

Underage Gambling: Not Just Fun and Games

By Carly Houts

How would you like to take \$40 and turn it into \$3000 in just a few short hours? “It’s the worst thing that could have ever happened,” recalled Kevin Groth, who was a 19-year-old sophomore in college when that happened to him during his first visit to a casino eight years ago. Groth was addicted – and underage. Two years later, Groth was \$15,000 in debt and had stolen thousands of dollars from his employer to fund his habit, which he had kept secret from his family and friends. His parents were unaware of his gambling debts until the night he was arrested on felony embezzlement charges.

Underage gambling has skyrocketed in part because of the Internet gambling industry. It is estimated that more than half of the nation’s adolescents are involved in gambling, and according to Youth Gambling International, most problem gamblers begin gambling at age 10. A 1999 National Research Council study reports serious gambling issues in adolescents number two to three times higher than adults with serious gambling problems. In some cases, parents actually unknowingly permit illegal underage gambling by giving their kids scratch off tickets or allowing them to participate in the company football pool. Schools have even sponsored “harmless” Casino Nights as fundraisers, but seemingly condone underage gambling.

Warning signs of adolescent gambling include stealing, borrowing money and lying. Youth gamblers may max out credit cards or sell prized possessions to continue their gambling habits.

In the past, casinos were ultimately responsible for turning away underage gamblers, and fines were imposed on them when the rules were broken. Now, some states are also fining the underage gambler and charging them with a misdemeanor.

Educating youth – and their parents – about the perils and consequences of underage gambling is the first step in solving the problem. An online quiz (www.800gambler.org) will tell adolescents if they are addicted to gambling. “Wanna Bet” is a gambling prevention and training program targeted at youth.

Kevin Groth wishes he had known about these resources before his underage gambling led to his arrest, followed by eight months in a half-way house while completing a full-time treatment program, and another two years of counseling. He is now back in school studying psychology.