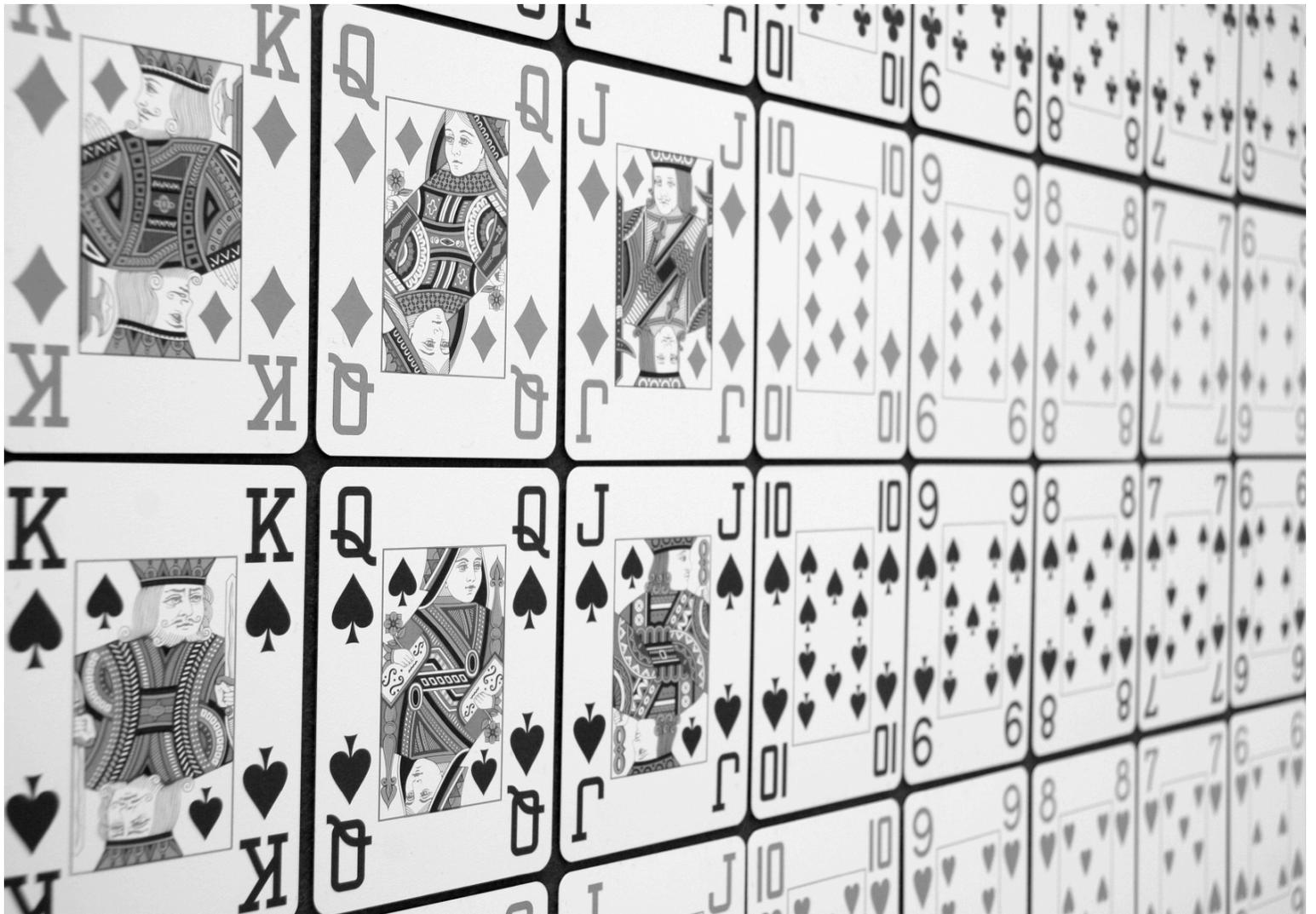


# PARENTS AS PARTNERS

Qualitative National Findings  
July 1, 2009



**DECODE**

DECODING YOUTH, YOUNG ADULTS  
AND YOUNG FAMILIES



International Centre for  
Youth Gambling Problems  
and High-Risk Behaviors

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## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PHASE INTRODUCTION

Building upon findings from the national quantitative research phase, DECODE conducted a series of qualitative focus groups across Canada with parents of underage youth. The objective of the sessions was to delve deeper into the quantitative findings and provide local context for parental attitudes and behaviors related to underage gambling. The following topics were discussed in focus groups:

- Realities of parenting teens
- Youth issues and parents' relationship with their teen
- Opinions on underage gambling and the level of acceptability of various gambling activities for youth
- Parents' roles and responsibilities as they relate to underage gambling
- Parents' ability to identify if their teen was involved in gambling activities
- Effective messaging
- Preferred communication channels

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PHASE METHODOLOGY

From January to March 2009, a total of 24 focus groups were completed with approximately 190 parent participants. Each discussion was approximately 90 minutes in length and consisted of eight or nine parents. Groups were conducted in the following locations: Vancouver, Prince George, Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon, Regina, Montreal, Quebec City, Trois-Rivières and Halifax.

Based on an analysis of the quantitative research, the focus groups were organized into four primary sessions:

- Mothers with younger teens (13 to 15 years old)
- Mothers with older teens (16 to 17/18 years old)
- Fathers with younger teens (13 to 15 years old)
- Fathers with older teens (16 to 17/18 years old)

Despite the relatively large number of parents participating in the research phase, the findings must be understood to be qualitative in nature and not statistically representative. Quotations by parents included in this report are only for the purpose of illustrating the national findings and are not intended to be indicative of differences between regions.

