are relegated only to adults and not to adolescents or in fact even to younger children. Yet prevalence study after prevalence study, independent of the type of instrument used for screening, point to the high prevalence of gambling problems amongst children, adolescents, and young adults. This state of affairs may be a result of their inherent risk taking behaviors, their belief that they can stop at any time, and their perception of invulnerability. Adolescence as a developmental period is often fraught with a number of potentially risky behaviors, including alcohol and substance use and abuse, eating disorders, depression, etc, all of which have managed to mask the growing number of youth with gambling problems.

Youth gambling represents a potentially serious public policy and health issue. Nevertheless, the rise in youth gambling issues and problems in the global context is not matched by a parallel increase in research on adolescent gambling. As such, there is an urgent need to conduct more studies on adolescent gambling behavior. Fortunately, whereas our research appears to be in its early developmental stages, significant advances in our knowledge of the risk factors associated with adolescents' problem gambling have emerged. This special issue of the International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health addresses

issues related to the prevalence, assessment, prevention, and treatment of youth gambling problems as well as to concerns related to the technological changes associated with youth problem gambling. Significant advances in our knowledge have been made in the past decade. The leading researchers in the field have addressed many of the current issues and have provided the most up-to-date research and information available.

Our increased understanding of the trajectory of gambling behaviors and ways to screen youth and programs to help prevent potential gambling-related problems from emerging will ultimately minimize the numbers of youth and adults with this disorder. We hope that governments will work with the research and clinical communities to establish coherent and responsible policies toward youth gambling.

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