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## Highlights...

With a **growing number of children being home-schooled**, researchers Rachael Reavis and Audrey Zakriski, Ph.D., look at the potential risks and benefits of this approach to education.

As gambling becomes, at least in some circles, a more acceptable form of entertainment and children see images of adults gambling on networks like ESPN, it is important to **stay informed about the danger of problem gambling (PG)**. We spoke with Keith Whyte, the executive director of the National Council on Problem Gambling, about how to recognize and treat PG in children and teens.

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Free Parent Handout...

## Gambling: Facts for Parents

Monthly reports on the problems of children and adolescents growing up

# CABL

## Experts Speak Out

### Are home-schooled children socially at-risk or socially protected?

By Rachael Reavis and Audrey Zakriski, Ph.D.

In the past 30 years, home schooling has become an increasingly popular alternative to the traditional school system, with approximately 1 million children currently being schooled exclusively or primarily at home. Although this growing trend suggests increasing acceptance of home schooling, public skepticism lingers.

Opponents of home-schooling often raise concerns about social isolation, and limited opportunities for home-schooled children to develop social skills and positive peer relationships. Conversely, many home schooling parents raise concerns about the traditional school system exposing children to a negative social

environment, including peer pressure and bullying. Though there have been studies demonstrating the positive academic development and achievements of home-schooled children, very little research has tested assumptions about the impact of home-schooling on children's social development.

#### Assessing impact of home schooling

To address this gap, we recently investigated and compared the peer relations and psychological adjustment of home-schooled (HS) and traditionally schooled (TS) children. Sixteen home-schooled and 48 traditionally schooled children were asked about the number and quality  
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## Spotlight on Addiction

### Problem gambling in youth — a hidden addiction

Pathological gambling (PG) is commonly referred to as a "hidden" addiction. While in recent years, PG in adults has been recognized as an addiction that can be diagnosed and treated, PG among youth remains relatively unrecognized. Yet, a national survey indicates that the rate of pathological gambling in youth is higher than that in adults (Welte, 2002), possibly as distinct as 5% versus 1%, respectively (NCPG). And as in adults, gambling in children and adolescents has been linked to higher rates of problem behaviors, including substance abuse, violence, stealing and risky sexual behaviors (NCPG).

"Gambling in kids could very well be the gateway behavior that we used to believe marijuana was," Keith Whyte recently told CABL. "Scattered studies and emerging evi-

dence suggest that early onset of gambling should be a big indicator for people to look for additional problems."

Keith Whyte is the executive director of the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG), the national advocate for programs and services to assist problem gamblers and their families. He emphasized that NCPG is not against gambling. Rather, they are concerned about gambling as a disease. Regarding gambling problems in youth, he said, "Nobody is paying attention, really looking at some of the societal indications. It hasn't received the attention it deserves."

#### What's changed?

"It's always been easy to gamble," Whyte admitted, "just find a deck of  
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## What's New in Research

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and an additional survey on physical and sedentary activities. Of the 5,517 children who obtained parental consent to participate, 5,197 children completed the survey on physical and sedentary activities. Students were asked to report the number of weekly engagements in organized sports and other leisure time physical activities, and the number of hours spent

in sedentary activity such as playing video games, using the computer or watching TV.

Of the total number of students participating in the survey, 3,656 (70.6%) attended schools without a nutrition program (N=199), 1,350 (26.6%) attended schools with a nutrition program (N=73), and 133 (2.6%) attended one of 7 participating AVHPSP schools.

Results showed that students from the AVHPSP schools had lower rates of obesity and overweight, with healthier eating

habits (i.e., higher consumption of fruits and vegetables and less intake of calories from fat), and higher index scores for dietary quality. However, students from non-AVHPSP schools with healthy menu alternatives did not have substantially healthier body weights compared with children from schools without nutrition programs. The latter finding, according to Veugelers, may possibly be attributed to newly-introduced eating programs where the benefits are not yet evident.

"The magnitude of the difference between AVHPSP schools and schools offering healthy menu alternatives suggests that children insufficiently choose healthy foods if they are offered and that school initiatives should follow integrated approaches if they are to be effective," the authors write. They conclude that the investments needed to increase implementation of such programs would be justified given their high potential to reduce childhood obesity in children and, on a long-term basis, to reduce comorbid conditions and healthcare spending.



Veugelers PJ, AL Fitzgerald: Effectiveness of school programs in preventing childhood obesity: a multi-level comparison. *Am J Public Health* 2005; 95(3):432-435. E-mail: paul.veugelers@ualberta.ca.

**Table 1 - Body weight, diet and activity level of 5th-grade students in Nova Scotia, Canada, by school nutrition program category**

	No nutrition program	Nutrition program	AVHPSP program
% overweight	32.8	34.2	17.9
% obese	9.9	10.4	4.1
Mean no. of daily fruit/veg. servings	5.7	5.8	6.7
% calories from fat	30.3	30.3	29.4
Overall diet quality, index score	62.3	62.1	64.5
% physical activity (weekly)			
3 times or less	21.9	24.6	19.9
4-6 times	33.5	32.3	35.4
7 times or more	44.5	43.1	44.7
% sedentary activities (daily)			
3 hours or less	49.9	50.6	56.6
4 to 6 hours	29.5	28.5	27.8
7 hours or more	20.6	20.9	15.6

Table adapted from Veugelers 2005.

## Home-schooled children

From page 1

of their friendships, experiences with peer victimization, and their psychological adjustment. The children in the study ranged in age from 9-13 years (with an average age of 10.4).

To assess their experiences with peer victimization, we presented children with hypothetical scenarios depicting physical or social victimization. We then asked how often they witnessed similar situations, how often such situations happened to them personally, and how upset they would be if victimized in this way. We also gave children the self-report version of a commonly used child behavior checklist to assess their psychological adjustment.