*"I keep my ear to the ground so I know a bit of what is going on and then I wait for the right time ... and give my opinion."  
(Father, Vancouver)*

*"Things that would have been considered inappropriate in our day are now 'okay.'" (Father, Halifax)*

*"My biggest fear is that something might have happened and I didn't know." (Mother, Halifax)*

## CURRENT REALITY FOR PARENTS OF TEENS

Participants were asked to select one word that would best describe what it is like to be the parent of a teen today. The most common words parents chose included: "challenging," "stressful," "difficult" and "rewarding." Focus group discussions were structured to best discover parenting mindset and approach with teens, as well as which issues they deem to be relevant or concerning. Mothers were more inclined to select words that demonstrated stress or concern, whereas many fathers described their experience as "fun," "cool," and "entertaining."

For many participants, the role of being a parent requires embodying the role of "guide," "mentor" and "disciplinarian." As a guide or mentor, parents believe they are responsible for providing direction while simultaneously allowing teens leeway to make certain decisions on their own: "As a parent, you need to set boundaries. You have to know when to keep them and know when to give in." (Mother, Vancouver) Repeatedly referring back, to the description of parenting as challenging, many participants said that the task of setting boundaries and appropriately "choosing your battles" is not easy. Parents said teens are quick to see through any agenda they may have, leading some participants to say: "To be a mentor, it's important to lead by example." (Father, Regina)

Responses were polarized regarding whether or not parents should be "friends" with their child. The majority of parents were opposed to having this type of relationship with their teen, while others felt that acting as more of a friend than a disciplinarian enabled them to maintain a closer relationship with their teen. Regardless of parenting style, participants agreed that consistency in setting rules and boundaries is essential to have an impact on their teen's behaviour. As one mother said, "Parents need to be more consistent and should not give in just because you want to be liked. It's difficult. You want to try to get your son's attention and favour." (Mother, Vancouver)

Participants said their approach to parenting is significantly different than that of their parents, with the major difference being their own allowance and encouragement for open discussions on topics that may have previously been considered inappropriate. Many said that creating this type of open relationship with their teen is an important way to build honesty and trust. By sharing their own experiences as teens, parents are better able to equip their child with knowledge of how to deal with similar situations.

When asked about how and when parents know they are doing a "good job," many parents said a useful indicator of success is the confidence they have that their teen will come to them if they are in trouble or are having a problem: "When you're comfortable your teen will come to you if they're having a problem. Eighty percent of the time you know what they're doing. So, for the other 20 percent you need to have confidence that if something happens they will come to you." (Mother, Alberta). Many parents have a fear of being unaware that their teen is dealing with a difficult issue, leaving them unable to help. In addition, maintaining the type of closeness that facilitates open dialogue during their teen's high school years was both a priority and potential concern.

**PARENTS AND TEEN ISSUES**

Parents today feel they have far more to worry about with their teens than parents in previous generations, due in large part to the complexity and risk associated with new technologies and the central role of mass media in the lives of their teens, both of which can shape attitudes, beliefs, perceived needs and actions.

Many of the issues that parents identified as relevant and worrisome are problems that are widely accepted to be common “teen issues.” These include: peer pressure, alcohol consumption, drugs, bullying, self-esteem, negative body image and safety. In addition, parents had concerns or problems to deal with which they believe relate solely to today’s generation of teens. Feeling frustrated or ill-equipped to deal with these “new” issues was said to be a considerable source of stress for many parents. Prime examples of these new issues include: a dependence or unhealthy connection to technology, entitlement to material goods, expectation of personal freedom, and early exposure to adult topics. .

Parents frequently described their struggle to limit, manage or monitor their teen’s online, cell phone or video game usage. On top of concerns related to their child spending too much time “connected” on a daily basis, parents fear they are not technologically savvy enough to ensure their child is not engaging in inappropriate or potentially harmful activities. Some parents repeatedly mentioned that educating and preparing their teen for issues related to alcohol or drugs was in some ways less difficult or “scary” because they had gone through similar experiences as a teen themselves and thus felt better equipped to deal with those types of issues. With technology, parents fear the unknown and feel they are unable to identify or protect their child from harm: “It’s harder for parents to identify the risks because we didn’t go through the same things.” (Mother, Alberta)

As mentioned above, many parents also brought up their belief that teens today have a sense of entitlement that frequently leads them to expect to get everything they want all the time. “Teens don’t realize the freedom and rights they have were earned. They don’t think things can be taken away from them.” (Mother, Halifax) Other parents said that teens have a tendency to constantly desire and expect to get “the next best thing.” Some parents also said that today’s teens place a heightened sense of importance on keeping up with peers in a material sense, which they find stressful and problematic.

The abundance of information teens can access in today’s “information age” was also cited as a significant development that has pros and cons for both teens and parents. Many felt that the endless sea of information teens have access to places added pressure on parents. They also feel that their child’s level of knowledge can sometimes impact the balance of power: “I feel that I have to be more knowledgeable, we have to be up to date on what they are doing, what is out there, so we can help and guide them.” (Mother, Regina)

Additionally, parents were concerned that teens are not emotionally mature enough to digest all the information they consume: “Things we didn’t learn until Grade 11 or 12, Grade Six youth are learning. They can tell you all the information, but they are not yet ready to emotionally process it.” (Mother, Halifax) This opinion appeared to be a common belief for many parents: “They are immature yet feel that are more mature because they have been exposed to so much.” (Father, Vancouver) Parents felt somewhat helpless and uneasy about this possibility: “The media (to some degree) is parenting our children.” (Father, Saskatoon)

*“It’s difficult. Teens don’t want to talk about the issues. They feel they know everything”  
(Mother, Alberta).*

*“Constant communication makes it harder for parents. Problems follow kids home because they’re always texting, messaging and on Facebook.”  
(Mother, Halifax)*

*"I am so curious about this, I heard of gambling being a problem for young adults, but not teens, I never thought it was a real issue for teens!" (Mother, Vancouver)*

