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TODAY'S YOUTH

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A Poker Pup's Potential Problems

Type the word "poker" into a Yahoo search engine and you'll come up with an astonishing 206 million pages (up 400% in the last 6 months.) This is just one simple indicator of the rising fascination with cards and other forms of gambling. And who is the fastest growing segment in this market? Teenage boys – some of them in your neighbourhood, perhaps even your family.

One only has to check out the current television listings (Oct. 05) to see the cultural fascination with the sport – *World Series of Poker, American Poker Championship at Turning Stone Resort & Casino, Celebrity Poker Showdown, Degree Poker Championship, Poker, Pokermillion.com Championship Highlights, The Ultimate Poker Challenge, and Poker Royale: James Woods Gang vs. Unabombers*. Perfect training grounds for some poke pups who will become gambling addicts over the next couple of years. Howard Worrell, V-P of Alberta operations for Gateway Casinos, says, **"Because of the popularity of poker on TV, we've definitely seen an increase in younger players."**



The Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission states that only one per cent of their clients under 18 are gambling addicts. However, another recent report found that 3.8 per cent of the province's youth have gambling problems and 5.7 per cent "display hazardous gambling patterns." According to the International Centre for Youth Gambling Problems and High-Risk Behaviours at McGill University, when young people do gamble, they are more likely than adults to get into serious trouble. The centre says youth are two to four more times as likely as their adult counterparts to develop serious problems. Adult problem gamblers reported their first gambling experiences occurred between ages 10-19. Studies in Quebec and Alberta found that most problem gamblers began gambling at age 10.

In the fall of 1998, the Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology at McGill estimated that 55 per

cent of adolescents were casual gamblers, 13 per cent have some gambling related issues, and 4-6 percent has serious problems. Given the changes since then on how gambling is viewed, one can only surmise that all these figures are somewhat higher.

In Ontario, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (2003) reports that 24 per cent of students played cards for money at least once in the past year. About one-in-five played lottery tickets and the same proportion bet money on sports pools. The least prevalent activity is casino gambling (2%). Internet gambling was also reported by

2 percent of the students. Among all students, 6 percent were considered heavy gamblers. Males (10%) are more likely than females (3%) to be involved in gambling activities. About 4 per cent of students report signs of pathological gambling, with more males likely to do so than females.

In the most recent report (Oct. 05) on teen gambling, the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba reports more than one-third of junior and high school students in that province have gambled in the past year. One in 50 youths displayed symptoms of problem gambling.

The analysis shows the most popular forms of gambling among their youth are card games, sporting events or silent auctions. The survey said 31 per cent of Grade 7 students had gambled at least once during the year, while 43 per cent of Grade 12 students reported having gambled, the majority being involved in playing poker. Problem gamblers were more likely to show signs of alcohol dependence, and were more likely to use drugs.

"Youth are two to four more times as likely as their adult counterparts to develop serious problems."

So what's the draw?

Why are so many young people becoming obsessed with the game of poker and other forms of gambling? Why is this new phenomenon taking place in our youth culture?

First, most teens are naturally inquisitive, think they know everything, and feel nothing bad will ever

Youth Culture Facts:

- Over 70% of teen magazine content deals with beauty
- Number of obese children has doubled last 20 years
- 15% of grade 6 students each eat french fries daily
- children young as 2 are able to recognize brand names

A Game With Deadly Results

It goes by several names and all of them leave adults wondering why anyone would ever do it – space monkey, suffocation roulette, fainting game, tingling game, something dreaming game, funky chicken, blackout, flat liner, airplaning, or space cowboy.

The game entails self-asphyxiation or having someone else choke you. In some cases you make yourself hyperventilate and then someone squeezes you till you pass out. In other instances, a group of kids will press another youth up against a wall thereby cutting off their oxygen until they go limp. Others wrap ties, ropes, and towels around their own necks and hold them till they go unconscious. Kids watching often

find it humorous as the person twitches, thrashes, or speaks unintelligibly.

What teens don't understand is that the brain is basically in seizure due to lack of oxygen. At this point, brain cells are dying. There could also be hemorrhaging, as well as silent strokes in the temporal lobe and other areas.

This description is offered by one young player. **"It's hard to describe how it feels.**

It's kinda like, just, like, somewhere not on earth, but you're just dreaming, kind of. But then it only last for a few seconds and when you wake up... you don't know where you are or what's going on." In some areas where kids have died, as many as half the grade eight students had played the game. The short time high makes it an addictive behaviour with some kids playing for hours.

In 2001, *Injury Prevention Journal* reported five cases in Canada where young girls had strangled themselves using the hanging cloth towel dispensers in their school washrooms. Four of them died. Professionals fear it is now becoming a fast growing trend among young teens. At least one young adult Youth Unlimited spoke to here in



the GTA reported that it is very common among the young teens in her neighbourhood.

