

ADULT ISSUES

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

Gambling opportunities seem to be everywhere these days and a lot of people have a bet on one thing or another—so is there a problem with that?

Most mothers, fathers and children do not experience any problems as a result of their own or others' gambling. It seems like a bit of fun and entertainment and few people seriously count on it making them rich.

For some families however gambling can have serious consequences. Gambling can cause much suffering for everyone in the family even for those family members who do not gamble. This guide looks at 'problem gambling' and how it can affect families.

What is gambling?

'Staking money on uncertain events driven by chance. The major forms are wagering (racing and sports) and gaming (casinos, gaming machines, keno and lotteries).' *Australia's Gambling Industries Productivity Commissioner Report Vol 1, 1999.*

Gambling—part of a lifestyle

People around the world have been gambling for many hundreds of years and it has been part of Australian culture since European settlement. Many of us have entered a Melbourne Cup sweep (when the whole country seems to stand still for a horse race) or taken part in 'footy pools' during the football season.

Gambling in Australia has changed over the last 10 years. There are many more kinds of gambling in our community that range from the minor forms, like raffle tickets, 'scratch and win' to the major forms like poker machines and sports betting. People can gamble in newsagents, delicatessens, service stations, clubs, hotels, casinos and over the Internet. Gambling in all its forms is now promoted and advertised more widely and frequently than ever before.

Gambling is fairly widespread with approximately eight out of ten adult Australians gambling in one way or another. One of the most popular ways of gambling in Australia involves gaming machines or pokies and more money is now spent on this type of gambling than any other.

Gamblers come from all walks of life and sections of the community. For most people it is an enjoyable pastime that does not cause any difficulties because people are able to control their behaviour and are prepared to spend and lose what they can realistically afford.

Gambling can have serious consequences for some families—it can cause much suffering for everyone in the family even for those family members who do not gamble.



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How does gambling become a problem?

There are a small group of gamblers who tend to gamble for very different reasons from other gamblers and they lose much more than they can afford.

Reasons can include:

- a way to escape bad feelings, for example, anxiety, loneliness, depression, sadness and grief
- a way to cope with feelings of stress
- to relieve boredom
- to feel accepted in a group
- to cope with unhappy relationships
- a way out to solve all their problems.

The effects of 'problem gambling' can be felt by the gambler, those close to the gambler and the community. It has been estimated that for every person who has a problem with gambling another five people are affected.

These effects can be:

- relationship and family problems with negative impact on children
- family break-up through separation and divorce
- health issues such as depression, headaches and physical ill health
- increased absenteeism at work or even the loss of employment
- legal problems as a result of criminal activity
- financial hardship which can in some cases result in bankruptcy.

It can be difficult to tell at what point gambling stops being a pleasurable activity and begins to be a problem for both the gambler and family members.

When is gambling a problem?

It can be difficult to tell at what point gambling stops being a pleasurable activity and begins to be a problem for both the gambler and family members.

As a parent if you are not sure whether your gambling is a problem ask yourself these questions:

- do I think about gambling more than anything else?
- do I spend more money than I had planned when gambling?
- am I going into debt because of gambling?
- do I return to gambling to win back losses?
- do I lie about gambling to my family?
- am I hiding my gambling from family and friends?
- have I borrowed money to gamble?
- is someone close to me worried about my gambling?
- has my gambling hurt anyone close to me?
- do I gamble to get away from my worries and problems?
- does my gambling create problems for my family?

If your answers to these questions indicate that gambling is no longer an enjoyable past-time then you might need to consider looking at ways to regain control of your gambling behaviour and maybe changing some other things to get back on track.

Getting back on track

- Pay your bills, rent, mortgage and buy food etc before deciding to gamble.
- Only gamble with your own money.
- Plan your gambling before you leave the house, for example set limits on the amounts of **time** and **money** you will spend.
- Keep a weekly record of your wins and losses.
- Do not take an ATM card to access extra money.
- Arrange other activities for some of the times you would go to gamble.
- Discuss in confidence your situation with someone who knows about gambling problems

Some ideas that have worked for others:

- always eat before gambling, particularly breakfast, as this will help you to think more clearly
- reduce your intake of caffeine (coffee, tea, soft drinks) if you are not sleeping well
- do not drink alcoholic drinks while you gamble
- tell someone who cares for you if you are feeling particularly stressed, unhappy or upset
- talk to your doctor
- don't feel ashamed about getting help from a professional who has a good understanding of gambling and the problems that may come with it.