*"It seems today gambling is so socially acceptable that you might not even think they are doing anything wrong." (Father, Saskatoon)*

## PARENTAL AWARENESS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD UNDERAGE GAMBLING

Consistent with quantitative findings, focus group discussions revealed that underage gambling is currently a "non-issue" for the majority of Canadian parents. Out of 24 focus group discussions, only one parent felt that underage gambling is a relevant and concerning youth issue (prior to the facilitator introducing the topic of underage gambling to the group). For many parents, the topic of underage gambling provoked questions as well as confusion about which activities qualify as "underage gambling." A subset of parents had difficulty comprehending how gambling could be a "problem" for teens when it is illegal for them to participate in regulated gambling activities in their province. Echoing sentiments other parents shared, one mother said she had no context for underage gambling and felt underage gambling was "an oxymoron." In this and other instances, it was evident that parents often do not associate non-regulated gambling activities as "gambling." As an example, some parents volunteered stories of their teen participating in gambling activities in their home, either with friends or family, and did not make the initial connection that those activities qualify as "underage gambling."

As stated above, a number of parents said their teen had played poker in their home, either with family or friends, for "fun." It was also common for parents to say that they or another family member had purchased a lottery ticket or other type of scratch and win ticket for their teen. Few parents said that their teen's participation in these activities had ever struck them as potentially problematic. On the contrary, it was more common for participants to talk about their teen's occasional lottery ticket play or involvement in games of poker in their home as "family fun time." Lottery or scratch and win ticket play was perceived by most to be an activity that was "harmless" and done on special occasions "for fun." Parents' actions and attitudes related to underage gambling sometimes appeared to contradictory: "I don't myself agree with underage gambling, yet I will buy my son a lottery ticket." (Mother, Vancouver)

Only a handful of parents said that their teen (in most cases, their son) had been involved in a gambling activity to a degree that they felt uncomfortable with.

Interestingly, many parents' attitudes and opinions changed the more they thought about and discussed the topic of underage gambling. While some parents continued to believe that gambling was a "low-risk" or "last priority" youth issue, other parents began to acknowledge that various underage gambling scenarios were potentially harmful. Many parents revealed the reason they had perceived certain gambling-related activities as innocent and harmless was simply because they "Never really thought about it before." (Mother, Regina)

Talking with participants about the different forms of youth gambling activities provided insight into parental perspectives on what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable gambling-related behaviour for underage youth. Different conditions influence the degree of gambling acceptability. The following chart outlines these conditions in terms of how they influence a parent's perception of what gambling-related behaviours are "more acceptable" and "NOT acceptable" for their teen.

*“I have nothing against poker, but you need to know when to stop, as long as he learns from his mistakes.” (Father, Alberta)*

More Acceptable	NOT Acceptable
Gambling activities with family for “entertainment”	Gambling activities online for free
Gambling activities with friends, no money exchanged	Gambling online for money (teaches gambling skills, behaviour modeling)
Lottery tickets as occasional gifts	Gambling activities a regular habit
Gambling activities happen in the home (and parent is aware)	Gambling addiction in the family
Live gambling with friends for small amounts of money (for older teens)	Participation in gambling-related activities hidden from parents
	Motivation to play focused on money instead of sociability or fun

*“Today’s kids are smarter and exposed to more things at an early age, which isn’t always a good thing.” (Father, Halifax)*

**Lottery Tickets**

Each parent discussion group expressed a variety of opinions about certain gambling activities. For example, many parents deemed occasional lottery ticket play to be “harmless,” while others adamantly opposed it. Some parents felt occasional lottery ticket play was a “bad habit” for their teen to pick up while others did not feel it was “a big deal.” A number of parents said that purchasing a lottery ticket for their teen is acceptable if the teen pays for the ticket with his/her own money. Participants felt this would create situations where teens can learn a lasting lesson (through losing their own money), and consequently be less inclined to gamble in the future.

Related to this point, a number of parents hoped that their teen would lose when experimenting with any gambling activity because winning even small amounts of money can provide a skewed or unrealistic impression of future gambling success and increase the teen’s desire to continue. When discussing the pros and cons of teens receiving lottery tickets as gifts, the concept of personal initiative versus outside initiative was also raised. As one parent stated, “I am comfortable with scratch and win tickets as a gift because it was not my child’s decision to play the ticket. It was just a gift.” (Mother, Quebec City)

*“It’s difficult to give advice because they don’t see us as cool anymore.” (Father, Quebec City)*

It was evident that of all potential gambling behaviours, lotto ticket play was perceived lowest on the danger scale and deemed relatively acceptable provided the ticket play happened a few times a year at maximum. Summarizing the general parental attitude, one father said, “Lottery ticket play doesn’t concern me, unless I really overanalyze it. When I think of gambling, I think of casinos, excessive drinking, drug use and prostitutes. I don’t think of a grandfather giving their grandchild a scratch and win ticket.” (Father, Saskatoon)

*“It’s difficult to be a role model. The way our parents used to say: ‘do as I say, not as I do,’ just doesn’t work with teens today.” (Father, Halifax)*

*“Online sites are setup to hook people and then turn it into a money thing from a play thing.” (Father, Prince George)*

*“Problems with drugs and drinking are easy to detect. It’s hard to know what your teen is doing online.” (Mother, Halifax)*

### Live Gambling (Poker and Other Non-Regulated Gambling Activities)

A teen’s involvement in live games such as poker is a second example of a gambling activity that parents held varied opinions about in terms of acceptability. Many parents said that poker or similar card games played in a live setting with family or friends is “harmless” provided there is no money wagering involved. However, participants who held the belief that any form of gambling-related involvement was unacceptable for their child to partake in opposed the idea of live (free/“for fun”) gambling because they believed it was a form of “gambling training.” Condoning or taking part in an activity that “teaches the skill of gambling” was not acceptable for these parents. Among parents who held this perspective, the general sentiment was, “Whether it’s chips or money, it’s the same thing for me – you are teaching them a gambling behaviour. And that’s not acceptable.” (Mother, Trois-Rivières)