Warning signs for parents include your child keeping a rope or plastic bag, bloodshot eyes, headaches, dizziness, falling, marks on their neck, and objects tied to shelves and doorknobs.

Noting this growing fascination for our kids, all adults would do well to keep their eyes open and not be afraid to ask the tough questions. If a parent has suspicions, they might even introduce the topic by saying that they have heard or read reports about "the choking game" and then ask if their kids have heard anything around school. As with any other issue, staying in touch with your teen is best antidote. Sure not easy being a parent these days.



The Cultural Seduction of Tweens

The lead article in the September 2003 issue of *Twist* magazine was titled **"Best Breasts: Whose Chest Beats All the Rest?"** It included photos of seven of the top actresses in Hollywood. Not a bad article if you are an adult but *Twist* targets young girls 10-12 and is frequently read by girls as young as 7-9. No wonder we have a new generation of little girls who are seduced early into believing that their body is all that counts.

In a recent email to Youth Unlimited, a mother was concerned about issues of

age compression (marketers targeting younger and younger kids) on her 8-year-old son. He looks up to another 12-year-old boy who considers himself a "ladies man" and runs around the school yard without his shirt on to reveal his "6 pack" abdominal muscles. Her son is now pre-occupied with acquiring a similar body type so he too can make it as a ladies man. Her last sentence said it all - **"Tough topic to reason with a little boy when he clearly doesn't understand completely this sexual side of himself which seems to be**

awakening too soon!"

Pediatrics (August 2005) journal reports that their latest survey shows 12 per cent of boys and 8 per cent of girls aged 9-12 stated they had used a product to build muscles or improve their shape in the last year with nearly 5 per cent of the boys and 2 per cent of the girls saying they had used them once or more per week!

Perhaps even more disturbing are the findings of *The British Journal of Developmental Psychology* (March 2005). The study showed that 47 per

The Cultural Seduction of Tweens continued

cent of 5-8 year old girls wanted to be slimmer and thought that this would make them more popular. The **UK Eating Disorder Association** said that girls as young as eight, and probably even younger, had been diagnosed with anorexia. The bottom line is more and more little girls, and boys, are unhappy with their bodies.

In today's world of airbrushed perfection and mass media messages, kids learn early to shape up or they'll be shipped out of the mainstream. In November 2004 the **Canadian Marketing Association** reprimanded La Senza Girl for making phone call to girls as young as nine years old at home to invite them to "shopping parties" at the store.

The CMA code of ethics says, "All marketing interactions directed to children... require the express consent of the child's parent or guardian.



Marketing to children shall not exploit children's credulity, lack of experience or sense of loyalty. Marketers shall not pressure a child to urge their parents or guardians to purchase a product or service." Who said rules were made to be broken? One major car company is currently running a TV ad which shows a small child leaving his mother to hold hands with another mother who has a better minivan. They never let ethics get in the way of making a few more dollars.

Parents would do well to protect their kids from all marketing predators. The smart parent will help their children discern the real meaning behind the messages. Good parents focus on who their children are as people and not what type of consumer they should be. It is a tough lesson to teach when it seems the world cares more about products than people.

How to Raise Healthier Teens

Given the junk food culture our kids are growing up in, you would think the key to raising healthy young people would be fresh veggies and extra vitamins. Much to the surprise of some, the answer is not in food but in human contact.

The Canadian Institute for Health Information (October 2005) reports that the key five "assets" in raising healthy 12-15 year-olds are parental nurturing, parental monitoring, school engagement, volunteering, and friends.

The study found that 67 per cent of the young people who reported having four or five of these assets were more likely to say they were in good or excellent health. But there is even more encouragement for parents; these same youth are less likely to use drugs, alcohol, or commit crimes.

Other good news items included a drop in teen smoking in the last five years and a significant drop in teen pregnancies since the 1990s. When it comes to their personal lives, 70 to 80 per cent of these teens were involved in volunteer activities, highly engaged at school, and deeply committed to

their friends.

Nine in 10 also say they experience low levels of anxiety and the large majority feels they have a high sense of self-worth.

This survey also reminds parents of



the significant role they play in the development of their children. Here is a few more practical ways to nurture meaningful relationships with your kids.

One, don't forget to eat together at least four times per week. Studies show that families that eat together stay together. It is not so much the magic of the food but the conversations that take place. In the midst of

busy schedules, time together at the table becomes crucial.

Two, give them two listening ears. The vast majority of Canadian teens (73%) report "having someone to listen to me is very important." Parents need to make time to be with their teens, look them in the eyes, and listen to their hearts.

Three, help them set boundaries. Parents are responsible for teaching right and wrong and formulating moral limits. Kids grow healthiest when they live within clearly set boundaries for behaviour. This should be coupled with a deep love and belief in our children.

