West Islip Health & Wellness Alliance

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Kids as Young as 11 Are Becoming Addicted to Online Gambling

By Beth Ann Mayer

What are the odds your tween or teen has been exposed to gambling marketing messages? Research shows it's pretty high—even though the legal age for gambling in the U.S. is 18 or 21.

Marc Lefkowitz began gambling at age 9 and was playing poker with his friends at 12. He wasn't great at sports, but he could win in the card game. "I was bullied as a kid," says Lefkowitz. "Here was something I could do. I could always win in poker." Not always, exactly. Lefkowitz loved the rush of the win, but he didn't quit while he was ahead. And he wound up losing—big. In college, he gambled so much and found himself in so much debt that he had to drop out.

At 24, Lefkowitz hit rock bottom and sought help for his gambling addiction. Today, he's an international certified gambling counselor and director of program management at Kindbridge, an online therapy platform. He has been in recovery for four decades and has never had to navigate the world of online and app-based gambling as an addict. But he knows what an issue it could be. "I can't imagine being a teenager today," says Lefkowitz.

Why Gambling Ads Can Be Harmful to Kids

Know the Odds, an organization that seeks to raise awareness for problem gambling and prevent addiction, reports that children introduced to gambling by age 12 are four times more likely to develop a problem. The researchers at Ipsos Mori and the University of Stirling also found children's exposure to online gambling ads made them more likely to bet in the future.

Ads and easy access to apps have made gambling, more appealing. Gambling can become a serious issue. It's listed in the DSM-5 manual, which mental health providers use to diagnose conditions as an addiction. Up to 5 percent of youth, ages 12 to 17, have a gambling problem, while 10 to 14 percent are at risk for developing one, according to the National Council on Problem Gambling. "Gambling has its ups and downs just like drugs and alcohol," says Lefkowitz. "Betting on a game, the excitement of it—it's that constant rush, and that rush works, especially for a teenager going through [changes]. It's a way to escape."

Yet, it often doesn't get the same attention in schools and with parents as drug and alcohol addictions. And Lefkowitz says that needs to change. "There's marketing to parents on what to do about drugs and alcohol, but there's not the same with gambling," he says. "Gambling is a lot of times way more devastating because it's very easy to hide. You can't smell blackjack on somebody's breath."

Symptoms of Gambling Addiction

It can be hard for parents to pick up on a gambling addiction. In many ways, Lefkowitz says the symptoms mimic those of alcohol and drug addiction, including:

- Frequently asking for money, missing money or valuables
- Cutting school; distracted, sad, or anxious
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Decreased interest in usual activities

Lefkowitz says parents often notice these symptoms and send their children for a drug test. When it comes back negative, they drop the issue. But Lefkowitz recommends looking deeper for other, more distinct signs of gambling, including:

- Suddenly having extra money and expensive items
- Gambling apps on their phone or websites in their computer browser cache
- Increased interest in sports—not just a favorite team, but scores from multiple games
- Checking their phone constantly during sporting events
- A sudden knowledge of gambling terms, like "spread" and "line"
- Intense interest if other people start talking about gambling

If gambling is affecting someone's day-to-day functioning, including schoolwork and extracurricular activities, it's a problem, Lefkowitz says.

How to Talk to Your Kid About Gambling

Holly Schiff, Psy.D., a licensed clinical psychologist with Jewish Family Services in Greenwich, Connecticut, says parents can start addressing gambling starting around the age of 9. "Adolescents develop cognitive processes that include decision-making, problem-solving skills, and an ability to commit to choices that help foster competent decisions," says Dr. Schiff. "Talking to them about gambling as a risky behavior before that age will help make a difference in how they respond to and engage in gambling." Navigating the topic can be difficult. Experts share tips.

Time it right

Try to make the conversation seem natural rather than a planned lesson. "Children will be more receptive to the message if you approach it in a light and conversational way," says Dr. Schiff. For example, you may see a casino ad with people having fun while watching a football game. Lefkowitz suggests using it as a cue to discuss gambling by saying, "You know, not all those people are having fun," and then discussing how sometimes people wager too much and lose.

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Is TikTok Safe for Kids? By Maressa Brown

With 2.6 billion downloads to date, TikTok is currently the hottest social media site for tweens and teens. But while kids are hitting download, parents have questions: What is it? Where'd it come from? And, most importantly, is it safe?

While it may seem like it came out of nowhere, the app actually began in 2014 as a lip-synching site called Musical.ly. In 2018, it was acquired by a Bejing-based company and merged into the Chinese app TikTok, explains Titania Jordan, chief parenting officer of parental-control app Bark. Now, lip-synching is still a major theme on the app, but TikTok's content runs the gamut from clips involve taking apart pregnancy tests to others that feature songs destined to blow up pop charts.

If it sounds like TikTok is fertile ground for a lot of fun and a good deal of trouble, that's because it is. No matter which social media platform your child is using—even if it's a purportedly trustworthy, limited version aimed at children, like YouTube Kids—they'll likely come across potential safety issues. That's why TikTok has started implementing parental controls on the app (although these controls aren't yet available in the U.S.)