At the other end of the spectrum, a portion of parents, particularly those with older teens, said they were “fine” with their teen wagering “small amounts” of money (less than \$5) because they did not see the potential for it to be problematic. “I am not willing to block my child from playing for fun with pennies just because a small percentage might develop a problem.” (Father, Alberta) Fathers, overall, were more inclined to have this attitude. A number of fathers shared stories about teaching their teen how to play poker or other gambling-related card games. Some also said they occasionally invite their teen to play poker with them when poker games are played in their home. Reflecting on his experiences playing cards with his family, one father said, “I have taught my kids blackjack and Texas Hold’em all in good fun, but I have had conversations with them about it and that it is only okay as entertainment.” (Father, Vancouver)

In general, many said that this type of “play” was acceptable provided their teen’s motivation was mostly social: “It becomes an issue when it is only about the money.” (Father, Prince George) The amount of money exchanged was also a condition. As one father said, “If kids are conscious of their decisions, it’s okay. But not if they’re gambling their whole paycheck.” (Father, Regina) All parents were uncomfortable with the idea that their teen could “owe a debt” to another teen and said that serious concerns would arise if they discovered their teen was gambling their iPod or cell phone because they had a debt to settle with one of their peers.

### Online Gambling

There was strong consensus that a teen’s participation in gambling activities in a social setting was significantly “safer” than any level of involvement in online gambling. Parents held this opinion whether or not the live gambling activity included exchanging money. As one father stated, “Playing with friends is safer, the worst outcome is that friends fight. But friends are aware of each other and can help each other.” (Father, Regina) In contrast, online money play was widely perceived as scary: “When it’s solitary, the motivation is more to win money and it’s isolating.” (Father, Regina)

Parents cited many reasons why they collectively opposed the idea of their teen participating in an online gambling game – even if it did not involve money. These included: the idea of solitary play, the fear of online predators, not knowing what the teen is getting into (hidden activity), the ease of losing track of time, the teen gaining a false sense of success, knowing access could be 24/7 and the ease that it could escalate to money play. Parents appeared to have far more confidence that their teen would not get too involved in gambling when playing occasionally with friends for free, yet showed

significant concern that participation in online free gambling could “draw their teen in” and entice them to play for money.

### Facebook Gaming Applications

Discovering that Facebook offers Texas Hold’em and other free online gaming applications during the group discussions provoked some strong parental concerns. For some parents, this realization was “scary” because they had “no idea” that gambling was an activity that their teen might engage in when logging into their social networking page. This possible reality added a new dimension to parents’ ongoing fear of “not knowing” what their teen might be engaging in online and appeared to cause some distress for mothers in particular.

### Regulated Gambling Activities

Parents showed little concern about their child trying to enter a casino or other type of regulated gambling establishment. With regard to location, the main issue was the notion that any involvement in gambling that was “hidden” from them was unacceptable. One parent said that her teen could have poker games with friends at home on the condition that she was aware the game was going on: “When it’s in my house, I want to know what’s happening.” (Mother, Quebec City) Other parents said that generally, when a teen hides a behaviour from his/her parents, “He knows it’s not good.” (Father, Trois-Rivières)

## LOCATING RESPONSIBILITY FOR PREVENTING TEEN GAMBLING

Across the country parents overwhelmingly agreed they are primarily responsible for preventing underage gambling. Parents expressed that, similar to other youth issues, it is their role to educate and communicate with their teens to steer them clear of involvement in problematic behaviours. Attempts to discover the broader implications of this acknowledgement of responsibility revealed mixed responses. Some parents felt they currently had the knowledge to steer their teen from engaging in problematic gambling behaviours while others did not. Also, some parents felt that the responsibility falls on teens as well, particularly as teens get older.

It is worth noting that a number of parents, particularly fathers, were less convinced that underage gambling deserved the same attention or prevention efforts that they dedicate to other youth issues:

“I don’t think gambling is a big enough issue out there with teens. It’s not in the same category as drugs, not in the same category as drinking and driving. If my son was gambling I would have a long talk with him . . . but if you prioritize the issues, drugs and stupidity with alcohol and sex, those are the ones I worry about.” (Father, Regina)

Knowing many parents may share this opinion is important in understanding the challenge in raising awareness and putting underage gambling on parents’ radar. Parents feel primarily responsible for keeping their teen safe from harm – this was evident throughout the discussion. However, the level of active effort or allocation of time they are willing to spend specifically to prevent youth gambling problems varied from parent to parent.

Although many parents felt strongly that governments should also be responsible because casinos are being built everywhere, many also felt governments have conflicting interests since they profit from gambling revenue and consequently felt the prevention

*“Teens can back lash if you are too vigilant. They feel you are invading their privacy. It’s important to keep a balance.”*  
(Vancouver, Mother)

*“Gambling becomes a problem when it becomes a usual pattern and consumes their life.”*  
(Father, Prince George)

*"I don't think most parents would notice. It would be very difficult to diagnose. I don't know that parents would say anything." (Mother, Halifax)*

*"My son plays poker once a month. If it became once a week I would say it's a problem." (Father, Trois-Rivières)*

*"I don't know enough about underage gambling to recognize a problem. I would turn the internet first." (Father, Halifax)*

of teen gambling is really left up to parents. As one father noted, "Parents are the only people who would want to stop teens from gambling." (Father, Saskatoon) There were a handful of parents who had strong opinions about the need for government to act more responsibly. Some of these parents said that governments should make lotto and scratch tickets inaccessible at retail, similar to cigarettes, and not have tickets displayed at the counter. One mother said, "Government has a responsibility to make gambling look less cool. Because government sells gambling, they have an obligation. They are responsible. They should take lotto tickets out of view. Lotto ads look so fun and are always on TV." (Mother, Halifax)