Four, give them consistent discipline. Consistent, loving discipline helps them to learn self-control and therefore, builds character. Punishment will destroy their spirit but loving discipline corrects, molds, and perfects moral character.

Finally, give them unconditional love. Love can overcome a multitude of short-comings. Love is an investment in your child which will pay great dividends once they enter adulthood.

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happen to them. Playing poker is the perfect challenge and provides a much needed thrill-seeking component as they think to make it to the big times.

Second, research shows that, surprisingly, money is not the main motivation for playing but escaping their real world is. Poker is the new boredom buster where one can escape the pressing issues of life by engaging in a variety of gambling options whether with real people or on the Internet. Some students spend endless hours playing and perfecting their game on-line with kids from around the world. In their real world, the need for money is just the vehicle that permits them to play more often. Adolescents with serious gambling problems state that nothing else matters in life and that all their problems disappear. Sounds very much like drug addiction.

Third, this is the first generation of young people to grow up in a culture where gambling is so prevalent, legal, and glorified. Watching the numerous poker shows available, one is struck by the celebrity status of the top players. Interviews include how much money they have made, their favourite past times, and how they keep their game in top shape.

Fourth, this is a generation of young people growing up without boundaries. Like so many other activities in today's youth culture, many of them used to be reserved for adulthood. Gambling used to be for old guys smoking cigarettes hunched over a dingy poker table. Today, it is main stream and everyone is noticing. It is probably the fastest growing "sport" or activity among young people. As one young man said, **"We limit it to \$5 per player. Where else can I get that much entertainment for so little money?"** Great point if you are able to walk away after losing it.

Negative Consequences

Like most obsessions and addictions, gambling is fast becoming a problem in the lives of more and more young people with serious psychological, sociological, and economic implications.

First, for some wealthier students, especially at university, gambling has become obsessive leading to dropping out of school early. For kids betting their lives away, the harsh reality of their addiction comes at a high cost to both them and their families.

Second, problem gambling can lead to

increased delinquency and crime. Acquiring the money to continue the game can become an ominous task where lying and deception come into play. In Montreal, a group of students at a prestigious prep school were busted in relation to a poorly planned counterfeit ring. A group of grade 9 and 10 students were discovered trading fake bills to help pay off their friend's \$12,000 Internet gambling debt (Edmonton Journal, December 2, 2004).

Third, obsession with gambling causes kids to neglect other important relation-



ships. Time spent at the poker table detracts from time with family, sporting activities, and other friends. Like anything out of balance, gambling can have detrimental effects on all of life. The problem is that this risk-taking behaviour has few observable signs of addiction compared to things like substance and alcohol abuse.

Fourth, school performance and work activities can be neglected. An ever-increasing number of youth are spending endless hours cruising the net and visiting as many legal playing sites as they can. Some spend infinite hours playing on-line poker with others around the world.

Fifth, the probability that some of these teens will move into other anti-social or risk-taking behaviours should concern us. It is their nature to seek new thrills and once addicted, they will do whatever it takes to keep the habit alive.

Sixth, research shows that problem/pathological gamblers have lower self-esteem and higher rates for depression. In some ways gambling only enhances their problems as they seek to win notoriety but can fall into the depths of despair when things don't turn out the way they intended.

Our Response as Parents

Step One – As with all adolescent issues, you

need to know where your kids are, who they are spending time with, and what they are doing. Being an involved parent is the best antidote to all negative issues facing our children. Give them more of your time; you will never live to regret it.

Step Two – Parents need to engage their kids in a conversation about gambling and poker among their school friends. Most parents will be surprised at the pervasiveness of the issue. Speak with an inquisitive voice and not a condemning one. Let your kids educate you about the world they are growing up in.

Step Three – If your kids are involved in gambling, even if it is just for fun, you need to talk to them about the potential pitfalls. The greatest danger is for the game to go beyond "fun" and into debt. Some warning signs of kids with serious gambling habits include lying and covering up suspected betting situations, borrowing money frequently, showing an unusual interest in sports games, and having overly emotional reactions to game results.

Step Four – Tell your kids the real facts about gambling in Canada. The odds of winning the top prize in Lotto 6/49 are 1 in 14 million with the odds going as high as 1 in 14 **billion** in some cases! Lotto Super 7 odds are 1 in 21 million. Only 7 people out of 100 leave the casino with more money than when they entered! Talk about how destructive gambling can be in the lives of some people, most of whom never intended to become addicted.

Step Five – You need to be the best example for your kids. Be the model of someone who has no need to risk personal fortunes, and family fortunes, on winning big time. The biggest winner is always the parent who sets a model worth emulating.

There is no reason to believe that this gambling trend is going to abate in the next couple of years. Being an "in-touch" parent is the best defense on this and all issues that might bring harm to our children.



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To book a speaking engagement call: 905-453-7991