Parents of Young Gamblers

Gordon Moody, M.B.E., M.A.
Devon, England

A study of gambling among juveniles in the United Kingdom reveals that their favorite form of gambling, both in terms of percent participating and amounts spent, is playing "Amusement with Prizes" (i.e., slot) machines. These machines are widely, freely, and legally available to persons of all ages at amusement arcades, youth clubs, cafes, sports centers, bus and railroad stations, and other public settings. Before 1980, machine gamblers were rare at Gamblers Anonymous meetings. However, since that time, their numbers have increased rapidly, currently representing about half of all new members. Of these, 50% are described as children with the remainder in their late teens or early 20s.

The balance of the paper describes the difficulties faced by the parents of these youth and the recent development and objectives of a unique self-help group called Parents of Young Gamblers.

THE CRISIS

The formation of Parents of Young Gamblers in 1986 in the United Kingdom was a response to the need of families under stress because a
child was gambling excessively. These children were “problem” gamblers (“compulsive,” “pathological,” “addicted”—there is a choice of adjectives). There was the same obsession with gambling, the same associated change of personality, the same deception and stealing as characterizes adult “problem” gamblers. These criteria were present in children down to the age of 11 years.

Knowledge of this state of affairs exploded onto the attention of the public in 1983 when Gamblers Anonymous released the information that all over the country distracted parents were bringing their children to meetings in the hope that they could be persuaded to stop gambling. The media took this up, giving publicity to startling cases and reporting interviews with children and their parents.

It then transpired that schools and courts, as well as the medical, probation, and social services, were all confronted with this problem and were perplexed by it. It seemed as though another new evil had burst from nowhere upon the nation. Actually, of course, these developments, like all others, have roots, a favorable environment, a history that can be traced, and a context within which it has to be viewed.

THE ROOTS

The roots are twofold. First, children gamble from an early age. In common with adults, it is one of the things they do, often in the family circle. In a recent study, an Exeter University psychology student, Pat Ide-Smith (Ide-Smith & Lea, 1988), investigated the participation on the part of children in gambling. Fifty-one pupils from an Exeter school, 31 boys and 20 girls, with an average age of 13.7 years, completed her questionnaire. From the information she provided she drew up Tables 1 and 2. Bets were made between friends. Ten percent of the sample did not gamble (boys and girls together). The extent to which both boys and girls used slot machines (one-armed bandits, fruit machines, or amusement with prize machines) should be noted. The mean amounts gambled were so low that the great majority of the children must have kept within their limits.

Very few women, compared with men, seek help with “problem” gambling. There are strong reasons for believing that far fewer women than men fall victim to it. The lower rate of participation, the far lower rate of expenditure of girls as compared with boys, as revealed in the