What Parents Need to Know About Tik Tok

Kids can be targeted by predators.

TikTok allows users to contact anyone in the world, and this comes with its own host of hazards. "Like any social media platform that has a direct message or commenting feature, there's always the possibility that your child could be chatting with anyone, including strangers," Jordan says. "TikTok is a platform that encourages performance, and many of its users are excited to showcase their talents. This can make it easy for predators to use flattery and compliments as a way into kids' lives, making them feel special while putting them at ease."

Jordan points out that the app's "Duets" feature, which allows you to remix another user's video and lip-synch or dance alongside them in a new clip, has been exploited by sexual predators. BuzzFeed News reported on the issue in June, noting that predators who lurk on the app often use "Duets" to send young creators explicit messages.

It's easy to encounter inappropriate content.

The app is broken into two main feed sections. The default is referred to as "For You," which is an algorithmically generated stream of videos similar to Instagram's Explore page, Wired explains. If you swipe left, you'll see a more personally curated feed called "Following," featuring uploads from the people you choose to follow. It's the former public feed that's particularly problematic, Jordan notes. "Even if you set your own account to private, you may still be exposed to sexual or violent content posted to the public feed," she says. "Ranging from overtly sexual TikToks to physically dangerous stunts that kids may want to recreate, to overtly racist and discriminatory commentary, there is a wide range of concerning content on the platform."

The nature of the app might cause kids anxiety.

TikTok encourages content creation, as users can use the "Reactions" feature to respond to videos they like with their own take. While this set-up could support child's artistic impulses, it might also cause anxiety, Jordan says. "Kids may get sucked into the pressure to create more and better content, and this can cause anxiety, especially if they're not getting popular," she notes. "And many chase after that popularity by taking part in challenges, which can often be dangerous. Take, for example, the Cinnamon Challenge, the Choking Game, and the Kiki Challenge."

Users might become victims of cyberbullying.

Not unlike Twitter or Facebook, TikTok might lead to cyberbullying and trolling. "When videos aren't funny or successful, they're referred to as 'cringey,'" Jordan explains. "It provides fodder for bullies to make fun of them. People can also create multiple accounts, using aliases to target others they don't like. Trolling is popular on TikTok, too—especially through the 'Reactions' feature."

There are privacy concerns when it comes to user data on TikTok.

Las year, the U.S. government opened a national security review of the acquisition of TikTok by a Chinese company, the New York Times reported. The Federal Trade Commission fined TikTok $5.7 million for violating the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). "This is the largest civil penalty in a children's privacy case in history," Jordan says. "The law requires companies to obtain parental consent to collect the data of kids under 13, and TikTok did not do so. They also failed to notify parents of exactly how they collected children's data or allow them to ask to have that data deleted." Given the violation, thousands of parents complained, and TikTok launched increased efforts to improve privacy and security on the platform, according to Jordan. Nonetheless, the case is a reason parents should remain vigilant against data abuses, she says.

New safety features were introduced as of August 2021.

As of August 12, 2021, the app rolled out the following new safety features for teens:

- Accounts for children between ages 13-15 will not receive push notifications after 9 p.m.
- For teens between ages 16-17, push notifications will be disabled after 10 p.m.
- Users between the ages 16 and 17 must actively switch their settings to enable direct messaging. Those under 16 don't have access to direct messages.
- Users under age 16 who are trying to publish their first video will get a pop-up message to help them better understand their privacy options. They won't be able to publish the video without selecting who will be allowed to see it.

In February 2020, TikTok announced new parental control settings released in the United Kingdom (and coming to more countries soon). This "Family Safety Mode" lets parents link to their teenager's TikTok account and control "Digital Wellbeing features," according to an article published by TikTok. Parents can manage screen time, restrict content, and limit direct messages or turn off the feature completely. "As part of our commitment to safety, the wellbeing of our users is incredibly important to us. We want people to have fun on TikTok, but it's also important for our community to look after their wellbeing which means having a healthy relationship with online apps and services," according to TikTok. While waiting for this feature to launch in America, you can take the following measures to keep your kid safe.

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Immune "Boosters" for Children

Many parents wonder what they can do to prevent their child from catching illnesses, especially colds and ear infections. The immune system is a finely-tuned orchestra of different kinds of cells. Therefore, the idea of "boosting" immunity is a complicated one, as it is unclear which kinds of cells need to a boost, by how much, and how this can effectively be achieved. Even so, scientists have found that there are several ways to support the immune system. This includes adequate sleep, proper diet, and regular exercise. From a nutrition standpoint, there is evidence that suggests that "micronutrient malnutrition," might play a causal role in determining the risk of developing infectious diseases in both children and adults.

A diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, which contain many important micronutrients (vitamins/minerals), is key to maintaining a healthy lifestyle. What's more, there are nutrients that are known to play vital roles in immune function. These include: vitamin A, beta-carotene, folic acid, vitamin B12, vitamin C, thiamine, riboflavin, iron, zinc, and selenium. Some of these nutrients are also powerful antioxidants that can minimize the impact of viral illness by changing the genetic makeup of viruses.

