

# 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

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Editor's Note: Since this writing, P.O.Y.G. has channeled their energies into lobbying the Home Office to take action that would recognize slot machines as gambling devices, remove them from their present easy access to children, and restrict their availability to licensed Game Clubs where only registered adult members may play. The Home Office recently has agreed to place this matter under consideration.

The Reverend Gordon E. Moody, M.B.E., was Secretary of the late (British) Churches' Council on Gambling. In the United Kingdom he is Honorary Founder-Patron of Gamblers Anonymous and Chairman of the Gamblers Anonymous General Services Board. He is Founder of Gordon House (a hostel for single, homeless compulsive gamblers) and Honorary Life Member of the Society for the Study of Gambling.

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

**Table 1**  
**Types of Gambling, Mean Amount Spent, and**  
**Mean Age Began — Boys (N = 31)<sup>a</sup>**

<i>Types of Gambling</i>	<i>% of Ss Participating</i>	<i>Mean Amount Spent by Participants per Year (British Pounds)</i>	<i>Mean Age Began</i>
Cards	63.3	10.64	9.2
Coins	33.3	5.31	10.5
Dominoes	6.6	1.00	9.0
Slot machines	83.3	15.32	9.3
Bets	60.0	10.41	9.7
Other	10.0	26.43	9.8

<sup>a</sup>Source: Ide-Smith & Lea, 1988.

**Table 2**  
**Types of Gambling, Mean Amount Spent, and**  
**Mean Age Began — Girls (N = 20)<sup>a</sup>**

<i>Types of Gambling</i>	<i>% of Ss Participating</i>	<i>Mean Amount Spent by Participants per Year (British Pounds)</i>	<i>Mean Age Began</i>
Cards	50.0	1.17	10.4
Coins	10.0	.72	8.7
Dominoes	10.0	.55	7.0
Slot machines	80.0	3.05	9.9
Bets	35.0	3.20	11.5
Other	None		

<sup>a</sup>Source: Ide-Smith & Lea, 1988.

tables, is perhaps another pointer in that direction. Be that as it may, there is reason to suppose that, with the exception of slot machines and possibly to some extent betting, the pattern of gambling among young people shown here has persisted at least for a number of generations.

Some who gamble as children proceed to "problem" gambling. Older "problem" gamblers generally trace the beginnings of their gambling, and often the onset of the associated problems, to their child-

hood. Most also say that, from the start, their own involvement with gambling noticeably exceeded that of the companions with whom they played.

### THE ENVIRONMENT

The favorable *environment* is provided by the availability of Amusement with Prizes (AWP) machines in amusement arcades, cafes, chip shops, bars, sports centers, youth clubs, bus and railway refreshment rooms, and so on. These machines are the medium through which young gamblers become addicted. This is because AWP machines provide the experience of "hard" gaming. They are modified "jackpot" machines. Both of these machines provide the same experience as casino games such as roulette, blackjack, and dice. Equally with each other, and with all casino games, they are "addictive." That is not generally recognized.

AWP machines are thought to be harmless because, believing that people gamble to win money, it is thought that no one would risk staking much more than the maximum cash prize of one pound fifty. That is not the way things are, however. Probably few people play the machines with any real hope of winning, although the outside chance that they may do so no doubt adds an extra flavor to the experience. People "have a go" to see how things turn out; that is, to enjoy the fun of playing with chance. They restrict their stakes, but generally that involves no great act of will. Certainly their motive has little or nothing to do with the maximum prize. They know how much they are prepared to spend on that kind of fun.

However, once enjoying the fun deepens into enjoying the "action" (the excitement of experiencing risk after risk in rapid succession), the pattern changes. Prizes of any denomination now merely serve to provide extra stakes for further play, and play itself becomes important enough to justify increasing expenditure. The amount staked rises to five pounds, 10 pounds, 20 pounds, and much more in one session and, when control is lost, money for this purpose has to come from wherever it may be obtained. That includes crime. That is the pattern of "problem" gambling in young and old alike. It is associated with "action" gambling, most easily with "hard" gaming — and that includes playing these "harmless" machines.

The clearest evidence for an increase in the speed at which “problem” gambling develops is to be found in the steadily falling age at which people have sought help. Gamblers Anonymous came from the United States to London in July 1964. All the first night attenders had started gambling as children but only two were under 40 years of age, and the average age must have been between 45 and 50 years. That average age of members continued for probably two years and then, gradually, more people in their 30s and soon after that some in the late 20s, began to arrive. By the 1970s people in their early 20s and late teens were becoming more common. Varying from group to group, the average age in 1979 was probably 30 to 35.

Then came the latest flood, the AWP machine gamblers. Until around 1980 there were few of these in Gamblers Anonymous, in some groups none at all. Suddenly, there were many. Now, machine gamblers constitute about 50% of the whole intake. Half of these are children, the rest mostly in their late teens or early 20s.

## THE PROBLEM

Gamblers Anonymous has borne the brunt of this impact. Usually twinned with Gam-Anon, a fellowship for relatives and close friends of “problem” gamblers, it has had, through the 1980s, about 100 groups in the United Kingdom, all of which have been affected. In the past few years thousands of desperate parents have telephoned for help and taken their child to a meeting. There was nowhere else for them to go.

