Show Me the Real Odds

WHY TEEN GAMBLING OFTEN GOES UNNOTICED



One of the biggest challenges in recognizing a gambling problem is that many of the early warning signs can look like typical adolescence.

It's normal for young people to want more independence, spend more time with friends, stay up later, and become more connected to their phones, games, and social media. As they grow, they naturally seek more privacy and begin figuring out who they are. That's what makes it difficult.

The question often isn't whether a behavior is normal—it's whether something has changed. Research shows that **many young people first experience gambling before age 18,** and earlier exposure increases the risk of gambling-related problems later in life. [3] **Common Sense Media (2026) also found that 32% of 11-year-old boys reported gambling, increasing to 49% by age 17.** [1]

"Who am I?" is the leading question. They are searching internally and externally to answer this question and understand who they are and how they want to present themselves in the world.

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They are searching for ways to create their identity while also trying to "fit in." Friends can be very influential and gaining their independence becomes a primary focus and major goal. During this period, the adolescent and young adult brain is still developing, especially in areas responsible for planning, self-control, and considering long-term consequences. [4] Adding to the complexity is the common developmental belief,"That won't happen to me" or "I know when to stop," which is a common feature of adolescent development that can make risk harder to recognize. [2]

As a parent or educator, you know your child or student better than anyone. Ask yourself:

- Have they become more secretive than usual about their phone?
- Have you noticed changes in their mood, friendships, grades, attendance, and/or responsibilities?
- Do they seem more interested in betting, odds, or gambling than they used to?
- Have you noticed uncharacteristic, intense, and/or aggressive outbursts during or after sporting events?

If you notice their pattern has changed, curiosity is a key strategy. When you begin with curiosity instead of judgment, criticism, or conclusions, you are more likely to create space for conversations.

TRY SAYING:

"I've noticed a lot more betting and gambling ads on TV and on my phone lately. How about you?"

I've seen and heard more people spending time on betting/sports betting apps. Have you tried any? Do you know if any of your friends have tried any? If yes, help me understand what you/they enjoy about it."

"Is there anything you're worried about that you'd like to talk about?"

The goal isn't to catch young people doing something wrong—it's to create a conversation where they feel safe enough to tell you what's really going on. When they know they'll be met with curiosity instead of judgment, they're far more likely to be honest, ask questions, and reach out for help when they need it.

REFERENCES

[1] Common Sense Media. (2026). Betting on Boys: Understanding Gambling Among Adolescent Boys.

[2] Elkind, D. (1967). Egocentrism in Adolescence. Child Development, 38(4), 1025–1034.

[3] National Council on Problem Gambling. (2024). Sports Betting and Problem Gambling.

[4] Steinberg, L. (2014). Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

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