Below are some examples foods that are rich in one or more of these important micronutrients that can help to support a child's immune system.

- Sweet potatoes
- Carrots
- Dark green leafy vegetables (kale, spinach, broccoli, etc.)
- Citrus fruit (orange, grapefruit, lemon, etc.)
- Berries (elderberry, blueberries, strawberries)
- Salmon
- Black-eyed peas
- Avocados
- Almonds or raw almond butter
- Seeds (chia, sunflower, pumpkin, etc.)

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Have an open dialogue about the app and internet safety practices.

Jordan encourages parents to have open, honest, and ongoing conversations about what's happening in this digital space, noting, "If your child uses the app and you have not yet sat down with them to look at it together, that would be a great first step. "She herself did this with her tween son and they skipped past inappropriate posts and discussed why sharing certain content on the platform isn't wise. "We also discussed why it's so important to have a private account and only connect with people you truly know in real life," Jordan says. They also talked about how screenshots and screen recording tech can mean something seemingly impermanent might become a meme that haunts you.

Understand it yourself.

Laura Bedrossian, vice president, social strategy, at integrated marketing communications agency Hot Paper Lantern, reminds parents that knowledge is power. "If your kid is on any social media platform, make sure you as a parent or guardian have some understanding of it," she notes. "Download the app yourself and see what it's all about so you can answer questions or even ask your child about what they're seeing on an app. Keep an open and honest discussion about their—and your—digital literacy and footprint."

Youth Online Gambling (continued from p.1)

Aim for short and sweet

Tweens and teens don't want a lecture during a coffee date or while watching the big game. "Children and teens will probably tune out before you get your message across [if it's a lecture], whereas a short conversation will really drive the message home," says Dr. Schiff. Don't feel the need to cover everything in one sitting. A two-way conversation during a commercial break is more effective than a half-hour, one-sided discussion where your teen's focus shifts back toward the game.

Ask questions

Your child, tween, or teen may know more about gambling than you think. Be sure to gauge their knowledge.

"Ask them what they've heard about gambling, or what they think they already know, so you can better understand where they are coming from," says Dr. Schiff. "Give them the opportunity to air their questions and concerns, so you can address them head-on and provide answers that are accurate and well-informed."

Tailor your conversation

Though sports betting is the most accessible, not every teen is into sports. Schiff says a child will relate to the conversation more if parents customize it to their interests. For example, video game-loving kids may understand the concepts behind loot boxes and esport betting. "Provide some education, talk to them about the odds and the risks, and explain probability," she says. "This can help them make better choices down the road."

Resources for Parents

If your child has a gambling problem, help is available. Resources include:

- Gambler's Anonymous: A 12-step program aimed at helping individuals overcome gambling addiction.
- Gam-Anon: A support group for parents and families of children with gambling issues.
- A therapist specializing in gambling addiction. Parents can find therapists through a child's pediatrician or their insurance company.
- State helplines. Lefkowitz suggests googling your state and "problem gambling." States like New York have resources for those with addiction and their families.

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West Islip Essential Needs Pantry

The West Islip Union Free School District provides an essential needs pantry to provide important supplies for families in need.

The pantry is stocked with a variety of items such as: shampoo, conditioner, soap, toilet paper, toothpaste, toothbrushes, laundry detergent, deodorant, baby supplies, femine hygiene products, along with many other household essentials.

The West Islip Essential Needs Pantry is sponsored through community donations and is organized by the district's social work department. This pantry is designed to meet the needs of families who may be struggling due to financial and/or personal hardships.

To access the pantry, please contact your building social worker for assistance. All communication will be confidential and private arrangements will be made.

High School
Kerry Rivera
631-504-5838
Brendan O'Connell
631-504-5915

Beach Street
Carly Racanelli
631-930-1667

Udall Road
Kathryn Waters
631-930-1684

Bayview
Carrie Russo
631-504-5686

Oquenock
Erin Harris
631-504-5677

Paul J Bellew
Rachel Russell
631-504-5696

Manetuck
Jami Ashley
631-504-5651

Emergency Hotline Numbers

Counseling & Support
YMCA Family Services- Runaway
631-665-4255
Islip Youth Bureau 631-224-5320
LI Gay & Lesbian Youth 631-665-2300

Substance Abuse Services
Family Service League 631-647-3100
Outreach House II (Teens)
631-231-3232

Victim's Services
NYS Child Abuse Reporting Hotline
800-342-3270
Victim's Information Bureau
(Domestic Violence, Rape, Sexual Assault)
631-360-3606

Emotional Crisis
Response Hotline (Crisis Counseling)
631-751-7500
Suffolk County Mental Health Hotline
631-952-3333

Other Services
Eating Disorder Association Hotline
800-931-2237
Poison Control 800-222-1222
Heat Emergencies 631-854-9935