### **IDENTIFYING THE WARNING SIGNS OF TEEN INVOLVEMENT IN GAMBLING**

Discussions focused on a parent's ability to identify if their teen was becoming involved with gambling activities to a degree they believed to be concerning, unhealthy or potentially harmful produced polarizing opinions. On one hand, many parents said that they would easily be able to detect if their teen was having a problem. It was common for parents to share how well they felt they knew their teen and express a high level of confidence that they could detect a problem due to their teen's change in mood or their teen asking for money frequently. Money (missing money, discussion of money and presence of "new" money) was by far the most common "red flag" parents mentioned. Some parents shared the opinion that staying involved in your child's life is the easiest way to know when "something is up" and ensure they are not getting into "trouble."

Parents who said that it would be difficult to detect if their teen was involved in gambling activities often suggested that underage gambling is "different than other youth issues" because it has a unique set of challenges. The challenges parents felt might limit their ability to identify a problem included:

- a) their current lack of knowledge about what types of gambling teens are doing;
- b) the potential for the increasing social acceptability of gambling to mask or cloud their perception of a problem arising; and
- c) the notion that gambling "warning signs" are not as obvious as signs that alert parents to their teen smoking, drinking or doing drugs.

Some parents commented that it was obvious from their discussions with other parents in the focus group that most parents have little awareness or knowledge about youth gambling and thus felt it may not be realistic for parents to say that detecting a potential problem would be "easy." Echoing this belief, a mother said, "Without the focus group discussion, I wouldn't have thought of gambling." (Mother, Vancouver) Parents who said that identifying if their teen was involved in gambling would be challenging also expressed concern that the problem "Could escalate way beyond your control before you would know." (Mother, Saskatoon)

Also, for some parents, the idea of their teen getting involved in gambling activities seemed so farfetched that they had a hard time answering the question. "I don't believe my teen could develop a gambling problem. He knows what's going on." (Father, Halifax)

*“I probably wouldn’t look for information about underage gambling unless a reason pops up and then you start to actively search for that info.” (Mother, Halifax)*

*“To me, a very small percentage of the population has a gambling problem so I never really thought about it. But when we’re talking about teens it bothers me because they are more vulnerable.” (Father, Trois Rivières)*

**EDUCATING PARENTS ABOUT UNDERAGE GAMBLING**

Parents said information explaining how pervasive youth gambling is in their province and the types of gambling-related activities youth are engaging in would be valuable. Without this knowledge, parents felt their lack of context and understanding of what “underage gambling” currently means would restrict them from playing a more active role in preventing their teen from developing any negative habits associated with gambling. In addition to gaining an understanding of the current portrait of underage gambling, parents wished to be informed about teen warning signs and the actions required to be a responsible partner in gambling prevention.

The following chart outlines proposed communication messaging or knowledge parents think should be developed to increase their awareness and interest in underage gambling.

Awareness	Interest	Action
Define “underage gambling” for parents	Questionnaire/Quiz: help identify if parents understand the risks	Advice on what to do or say and what not to do
Current statistics about youth involvement in gambling and parent attitudes	Warning signs that your teen may have a problem	Online live chat with an expert for parents’ questions
Illustrate that ALL teens have the potential to develop a problem	Parent blog on dedicated parent website	Counseling opportunities for teen and parent
Communicate that many parents are sending “mixed” signals	Links and info for support	Hotline
Educate parents about the laws and age requirements to gamble in their province	Real examples of case studies: show how gambling can escalate and show stories of hope	Teen “addiction package”: include information for different addiction categories

**FEEDBACK AND REACTIONS TO CURRENT YOUTH GAMBLING FINDINGS**

In order to gauge what type of content would motivate parents to think of gambling as a “real” youth issue, recent youth gambling findings were presented during focus group sessions. The findings that were presented at the focus groups are recent youth gambling statistics collected by DECODE in various provinces in the last year. (Please note that the findings are not based on a national sample and are only representative of certain provinces.) The intention of sharing the findings with parents was to provide an approximate snapshot of what the current youth reality is and to see if parents view this reality as a “problem.” This exercise was also included to understand which findings are particular “hot button” areas for parents and why.

The seven youth findings that were shared with parents are listed below and displayed in no particular order:

“Show real examples. Like, what can happen to a 16-year-old that has a gambling problem.”  
(Mother, Halifax)

- A. Two out of three underage youth have participated in at least one activity that qualifies as gambling with money or exchanging something of value.
- B. The two most common places where underage youth gamble are their home (44 percent) or a friend’s house (43 percent).
- C. Close to four out of 10 underage youth say they have gambled for free online (any type of site).
- D. Twenty-five percent of underage youth have used a gambling application on a social networking site such as Facebook.
- E. Seven out of 10 underage youth who have played lottery tickets received the tickets from their parents.
- F. The majority of underage youth who have gambled for money believe their parents are indifferent to their participation in gambling activities.
- G. The first resource youth say they would turn to for help if they had a gambling problem is their parents.

“We all want to believe our kids don’t do that. Parents need to know it doesn’t just happen to kids from broken homes.” (Father, Saskatoon)

Overall, many parents said they found the statistics shocking, and had no idea so many youth today engage in gambling-related activities. Some parents felt it odd that youth participation in gambling could be this prevalent yet it had not been communicated to the public through the media or other avenues.

**Finding “A”:** Two out of three underage youth have participated in at least one activity that qualifies as gambling with money or exchanging something of value.

