

“Under 21? Roll the Dice and Pay the Price!”

By Ellie Koehly

I don't gamble at casinos. I've never been to Las Vegas. I've never bought a lottery ticket. So I could never be considered an underage gambler, right? Wrong.

What most teenagers and youth don't know is that gambling is not limited to casinos and lottery tickets. According to the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals website, gambling is defined as “the act of risking money or something else of value on an activity with an uncertain outcome.” (http://www.thegamble.org/f_facts.htm) This means that betting money on your poker hand or on your favorite teams during March Madness is considered gambling, and if you are under 21, it's illegal.

Some may choose to take the risk because it's just “harmless fun,” and the chances of getting caught aren't that high. However, just because you don't end up in the back of a police car, doesn't mean gambling comes without consequence.

There is a reason why one cannot legally purchase lottery tickets until the age of 18 or step foot into a casino until the age of 21. Gambling is a huge risk, even for adults. Most teenagers aren't at the maturity level to handle these kinds of risks, but when they do risk it, the results are devastating.

Underage gambling, even occasionally, can lead to very serious problems that can follow you into your adult life. Teens that gamble are more likely to commit crime, have school, family, and peer problems, feel depressed, have suicidal thoughts, and are at higher risk for other addictions, including alcohol and drugs. As adults suffering from gambling problems, careers, children, and financial security are also put at risk. (http://www.co.lane.or.us/prevention/gambling/Effects_of_PG.htm)

The facts show for themselves that this problem is not something to take lightly. After all, some problem gamblers, who also are substance abusers, claim gambling is more addictive, and more difficult to recover from, than either alcohol or cocaine. (http://www.thegamble.org/f_facts.htm) We have to stop it before these problems occur and to do so, one must go directly to the source.

When looking for the source of these problems, my 10-year old Hannah Montana-crazed cousin, doesn't really come to my mind. However, in some cases this scenario really isn't all that far fetched. On average, problem gamblers admit that they began gambling at age 10. (http://www.thegamble.org/f_facts.htm)

It's widely known that adolescence is a very impressionable life stage. American youth look heavily on the media and adults for guidance. When they see the media depicting gambling as harmless recreation, the youth want to take part. When they witness their relatives and trusted adults participating in the fun, they take note. The next thing you know, they are playing handheld poker games and trying their luck online. What may start out as innocent fun, can quickly turn into a much more serious problem as they get older.

Underage gambling has become widespread and popular among high school students. For example, a study done in 2000 showed that approximately 80% of youth, age 12 to 17, had gambled in the last 12 months. (<http://www.thegamble.org/facts.htm>) As a society, we have a duty to stop underage gambling and through education and enforcement, we have a chance.

Education starts at home, and it starts in the classroom. Parents need to educate themselves on the issue and think twice about discussing their latest casino escapades in front of the children. Teachers should be informed of the warning signs of underage gambling. Gambling information should be implemented into health classes and taught in conjunction with drug and alcohol abuse. There are endless school assemblies on drunk driving, STD's, and school violence. How about an assembly on the lesser publicized, but just as harmful topic of underage gambling? More facts and information can be found at the Missouri Alliance to Curb Problem Gambling and at 1-888-BETSOFF.

Along with education, comes enforcement. Local police personnel should keep a careful eye when March Madness rolls around or when they come upon boy's poker night. Casinos need to keep up the good work in keeping underage gamblers off the floor. In 1991, Atlantic City casinos refused entry to approximately 194,000 underage gamblers. (<http://www.thegamble.org/facts.htm>) Small steps are being made, but it is going to take a bigger effort to completely curb the problem. By educating yourself and others, you can bet on a brighter future for America's youth.