

Continuum of Online Gambling

Positive Impacts

Some patterns of gambling are not cause for concern. Gaming and gambling have become intertwined. Both are accessible from the same devices, for examples consoles, smartphones or computers, have elements of ability and chance, and are visually stimulating. Video games such as Pokémon Go, Grand Theft Auto, and Fortnite use techniques to ensure individuals spend money. Children and young people can play more for rewards, and one of the differences between gaming and gambling is that while individuals are gaming, they are more focused on chasing points, items, and skills rather than money; when gambling, youth have chance of losing money or belongings, and winning or losing is decided mostly by chance.

Some research supports the positive impacts of gaming and gambling, as it can:

- Help develop or improve problem-solving abilities.
- Provide positive reinforcement.
- Provide social reinforcement.
- Help develop or improve resource management skills.
- Improve quick thinking.
- Help develop or improve the ability to make reasoned judgments [1].

When Gambling Becomes Problematic

Similar to other process addictions, gambling-related behaviour exists on a continuum from total abstinence to pathological gambling [2]. Gambling among youth is of special concern, as the earlier they start, the likelier they are to have a gambling problem later in life [3].

Gambling becomes a problem when a youth:

- Frequently spends more money than intended.
- Plays for longer periods than planned.
- Gambles instead of taking care of responsibilities.
- Cannot stop thinking about gambling.
- Has difficulty cutting down on gambling or stopping to gamble [2].

Youth with harmful or pathological online gambling may:

- Gamble more when they are feeling unpleasant emotions.
- Become restless and irritable when they are unable to gamble.
- Lie to cover up the amount of time or money they spend gambling.
- Have jeopardized or lost a significant relationship due to gambling.
- Have lower marks due to time spent gambling instead of on schoolwork [3].

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) identifies the following consequences youth and their families may experience from online gambling:

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- Financial problems.
- Problems with various criminal issues (e.g., theft, forgery, embezzlement, fraud, credit card scams).
- Secretiveness and lying.
- School issues (e.g., reduced attendance, drop in academic performance, behavioural, social, and interpersonal concerns, etc.)
- Mood swings or irritability.
- Problems related to mental and physical health.
- Suicidality.
- Substance use problems.
- Excessive use of digital technology (e.g., phone, computer, video games, etc.)
- Parent-child relational conflict; increased family conflict.
- Physical, verbal, and emotional abuse between family members.
- Discomfort when discussing the gambling problem.
- Loneliness and isolation [4].

A Hidden Addiction?

Gambling is not perceived to be a serious issue in the same way substance use and other youth social problems are. Problematic gambling is often referred to as a hidden addiction, as it is easier to hide than a substance use problem. Parents, teachers, and mental health professionals alike rank gambling as their lowest concern when asked to consider common serious youth issues [5].

Protective Factors

A number of protective factors reduce the risk of a youth developing a gambling problem:

- Using little to no alcohol.
- Exercising social control (e.g., positive influence of family, school, society).
- Being able to delay gratification.
- Having low impulsivity.
- Experiencing few stressful life events.
- Having supportive relationships without conflict.
- Having parents with restrictive gambling attitudes.
- Belonging to a cohesive family.
- Having regular parental monitoring.
- Having positive relationships and strong emotional supports with parents, family members, teachers, and community members.
- Having a positive life outlook.
- Having future-oriented thinking.
- Having realistic boundaries and expectations.
- Making constructive use of time.
- Having good problem-solving skills.
- Having high self-esteem [6].

Risk Factors

Problematic gambling among youth may develop when risk factors outweigh protective factors. With a steady stream of new gambling technology and online gambling opportunities, online gambling could have a substantial negative impact on public health [4].

Simulated gambling is thought to “normalize” gambling for young people. Gambling is being more readily perceived as positive, safe, normal or socially accepted, legitimate, and an inextricable part of daily life and other activities (e.g., sports) [6].

Simulated gambling may:

- Ease entry into a gambling subculture with avenues for moving on to financial gambling.
- Enable interaction with a social network of peers and experienced gamblers who provide incentives to gamble.
- Increase the risk of gambling with real money in adulthood.
- Enable covert and excessive use of these activities [7].

Young people who make in-game purchases may be at greater risk of problematic gambling. Around 26% of those who engage in simulated gambling migrate to online gambling [9].

Simulated gambling in adolescence is:

- Shown to increase young people’s confidence in gambling due to the relative ease of winning in these activities [4, 9].
- Associated with problem gambling. Online gamblers were 12 times more likely to engage in other forms of gambling than non-online gamblers [4].

Youth who have a gambling problem are often coping with other mental health issues, including depression and substance use [10]. CAMH identifies that the following experiences and behaviours can put a young person at risk for developing a gambling problem:

- Having a parent or another family member with a gambling problem.
- Gambling in several different ways (e.g., playing the lottery, roulette, bingo or gaming machines.)
- Abusing or misusing alcohol or other drugs.
- Selling drugs.
- Demonstrating anti-social behaviours or impulsivity.
- Having an under-controlled temper.
- Having depression or anxiety.
- Having mental health problems or a high level of distress.
- Experiencing suicidal ideation or behaviour.
- Having experienced childhood abuse.
- Facing negative life events or traumatic experiences.
- Stealing.
- Playing video games excessively.
- Getting into fights.
- Having attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder or impulsive behaviours.
- Having difficulties with friends or lacking social support.
- Not having a sense of belonging at school.

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