

Online Gambling: Case Study

The following clinical description is fictional. Any resemblance to real cases is purely coincidental.

Scenario

Matt, a 14-year-old boy in Grade 9, is referred by his school guidance counsellor for an assessment regarding potential problems with online gambling. Matt's parents are also concerned about his increasing use of casino-based "freemium" games. Freemium games are initially free to download and play, but eventually require real money to move to an enhanced "premium" level, where players buy tokens to gamble with other players.

Matt buys around \$25 worth of tokens every day and has bought more than \$4,500 worth in the past six months. He is forgetting to hand in assignments, he is skipping classes and has a pattern of going home for lunch and not returning to school, and his grades are falling. He recently skipped gym class and was found playing on his phone in a cubicle in the boy's locker room. Matt and his parents are in constant conflict about the amount of time he spends playing online games. Matt claims he is no longer interested in trying out for team sports. He resists spending time with friends outside of school and has no extracurricular activities.

At times, Matt enjoys engaging in competition with adults online, and feels a sense of mastery and accomplishment when he wins. However, he mostly feels somewhat bored, and continues to play despite a lack of pleasure. He finds it hard to stop in the middle of a game and will usually play until he's lost all of his tokens. Matt lies to his parents about the total time he spends playing freemium games—he often plays up to 11 hours per day on school days and even more on weekends. He has used his father's credit card to buy tokens without permission.

Matt has never been involved with the mental health system. He had a stable childhood and his parents provided a good balance of nurturing and limit setting. He has never had any problems with substance use. He began having academic difficulties in Grade 7; but his parents don't know if his gaming and dropping grades are connected. His parents both work full time. If Matt attends school, he gambles immediately upon getting home, until his parents get home from work at 6 p.m. He has access to his phone in his bedroom at night. His parents have no idea he plays online casino games when everyone has gone to sleep.

Practice question 1:

As a service provider, how do you support Matt and his family?

Possible answers:

- Review the signs of problematic gambling.
- Reduce any stigma the parents are feeling, and reassure them they are not alone.
- Give parents information about prevalence rates of online gambling among youth.
- Give parents a list of websites that explain gambling patterns and the negative impact of online gambling on financial, educational, emotional, and social wellbeing.

Online Gambling: Case Study | 2

- If trained in process addictions, use some of the assessment and screening tools to determine the level of problematic gambling.
- Begin a treatment plan with Matt and his family, or refer them to a counsellor with a specialty in process addictions.
- Offer information about counselling and family therapy to assist with strategies to increase routine and enhance positive family communication and relationships.
- Recommend changing passwords on apps, limiting internet access to supervised-only sessions, setting timers and monitoring internet access, cancelling current access to credit cards, and removing all devices from bedrooms at night.
- Encourage parents to explore possible learning supports the school can provide to enhance learning and self-esteem.
- Encourage parents to explore ways to increase family opportunities to spend positive quality time together on a regular basis, and to discuss with Matt potential extracurricular activities he might be interested in trying.