

How to Talk to a Teen about Problem Gambling

Are you concerned about the gambling habits of a teen you love? Perhaps you suspect she is just experimenting; or maybe you know he's already gambling compulsively. Like other parents or educators, you may be stumped about what you can do to help.

But it can be tricky to know when and how to intervene. After all, by definition teenagers can be defensive and difficult. So is the teen in your life being a normal teenager or is he developing the problem gambling behaviors that will have a significant impact on his life and the lives of those around him?

It is never too early—or too late—to take action.

It's human nature to hope our problems will fix themselves. The number one mistake we make, however, is waiting to address possible addictive behaviors. It is common for adults who suspect a youth has a gambling problem to feel insecure about approaching her without firm proof of addiction. As our facilitators tell caregivers each month at our parenting workshops, "Don't under-react, don't over-react, but react!"

We encourage adults to trust their intuition. Spend more time planning a conversation than trying to figure out which gambling websites she visits or how much money she's lost. If you think there is something wrong, you're probably correct.

Make time for a conversation.

Choose a time when you are relatively calm. It's natural for caregivers to feel angry or betrayed by a child's negative behaviors, but putting those feelings aside will lead to a far more productive conversation.

Start by expressing your love for the teen and then describe a specific instance in which you saw behavior that concerns you. Express your personal feeling about the situation, and ask him an open-ended question. For example:

"You played poker so much last weekend that you didn't study for your important test—and then you did very badly on the test. I am upset and concerned. What's going on with you?"

As a caregiver, being honest in a non-judgmental way can be tough, but it's often a teen's only gauge of the harm his behavior is causing.

Focus on the deed, not the child.

Make it clear through your words and actions that you dislike the teen's behavior; not the teen. In turn, she may not like the rules you are enforcing, but she hopefully loves and respects you regardless.

When you spell out consequences, don't make idle threats.

Only consider punishment options you'll be able to follow through with. If you assign consequences and then fail to follow through, it teaches him not to take you seriously. In addition, consider using a written summary or contract that outlines desired behaviors as well as repercussions for not meeting those expectations. You might even outline the privileges the teen will earn for staying compliant. Keep the language positive, and post the agreement in a prominent spot, like on the refrigerator.

Be prepared for an emotional conversation.

Despite your best efforts to keep a calm tone, the conversation may become heated or emotional. Be aware of your own defensive feelings and keep them in check. Remember, your child is entitled to her opinions. If it becomes too heated to continue the discussion, take a break and finish it later; just be sure to follow through. That follow-up is crucial: if you never initiate the conversation again, she will learn that you can be derailed if things get emotional enough.

You can find help for a teen with a gambling problem.

The initial conversation is unlikely to instantly solve your child's gambling problems, but it's a must-have first step. Focus on what you're most concerned about, and let him know the discussion will be ongoing, especially if he isn't immediately open about the behavior.

Addressing teen gambling addiction is like entering a maze: when you start down the path you don't know where you'll end up. And that is a scary thought for any parent or caregiver—but your family's health and well-being are worth your effort.

You don't have to do it alone, either. Call Compass Mark for confidential, individualized guidance, including our free, three-hour parenting class, or visit SafeStakes.org for more parent and educator resources.

Compass Mark Drug & Alcohol Information Center
630 Janet Avenue
Lancaster, PA 17601
(717) 299-2831
www.SafeStakes.org