What can I do if my partner is having problems with gambling?

If you think or know that your partner or spouse is having problems with gambling then it's important that they hear your concerns and that you let them know in ways which will increase the chances that they will listen. Don't expect them to instantly agree with you because many 'problem gamblers' tend to make light of their gambling or deny that it is a problem.

In dealing with your partner's gambling behaviour it can be useful to keep in mind:

- people who gamble are responsible for their behaviour and are the ones to decide if they will change their behaviour
- you can say to your partner that you care about him or her but will not support or put up with 'problem gambling' behaviour
- you and your children have a right to be safe financially, physically and emotionally.

If the effects of the gambling have become more noticeable, then in order to stay safe you may need to think about the following suggestions. Putting them into action may not be easy for you to do.

- Arrange separate bank accounts.
- Cancel joint credit cards.
- Get legal advice about protecting your share of joint assets, like the house.
- Pay the bills yourself or arrange automatic bank transfer.
- Talk your worries over with a trusted friend.
- Be aware of your own stress and the effects the situation may be having on your children.
- Talk with a counsellor who may be able to suggest other things you can do. It often helps to share your concerns with someone experienced in the area regardless of the decisions your gambling partner makes.

Parents who change their 'problem gambling' behaviour provide their children with a real example of overcoming a difficult situation with effort and commitment.

Does 'problem gambling' affect children?

Children are usually aware when their parents are going through stress and worries. Children can also feel the effects that 'problem gambling' has on their parents' lives and relationships. Children respond differently to these problems depending on their individual natures and their ages.

There is some evidence to suggest that children of parent(s) who have a problem with gambling are at a greater risk of using alcohol, drugs or gambling at an earlier age than other children. The more immediate effects on children can include:

- being anxious, depressed, angry
- refusing to go to school
- poor school performance
- withdrawal from friends or activities
- worrying about parents' worries
- they may show signs in their physical health
- changes in sleeping patterns
- changes in their usual behaviour.

Children can also have a strong sense of loss. This loss may be for a parent who is away gambling for long periods, the loss of security, the loss of trust and of feeling connected and close to a parent when the parent is preoccupied with gambling or trying to hide it. They may feel the loss of family 'togetherness' they once had. Children also have feelings of loss that come with financial hardship. They know there is less money for household items like food, clothing, family outings, activities and school excursions.

If gambling is beginning to cause problems at home it is generally a good idea to bring this out in the open and let your children know that you are trying to sort things out and that they are not to blame for the situation. This also lets them know that they don't have to be responsible for their parents.

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What the law says about children and gambling

In the ACT:

- a person under the age of 18 may not enter the gaming area of clubs, hotels or casinos
- a person who is aged less than 18 may not gamble in those venues.

Reminders

- Gambling is a recreation for many people—for some people it develops into a problem.
- Gambling may be a problem if it is taking too much money or time from other areas of your life.
- ‘Problem gamblers’ tend to make light of their behaviour or deny there is a problem.
- If you or your partner think you might have a problem then limit the money and time that you have to gamble.
- A parent with a gambling problem can alter the home environment enormously.
- A parent with a gambling problem affects their children’s lives both physically and emotionally.
- If you are at all worried about yourself or your partner’s gambling talk to someone who understands gambling and the problems that can come with it.
- People cut down or stop gambling when they believe that change is necessary.

Contacts

G-Line Telephone counselling, telephone intervention and referral	24-hour	1800 633 635
Lifeline Gambling Care and Club Care The only service in Canberra that offer specialises face-to-face counselling for problem gambling. The services offer free, private and confidential counselling for clients with a gambling problem and their family and friends. All counsellors are trained, salaried professionals.	24-hour	131 114

Websites

www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.gamblersanonymous.org.au	Gamblers Anonymous peer support group
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides

This guide’s content has been produced by Parenting SA and adapted by the ACT Government to reflect the application to laws of the Australian Capital Territory.

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