Of all the findings shared with participants, finding “a” provoked the strongest reaction from parents. Many parents said this statistic would be the one they would choose out of the seven findings to place on a billboard and capture the attention of parents. As one mother stated, the knowledge that two out of three underage youth have participated in a gambling activity with money or exchanging something of value, “Gives the impression that there might be a problem that I wasn’t aware of.” (Mother, Quebec City) A number of parents seemed stunned that youth participation in gambling activities could be this pervasive. Many parents felt this kind of information would spur them to have a conversation with their teen about gambling.

**Finding “B”:** The two most common places where underage youth gamble are their home (44 percent) or a friend’s house (43 percent).

“When it’s in my house, I want to know what’s happening.” (Mother, Quebec City)

Many parents found the notion of youth gambling in their home to be unsettling because it implies underage gambling is occurring right under their nose. Some said this finding was a red flag: “This statistic woke me up!” (Mother, Quebec City) Others said that, “Either parents don’t care or kids are sneaking around. It’s happening right under their parent’s nose.” (Father, Regina) Some parents felt the danger is that they tend to assume their teen is safe when they are under their own roof or going to a friend’s house: “We don’t overreact when they are home, at least we know where they are.” (Mother, Trois-Rivières) Other parents expressed discomfort with the idea their teen may be engaging in gambling-related activities in their home and keeping it hidden from them. Overall, parents felt this information was beneficial because they are responsible for setting rules about what activities are acceptable for their teen to participate in, particularly when it is happening in their home.

**Finding “C”:** Close to four out of 10 underage youth say they have gambled for free online (any type of site).

*‘Online gambling bothers me because they do it alone.’ (Father, Trois Rivières)*

Parents felt that the word “online” was the most alarming component of this statement. A number of parents expressed concern and fear that online gambling activities, with or without money, are more dangerous for their teen. Many parents agreed: “The percentage is high and I am not comfortable with the online component. The negative potential is bigger online.” (Father, Prince George) Others added, “The online component makes it feel more serious because it is so accessible.” (Father, Saskatoon) Parents, even those who were more comfortable with occasional live “friendly” gambling said that knowing almost 40 percent of underage youth have gambled for free online is something they would pay attention to: “Online bothers me because they do it alone, no one is there. When you’re in a group with friends, there’s something fun about it. This is closer to ‘gambling.’” (Father, Trois-Rivières) A number of mothers also reiterated their concerns about not knowing who their teen may be playing with online and fear that this type of online activity could potentially jeopardize their teen’s safety.

***Finding “D”:*** *Twenty-five percent of underage youth have used a gambling application on a social networking site such as Facebook.*

*“I never thought of Facebook as a way teens could gamble.” (Mother, Saskatoon)*

Although many parents said this statistic did not faze them, some parents, particularly mothers indicated that the information is “So relevant, because teens are on it all the time.” (Mother, Vancouver) Another parent said this statistic helped him realize youth are spending their time engaging in gambling-related activities that many parents do not know exist: “I had no idea any type of gambling was on Facebook. Kids are on social networking sites all the time!” (Father, Saskatoon) Overall, parents were divided over Facebook-related fears and determining an acceptable amount of time for their teen to spend on Facebook. One mother raised the point that, “This Facebook statistic makes it real because Facebook is so acceptable today.” (Mother, Vancouver)

***Finding “E”:*** *Seven out of 10 underage youth who have played lottery tickets received the tickets from their parents.*

*“I wouldn’t have a clue what to do. I’ve never thought about it.” (Father, Prince George)*

A number of parents who had previously given their teen a lottery ticket said seeing this statistic crystallized the role they have played in encouraging or influencing their teen to potentially develop a gambling habit. As one father said, “This jumps out to me because I have given tickets often to my teen and would hate to set my child up for a problem. I want to be a role model.” (Father, Saskatoon) Others voiced similar thoughts: “I realize now that we could be the source of the problem.” (Mother, Saskatoon) At the start of discussions about their teen’s occasional lottery ticket play, parents had few concerns. But seeing the statistic phrased this way appeared to alter their perceptions. Discussing this statistic spurred many acknowledgements that, “When giving lottery tickets to youth, you give them a taste of gambling and then a habit can develop.” (Mother, Trois-Rivières)

***Finding “F”:*** *The majority of underage youth who have gambled for money believe their parents are indifferent to their participation in gambling activities.*

Parents said this finding is concerning because it is upsetting to think their child believes they are indifferent to anything they do. Parents felt that if this was the general youth perception, it is possible parents are not having clear conversations with teens about gambling. Of course, parents need to first take the time to define for themselves what actions they deem as “okay” and “not okay” so they are in a position to educate their teen about gambling and send clear signals that reinforce their beliefs. As one mother said, “Gambling can cross the line which is not black or white and parents need to help define that grey area.” (Mother, Regina) A number of parents said this statistic would prompt them to have a conversation with their teen about underage gambling.

*“Teens today have no idea how to do anything in moderation. They believe everything is unlimited.” (Mother, Halifax)*

*“Gambling is distracting and takes their mind away from dealing with other things. You don’t want them to escape from life that way.” (Mother, Halifax)*

**Finding “G”:** *The first resource youth say they would turn to for help if they had a gambling problem is their parents.*

There were a variety of reactions observed among parents when presented with this finding. Some parents found this information comforting; others felt it implied that parents have an obligation to be informed so they can help their teen should they ever need assistance or support related to gambling. Some were surprised youth said they would turn to them as they imagined their teen may turn to a friend first.

### **BLOCKING SOFTWARE**

When asked if they would consider installing free gambling blocking software on their home computer, parents responded with mixed opinions. Parents who expressed strong concern about the safety of their teen online seemed more apt to agree they would install the software as a precautionary measure. However, many who agreed said that they would most likely only install the software if they noticed their teen was visiting gambling-related sites or engaging in other types of gambling activities that caught their attention. On the other hand, a group of parents (particularly in Quebec) had adverse reactions to the idea of installing this type of software as they felt it would erode the trust they had built with their teen. These parents feared that their teen would interpret this action as an indication of a lack of trust which would not set the right precedent for nurturing an open relationship.

