



My son seems to be spending a lot of time playing poker with his friends. He also reads about it on the internet and watches it on TV. Could he have a gambling problem?

Most kids are exposed to gambling long before they reach the adolescent years. They bet their friends that can run faster, make a basket, or choose the winning team. They play chance games at fast food restaurants with lucky scratch off cards or look under the cap of carbonated beverages to win a prize. In fact, I will bet that you have made an innocent wager with your child and didn't even realize it.

Today's generation is the first to grow up with legalized gaming. In one form or another, gambling has been legitimized in every state. Be it a casino, lottery, or sports book, games of chance have become part of popular culture. Further extending the reach of this highly profitable industry is the internet, which offers anyone the opportunity to "make a bet" with virtually no regulations regarding age and ability.

What distinguishes social gambling from problem betting has more to do with the individual than rolling the dice. In fact, most kids like to make the occasional bet and find wagering to be a fun but forgettable experience. Unfortunately, approximately eleven percent of teens admit to gambling regularly, and one in fifty teens has a true addiction.

The best way to prevent gaming addiction is to pay attention and covertly converse with your kids about fiscal awareness. Explain how the family budget works. Let your teens know there are things you want but can't afford. And emphasize the importance of relationships over material matters. Acknowledge the occasional small wager is acceptable, but explain how obsession over the next win and anxiety over a current loss is the sign of an emerging problem.

Lastly, what makes gaming addictions so scary is that problem gamblers can initially hide their betting behaviors. There are no needle marks, blood shot eyes, or slurred speech. Furthermore, many gamers, on the outside, are strong students who are highly motivated to be successful. On the inside, however, these kids can't manage their impulsivity and often suffer from low self-esteem. When they lose; they lose control. Grades slip, household money goes missing, and relationships weaken. Many turn to additional addictions to mask their pain and frustration.

If you fear your teen is troubled, take a chance and have conversation. Don't gamble with a potentially dangerous situation. After all, it is better to have a difficult discussion now than a frustrating argument later.