There were, and there still are, successes. Individual groups have experimented with ways of dealing with the problem. One set up a special group for young members. Others let the young ones meet separately, although with an older member, for the whole or for a part of the meeting. One has set aside a member to help each new young one with personal counselling until he or she is ready to join the full group. Most tried to carry on with the older and younger ones together.

There were problems. The young gamblers had been compelled by their parents to come. Generally, they had no wish to be there. They did not relate to the experiences of the older members, nor did they respond to their advice. They did not want to stop gambling, nor did they admit to having a problem. They soon found a way of ceasing to attend.

The parents were often a disturbing and divisive influence in the Gam-Anon room. Wives and girl friends know they have their own need for help and accept that they and their gambling partner are in for a long haul to recovery. Parents, on the other hand, in their great anxiety and eagerness, want to see their child cured *now* and often do not realize that they, too, have a recovery to make. That does not mean that parents and wives (or husbands) can never helpfully meet in the same room. For many years single young men in their early 20s and succeeding in Gamblers Anonymous, have had the support of their parents in Gam-Anon. In those cases, and more recently with young men of 18 and 19 years, the parents have suffered long enough to know that there is no easy solution and the young adults themselves attend Gamblers Anonymous willingly and with understanding.

When, however, parents of younger children realize within a few weeks (if not at once) that there is no point in trying to force their child to go to Gamblers Anonymous, they, too, usually leave Gam-Anon and return to their lonely distress. By 1985, by reason of my close contact with Gamblers Anonymous and Gam-Anon, I realized that all over the country there were parents of junior and senior school age children who were continuing to gamble in spite of increasing problems, no matter what was done or where they were taken for counselling. The greatest agony of the parents was to watch helplessly while their children destroyed themselves and became alienated from the family. The "treasured" possessions which were stolen for gambling money were of little consequence compared with that. Such parents have a long, lonely, and very difficult road ahead of them. They have agonizing decisions to make. They are torn between protecting their children (i.e., placing them with family or friends temporarily) and saving them from the courts, between throwing them out for the family's sake and keeping them home to protect them as long as possible. It is a tormenting experience.

### THE PROPOSED ANSWER

I conceived the idea of a new fellowship in which such parents could support, comfort, and advise each other. Together they could seek ways of creating at least some quiet family spaces secure from the gambling and its effects. They could also seek ways of so living with

the gambling child, that if and when separation came, it might be achieved with the minimum of bitterness and the most hope of reconciliation.

Retirement and residence deep in the South West of England made it difficult for me to do anything about this. Hopes were raised when, through Gam-Anon, I met the parents of a young gambler living in a nearby town. The boy was now in his late teens. It was the common story, playing the machines from about 9 years of age, stealing from home, and disposing of his own possessions at least by 13, sought by the police at about 16. The parents welcomed the idea of *Parents of Young Gamblers* (P.O.Y.G.) and were ready to cooperate in setting it up. The mother, Noel, having more free time, became the Founder Member of P.O.Y.G. Soon afterwards they welcomed a contact made by Richard Murphy of the Spectrum Children's Trust, also based in the West Country. Richard soon confirmed that the Trust would be eager to use its office and staff to launch P.O.Y.G. and to provide it with a headquarters.

### LAUNCH OF P.O.Y.G.

The launch took place in July 1986. Many people responded and a number of groups were formed in various parts of the country. It is clear that P.O.Y.G. is addressed to a real need. Those who attend meetings, even those at a distance who only correspond or telephone and receive the literature, no longer feel intolerably confined with a problem which seemed to be theirs alone. Also, their intense sense of guilt and shame is relieved. Courage, and some ability to think clearly, is restored. In March 1987 members from a number of groups attended a general meeting in Bristol.

Prior to the launch, an unsuccessful attempt was made to adapt the Gam-Anon literature to the needs of the new fellowship. So a new literature was written by Gordon, Noel, and Richard. The Steps of Recovery proved to be the most difficult. The early members of P.O.Y.G. wished to omit the references to a Higher Power which, it has to be said, offended many potential members of GA and Gam-Anon, while giving great support and inspiration to others. In the end there were 22 "stages" instead of 12 "steps." Gordon wrote draft after draft, consulting closely with Noel and Richard and with Iain Brown,

an honorary member of Gamblers Anonymous and a lecturer in psychology at Glasgow University. His help was invaluable.

### THE FUTURE

It is not certain, however, that P.O.Y.G. meets all or even the deepest needs of parents of young gamblers. It is likely that nothing could do so which had not a remedy for "problem" gambling which could be applied at will by second parties. I now realize that I greatly underestimated the extent to which child gambling distracts and distresses the minds of parents. How can they concentrate and plan when they are mesmerized by their child's deterioration and waiting tensely for the next crisis to erupt? Those who have found great benefit from attending meetings tend to say, after a few weeks: "But what can we do about our child?" There may be nothing that can be done, but the agonizing need to be attempting something dominates their thinking and feeling.

### REFERENCE

- Ide-Smith, S., & Lea, S.E.G. (1988). Gambling in young adolescents. *Journal of Gambling Behavior*, 4, 110-119.