### **CHANNELS AND SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

Parents stressed they would not actively seek out information about underage gambling unless they first became aware of its relevance through a mass marketing campaign, their teen’s school or if they suspected their child was gambling. Parents felt they were in a unique position to consider underage gambling as a potential youth issue as a result of the focus group discussion and admitted they would otherwise have had little or no awareness of it. Accordingly, parents believed channels such as television or radio would initially be most effective to get the concept of underage gambling onto their radar. With respect to television spots, parents felt the best time to reach them would be in the evening while watching the news. Many fathers said a guaranteed way to get their attention would be through an informative television commercial aired during a sports game on TSN.

In order to have an impact on parents who gamble, participants suggested posting print advertisements in casinos. Parents also remarked that print advertisements would get their attention if they were displayed at hockey rinks or other types of recreational centers where both youth and parents spend their time.

Many parents identified their teen’s school as an ideal avenue to get their attention. Parents suggested including communication messages on their teen’s school website or including information in the monthly school bulletin. While some parents suggested that information brought home with their child may never reach them, others said their teen’s school usually alerts them of important information via email or phone and felt schools were an appropriate and effective channel to utilize.

*"I was totally clueless this was a problem!" (Mother, Vancouver)*

In addition, parents felt a website about underage gambling specifically targeting them would be a very useful tool provided they heard about the site from their teen's school or via a TV or radio campaign. Parents thought it unlikely that they would find out about the website without an earlier campaign designed to capture their attention. Many parents said that a website would be a particularly helpful resource if they noticed their teen was engaging in gambling activities. Parents believe a dedicated website has great value because it offers ease of access, around the clock information, anonymity, breadth of information, the ability to read case studies, and the opportunity to check out useful links. Some parents said they would read information on the site to be more informed and take preventative measures with their teen. Others disagreed, saying they would realistically only visit the website if they became aware their teen was experiencing a gambling-related problem.

A number of parents stressed that the source of the website plays an important role because they pay close attention to the credibility of the information they read online. Also, many proposed the site would be more relevant to them if it included local information or helpful resources. A small portion of parents, however, described the internet as "overwhelming" and would likely prefer to consult their family doctor or a helpline for more information. Related to this point, many parents were unsure about where to find the right number to call if they were in need of information about underage gambling.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

While most parents do not identify underage gambling as a pressing or serious youth issue, most parents believe that Canadian youth are growing up in an era of unprecedented exposure to gambling activities, and that underage gambling holds the potential to become an emerging youth issue and challenge. At the same time, youth indicate that parents are the first place they would turn to if they had a problem with gambling, and the vast majority of parents believe that parents are ultimately responsible for preventing underage gambling. These findings strongly suggest that there is both an opportunity and an obligation to engage parents as partners in addressing underage gambling.

Since communications and programs directly targeted toward parents of youth are currently very limited, an opportunity exists to develop effective parent-targeted communications and initiatives. However, these initiatives will not be without their challenges since most parents do not recognize underage gambling as an issue of great concern. Like other emerging youth issues, gambling is in many ways harder for parents to identify and address as they have limited personal experience and knowledge with this as a youth issue.

The recommendations in this section are designed to provide research-based direction in developing effective communication and initiatives. The recommendations are organized as follows:

- A. Increasing Parent Awareness and Interest
- B. Developing Relevant Messaging
- C. Utilizing Effective Communication Channels
- D. Market-Specific Strategy and Program Development
- E. National Collaboration Opportunities

### A. Increasing Parental Awareness and Interest

The number one priority is getting the issue of underage gambling onto the radar of parents through relevant messaging and targeted initiatives. As previously noted, the issue of underage gambling is currently near the bottom of the list of parental concerns, which is the first hurdle that must be overcome before parents can be expected to become engaged and take action on the issue.

The research also indicates that awareness and interest can be developed by showing them statistics that reflect current youth gambling attitudes and behaviours. Examining frequency of play, types of games, location, and expected role of parent and online activities demonstrates the key issues involved. In addition, the potential negative consequences of youth gambling should be communicated to parents as significant portions of them accept certain levels of gambling activity to be innocuous. Most parents, however, recognize that underage gambling can escalate into addiction and other negative behaviours, such as drugs, criminal activity and the deterioration of friendships, school achievement and work performance.

Another objective should be to assist parents in having discussions with their child before they begin to demonstrate problematic gambling behaviours. This is particularly challenging as parents generally believe that it would be more difficult to identify problematic gambling behavior in their child than if they were having a problem with alcohol, drugs or bullying.

Efforts should also be directed toward educating parents on the “where” of youth gambling (e.g. at home, friend’s house, on social networking sites, school, online) as parents often associate gambling with retail or casinos which they consider to be controlled/regulated venues that are inaccessible to youth. As a result, youth participation in non-regulated gambling activities often goes unnoticed.

Awareness and interest in the issue could also be built by highlighting the mixed messages parents send to their teens through their own gambling behavior and attitudes. While fathers generally demonstrate a more relaxed attitude toward youth gambling, and mothers are more likely to consider youth gambling an issue of some importance, both mothers and fathers can serve as positive role models for their children and help educate them about responsible gambling behavior.

Consideration should also be given to engaging parents who have been personally or indirectly impacted by problem gambling behavior, as they appear to be more likely to recognize youth gambling as an important issue, and hold the potential to be engaged as advocates.

## B. Developing Relevant Messaging

The following themes illustrate potentially effective messages.

