

Protection of Children Not a Gamble Worth Taking

By Marie Mullally

Ninety-four per cent of them have Internet access at home, but only 13 per cent are supervised when they go online. Of the 2,500 sites available to choose from, many don't require I.D. and some don't even require credit cards. Yes, children in Canada can most certainly access online gambling. And, according to research, a startling number of them do. In Nova Scotia, youth participation in Internet gambling is triple that of adults, and we know that prevalence is repeating itself in jurisdictions across the country. Because the reality is, kids who want to gamble are finding ways to do it and the Internet is rich with opportunities and rife with risks.

But should their access to the online gambling world be left unattended? Should unregulated Internet gambling operators be relied upon to prevent youth, whose risk analysis and decision-making skills aren't fully developed, from participating in an activity they aren't mature enough to handle? For the Nova Scotia Gaming Corporation (NSGC), the answer to those questions is unequivocally "no." The answer, as we see it, is that managers and operators of Canada's gaming industry have a duty to minimize the potential harm of gambling as much as possible. Where underage youth are concerned, that means making a concerted effort to prevent access to any and all forms of gambling. No exceptions.

It is this non-negotiable stance that led NSGC to invent and develop *BetStopper*, a world-leading achievement. *BetStopper* is easy to use software designed specifically as an online gambling prevention tool. By installing the software on all computers in the household and setting up a user account for every member of the family, complete with a unique username and password, parents can enable a gambling-blocking function for their children's user accounts. Then when children are logged into their accounts and surfing the Internet *BetStopper* effectively blocks their access to all gambling content. That includes play-for-free poker sites, sites where provincial operators sell their lottery products, and sites requiring a deposit of money that offer everything from bingo, to virtual scratch tickets and casino-style table games.

As the manager of gambling in our Province, we felt this was an area in which we had to demonstrate leadership. The research is clear. The younger someone starts to gamble, the greater the chances they will develop problems with gambling. And if someone develops a gambling problem, our entire industry loses – so prevention is key. That's why we set out on a two-year journey to invent *BetStopper*. What sets it apart from other blocking software is that it is narrowly focused – it blocks gambling content exclusively, rather than a host of potentially inappropriate content categories – and as a result, is more effective.

After developing the solution, we went out in the field to test it. Results from a six-month pilot test of *BetStopper* prove it is an effective youth gambling prevention tool. In fact, 92 per cent of parents said exactly that, along with the 85 per cent who think using *BetStopper* in their home will help prevent their children from developing learned gambling behaviours on the Internet. They said the software was easy to use, that their own awareness of the risks increased, and that 98 to 100 per cent of gambling sites

were effectively blocked. That result that resonated with us the most was that a full 99 per cent said NSGC should continue to make it available to Nova Scotia families.

So we listened. The bottom line is that we wouldn't operate our casinos without ensuring security personnel conducted age verification checks at the door, nor would we allow our retailers to sell tickets to anyone under the age of majority. For the same reason, we shouldn't sit back knowing the extent of gambling offerings available on the Internet today and not do something to help protect those who are among the most vulnerable for developing a gambling problem: our children.

Underage youth gambling is a real issue. *BetStopper* is a real solution. As of May 29, 2009, all families in Nova Scotia can download and install *BetStopper* for free. This prevention program is a world-first addition to NSGC's social responsibility portfolio and we look forward to finding ways to partner with other jurisdictions across the country and around the globe, so we can all work together to keep our children safe and enhance the social responsibility of our industry.

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Marie Mullally, President and CEO of the Nova Scotia Gaming Corporation and Lauren Grant, 11, prepare to download the BetStopper software.