

THE EFFECTS OF A PARENT'S GAMBLING ON CHILDREN

Compulsive or pathological gambling takes over a family, and the effect on the children is great, as it is in other addictive families. Focus is on the gambling, perhaps not just for the gambler, but also for the spouse. The children may thus live in a world without attention, emotional validation, stability, or parental predictability. It may be a world of lies, deceptions, illusions. Several common stressors on children of gamblers are:

Lack of Emotional Validation. Their feelings and experiences are not confirmed. Therefore, they may find it hard to identify or trust their emotions and thoughts, and they may feel confusion about their perceptions of the world. They then find it hard to judge, evaluate, and cope with events; and the lack of confidence in themselves may make them insecure and fearful.

Lack of Environmental Stability. Stable family routines and roles are important to children. Through these, they learn the value of work, persistence and frustration tolerance. The consequences of gambling may mean financial swings, separations, actual physical moves, etc.

Lack of Emotional Predictability. Ideally, parents should respond to a child with approval and love, meet their needs appropriately, with neither too much or too little gratifications. However, a gambling parent and their spouse may be excessively indulgent and stimulating, or physically absent or self or spouse focused that they are emotionally unavailable or unresponsive. To cope, the child may identify with the gambler's exciting, glamorous aspects. They may learn the magical thinking from the gambler. They may become depressed or anxious. They learn unhelpful rules and react to stress in several ways:

- Don't trust yourself or others. They are raised with lies and deceit.
- Act out or internalize angry feelings.
- Difficulty tolerating frustration.
- Need for immediate gratification.
- Problems with schoolwork, friends, etc.
- Physical complaints.
- Overly responsible/ serious or extremely irresponsible.
- Difficulty achieving autonomy and independence.
- Shame and guilt. They may think they cause the tension at home.
- Stuffing of feelings.
- Become loners or refuse to be alone.
- Sleeping/eating disorders.
- Become overcautious or take unnecessary risks.
- Overvaluing money/ materials things. Manipulation parent(s) for proof of their love, or offer to bail out the parents, etc.
- Blaming the non-gambling parent. The gambler may be seen as exciting, generous, special. They know the ties with the gambler are not strong so they act out their anger on the other parent, who is more trustworthy.
- Fear. The gambler's dealing with criminals may make the family actually unsafe; there may actually not be enough money for the essentials.
- Disregard for the law.

When a parent is in recovery:

- Validate the child's feelings. Give them a structured environment as much as possible. Admit lies and secrets. Teach them to check out the real facts. Go over their values. Talk about the unwritten rules of the family (i.e., don't talk outside the family).
- Educate. Children learn about other addictions in school; at this time they don't learn about gambling.
- Compensate. Provide structure.
- Get professional help, if needed. Give the child a safe place to express themselves, aside from you.
- Provide another role model of honesty, etc. Let them have a place to work out their own responsibilities in the family.
- Remember: Research shows that for a child to survive an abusive childhood successfully, all that is needed is ONE caring person in their life.