### *“Parents **are** Partners”*

Similar to the successful “Parents. The anti-drug” campaign in the United States, this theme focuses on communicating directly to parents their important role in addressing underage gambling issues. It will be important to illustrate that parents overwhelmingly believe they are responsible for preventing underage gambling, and that youth say they will turn to their parents if they have a gambling problem. It will also be important to communicate the commitment and shared responsibility of government to work with parents to prevent teen gambling.

### *“Reality Check”*

This approach would focus on the hard facts to clearly illustrate and dramatize the scope of teen gambling activities, including both traditional and non-traditional gambling channels.

### *“Do you know the signs?”*

Parents indicate that they are not as confident about detecting problematic gambling behaviours in their child as they are with other behaviours, such as drinking, smoking or drug use. This approach would focus on aiding parents in the early identification of problematic gambling behavior, and directing parents to resources that will assist them in discussing gambling issues with their child.

### *“Gambling is gambling”*

This approach would focus on broadening parents’ concept of various gambling behaviours that may be problematic for youth, regardless of the situation, location, company or amount of money. In particular stress that online “free” gambling sites might in fact be “training” youth to develop an interest in gambling and building gambling “skills.”

### *“Are we raising a generation of gamblers?”*

This theme would illustrate the potentially confusing messages parents are sending to their kids by their own gambling attitudes and behaviour, and the increasing socialization of gambling. In addition, it could show that much underage gambling activity happens in the home or homes of friends, and that playing gambling-type games with your child, even if not for money, may develop youth “gambling skills.” Recommendations to parents could include suggestions to not play gambling-type games with your children (poker, sports pools, lottery) and to instead choose other rewarding family activities.

### *“What you don’t know can hurt them”*

This approach could highlight that youth gambling often occurs where parents don’t see it, and would challenge parents to see if they really know what their child is doing online. This approach could also address parental concerns about the potential negative impacts of a child winning or losing at gambling activities, whereby initial wins may create a false sense of beating the system, and losses may indebt youth and lead to other undesirable behaviours such as theft or bullying.

## C. Utilizing Effective Communication Channels

The research study probed the various channels that parents indicated would be the most effective for communicating a youth gambling message to them. The findings outlined here are directional in nature and therefore should be further explored in the local context before any communication plan is developed. The communication channels most frequently suggested by parents as being particularly effective include:

### *School System*

Many parents indicated that their child’s school is a very important source of information and guidance on various youth issues. Parents said they find the electronic newsletters that are sent directly to them valuable. Also, parents often noted information sessions held at the school can be very helpful. Accordingly, developing relationships with schools should be a priority.

### *Health Providers*

Health providers are another leading source of information on youth issues, and one that parents mentioned they would specifically go to if they suspected that their child

had a gambling problem. This could include family physicians, addiction centres and specialized help organizations such as Gamblers Anonymous.

#### *Point-of-Play*

Some parents suggested that the best place to connect parents with messaging related to underage gambling would be on-site at gambling venues and directly on the product, such as lottery tickets.

#### *Online*

Many parents use the internet as a research source for youth issues. An online component to the communications plan will undoubtedly be an essential element, but it is important to note that many parents mentioned that they would only go to a gambling-specific website if they felt their child was experiencing a problem. Since the vast majority of parents do not think this is the case, the challenge remains to increase parents' awareness of the issue so that they recognize the value of informing themselves of the issue before it presents itself as a problem. The content areas that parents would primarily expect to find on a parents site about underage gambling include:

- Current, local statistics on the extent of youth gambling
- Real stories/testimonials
- Local contact and support information
- Warning signs
- How to talk to your teen about gambling

#### *Traditional Media*

Traditional media was also frequently mentioned as an important communication channel for parents, especially radio, as parents often mentioned that they found it was easiest to discuss issues with their children while driving. As well, after dinner television is often a shared viewing time with teens where advertisements can create a "teaching moment."

### **D. Market-Specific Strategy and Program Development**

While many of the key findings and recommendations are national in nature and generally applicable to most markets, it is recommended that parent communication and engagement initiatives also incorporate local realities and needs. In order to accomplish this, a dual approach is recommended:

#### *Phase One: Market-Specific Local Opportunity Assessment*

Engage key stakeholders to determine the current internal/local market realities and prioritize the opportunity areas that fit best with strategic objectives. Key questions to be assessed in this phase include:

- What are the unique local considerations?
- What is currently working well/not working well?

- What existing assets/programs/relationships can be leveraged?
- What possible challenges/gaps/redundancies need to be addressed?

### *Phase Two: Market-Specific Local Strategy and Initiatives Development*

Once local parameters have been established through the market-specific opportunity assessment, an idea generation and implementation approach is recommended:

- Idea generation: utilizing a team consisting of facilitation experts, organization staff, key partners and target consumer (parents)
- Idea selection: filtration and selection of program concepts to implement
- Program implementation

## **E. National Collaboration Opportunities**

In Canada, the issue of underage gambling is increasing becoming national in scope, particularly with the rapid and sustained growth of online gambling activity. It appears that inter-provincial collaboration is increasingly necessary and can also provide significant benefits, with the current “Parents as Partners” research being one example.

Other future collaboration opportunities include:

- Launching a “National Task Force on Youth Problem Gambling Prevention.” This could be an ongoing forum consisting of various stakeholders, including experts, operators, parents, youth, lottery corporations and health and government bodies. Significant functions could include: releasing key research findings, publishing white papers, coordinating forums and conferences, coordinating national communication efforts, initiating new research, creating national communication strategies, and generating national shared resources (such as a national website resource)
- Participating in the “Parents as Partners 2010” Study. This is designed as a tracking study scheduled for August 2010, building on the “Parents as Partners 2008” study, and will track changes in parents’ awareness, attitudes and behaviours related to underage gambling. In addition, it will measure awareness and impact of any new parent-focused initiatives and communications launched by the study partners

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