We chose to examine friendships and peer victimization because research has shown that both experiences impact children's social development, albeit in oppo-

site ways. Friendship quality and intimacy are related to self-esteem and sociability and can protect children against negative outcomes such as depression and anxiety. Peer victimization also has important, although negative, consequences for child development. Children who are chronically victimized experience more depression, loneliness, anxiety, and low self-esteem than other children.

We found that, in many ways, the peer relations of HS and TS children are quite similar. On average, both groups of children had the same number of close friends. They also reported having friendships that were of similar quality. Surprisingly, HS and TS children also reported being exposed to equal levels of peer victimization, both as victims and as bystanders. This finding was particularly unexpected given that many HS parents specifically stated that one reason they chose to home-school their children was to avoid the negative peer experiences

that occur in the traditional school setting. It may be that peer victimization occurs more frequently and in more settings than we would like to believe and is not easily avoided by children.

We did eliminate references to traditional school settings when presenting children with the hypothetical scenarios. Therefore, it is possible that TS and HS children have similar peer victimization experiences outside of school, but that their experiences differ during the school day.

### Exposure to peer victimization

Although HS and TS children reported similar levels of exposure to peer victimization, HS children reported being less upset by these experiences. This finding suggests that although HS parents may be unable to control their children's exposure to peer victimization, they may be protecting them in other ways, by influencing the degree of importance their children assign to these experiences.

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Another possibility is that HS children report less distress because such experiences do not threaten their social status or future peer interactions at school in the same way they do for TS children.

Yet another possibility, explored in cross-cultural research, is that peer relationship success is more important to the adjustment of those, like TS children, who "live primarily in the world of children." Regardless of the underlying reason, it appears that HS and TS children may interpret negative peer experiences differently.

Despite differences in self-reported distress, both groups showed signs of being negatively affected by peer victimization. For both HS and TS children, being victimized by peers was associated with increased levels of depression, anxiety, and social stress. This suggests that at least some of the negative effects of peer victimization are universal and not easily affected by schooling context. It also indirectly suggests that HS children may be more affected by peer victimization than they believe themselves to be. In our study, the causal direction between victimization and negative mood could not be established, but other longitudinal studies suggest a vicious cycle; victimization experiences can increase feelings of sadness and anxiety in children, and children who are sad and anxious are more likely to be victimized.

### Impact of friendships

Although HS and TS children were equally harmed by peer victimization, friendships affected them differently. Though both groups reported having friendships of similar quality, those relationships were more closely related to the psychological adjustment of HS children. For both HS and TS children, friendship quality was associated with depression and social stress, but this relationship was significantly stronger for HS children.

Additionally, anxiety and feelings of inadequacy were not related to best friendship quality for TS children, but they were for HS children. HS children with low quality friendships reported more anxiety and inadequacy than did HS children with high quality friendships.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the social context of their schooling may involve both benefits and risks for HS children. They are not as dependent

## It may be particularly important for parents to actively foster the friendships of their home-schooled children.

on their success in the larger peer dynamics of school, and this might have some benefits for them. However, this reduced involvement in the peer dynamics of school may create an even greater reliance on the best friendship for social support and well-being. Best friendships help satisfy needs for interpersonal intimacy and foster the development of social skills and competencies.

Although other relationships (e.g., relationships with parents and siblings) may help fill these needs for HS children, the current findings suggest they cannot replicate the special features and functions of a high quality best friendship with a peer.

These findings should not be taken to mean that HS children are socially and emotionally worse off than TS children. Rather, they suggest that HS children appear to be more vulnerable to psychological distress in the absence of a high-quality friendship. It is important to note that the study also revealed many positive aspects of HS children's adjustment. HS children reported more positive attitudes towards teachers/coaches, more positive relationships with parents, higher self-esteem, and more positive interpersonal relationships (broadly defined).

One negative difference is also worth considering: HS children reported a stronger sense of inadequacy than TS children. The items on this scale emphasize achievement expectations, raising the possibility that HS children feel more competent socially than academically.

### Study limits

Although we have taken a step towards answering important questions about the social development and adjustment of home-schooled children, our small sample size (16 home-schooled children) suggests the need for cautious interpretation. This small sample may not be representative of HS children in general (HS children were recruited via newsletters, email lists, church groups, and word of

mouth in Southern New England, Kentucky and Alabama).

It was exceptionally difficult to recruit HS participants, due more to their reluctance to participate than their small numbers. Many HS parents were understandably skeptical about the purpose of the study, expressing concern that home-schooling would be attacked, rather than objectively studied. Even with reassurances, many parents declined to participate. As home-schooling gains more acceptance in the general public, and more studies of the type described here are conducted, our hope is that HS parents may be more willing to participate in future studies.

### Conclusions

In summary, our investigation suggests that there are few differences between the peer relationships of HS and TS children, and that there are many signs of positive adjustment in HS children. HS children have better attitudes towards teachers and parents. They also seem to have better attitudes about themselves and towards interpersonal relationships, although it is unclear whether these positive feelings extend to an academic sense of self. Our investigation also suggests that HS children are not strangers to peer victimization, nor are they immune to its harmful effects, although they report some ability to distance themselves from victimization distress.

Most importantly, the study highlights one way in which HS children's different social experiences might make them more dependent, rather than less, on the success of their best friendships. As many have noted, there appears to be a universal need for peer acceptance and support in the developing child. Without the peer network available to TS children, HS children may be more vulnerable to breakdowns in peer support, especially in late childhood and early adolescence. Thus, it may be particularly important for parents to actively foster the friendships of their home-schooled children.



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