
Work in progress
***Child and Adolescent Gambling Problems:
A Program of Research***

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Although problem gambling has been primarily thought of as an adult behavior, recent research has suggested that it remains a popular activity amongst both children and adolescents. An alarmingly high percentage of children and adolescents are engaged in gambling activities. In one of our recent studies of adolescents we found 80.2% report having gambled during the past 12 months and 35.1% reported gambling at least once per week.

Research conducted over the past decade suggests that gambling activities remain particularly attractive to today's youth and its popularity is on the rise amongst both children and adolescents. Large scale prevalence studies conducted in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Europe, and in Australia all confirm the rising prevalence rates of youth involvement in both legal and illegal forms of gambling. Estimates are that between 4-8% of adolescents presently have a serious gambling problem with another 10-14% of adolescents at-risk for developing a serious gambling problem. Our recent data suggests that while 55% of adolescents are casual or recreational gamblers, 13% have some gambling related problems, and 4-6 % have a serious problem. Yet, for most parents, teens, educators, and school psychologists, gambling is viewed as an innocuous behavior with few negative consequences. While school psychologists and educators remain concerned about student smoking and use of alcohol and drugs, little attention has been focused upon gambling behavior. Our data shows that gambling is engaged in on a regular basis more frequently than any other potentially addictive behavior.

Retrospective studies of adult problem gamblers report the onset of their pathological behaviors to have begun quite early, often beginning between the ages of 10-19. A large scale study of adolescents in Alberta found that most problem gamblers began gambling, on average, around the age of 10

with similar results being found in our study of secondary school adolescents and young adults in Quebec. Of particular concern is the finding that the time between the onset of one's initial gambling and an addiction appears to be significantly decreasing.

Typically, most individuals perceive a problem gambler to be an adult, someone who has lost his job, his family, has committed some crime in order to support this behavior, has deserted his children, etc. While there is considerable truth to the adult profile, the profile for adolescent gamblers with serious problems look somewhat different. Many are still students, they have never been married, lost full time jobs or deserted their families. As a result, treatment paradigms must be modified to accommodate their behaviors. Problematic gambling among adolescents have been shown to result in increased delinquency and crime, the disruption of relationships, and impairs academic performance and work activities. While these youth present themselves differently from adults, they nevertheless have similar characteristics. They have a preoccupation with gambling, sacrificing school, parents and friends in order to maintain this behavior.

Contrary to public opinion, our research and clinical work suggests that money is not the predominant issue as to why adolescents engage in these behaviors. Rather, it appears as though money is used as a vehicle which enables them to continue playing. Most adolescents report that the primary reasons for gambling are for the excitement and enjoyment derived from these activities. Through their gambling activities, either with video lottery terminals, sports betting, cards, or other forms of gambling, adolescents with gambling problems exhibit a number of dissociative behaviors; escaping into another world, often with altered egos. When playing, adolescents with serious gambling problems report that nothing else matters and that all their problems disappear. For an adolescent with a gambling problem, a good day is walking into a gaming room with \$20, playing all day, and losing all the money. A bad day is when the \$20 only lasts 10 minutes.

Our program of research has been designed to help identify the risk factors associated with gambling problems among youth, to examine the antecedents of the problem, and to identify effective strategies for the prevention and treatment of youth with serious gambling problems. Despite some conflicting findings, there appears to be an overall consensus that a) gambling is more popular amongst males than females, b) probable/pathological gamblers are greater risk takers, c) adolescent prevalence rates of problem gamblers are 2-4 times that of adults, d) adolescents with problem/pathological gambling behaviors have lower self-esteem, higher rates of depression, and dissociate more frequently when gambling, e) adolescents with gambling problems are

at heightened risk for suicide ideation and suicide attempts, and f) adolescent problem gamblers frequently engage in other addictive behaviors (e.g. alcohol and drug use). Preliminary research on personality traits reveals adolescent pathological gamblers are more excitable, extroverted, anxious, tend to have difficulty conforming to societal norms, and experience difficulties with self-discipline. Our research and clinical data seem to suggest that these adolescents have poor coping and adaptive skills. They remain unable to cope with the multiple adversities they experience, particularly heightened during adolescence, and as such use their gambling as a form of escaping the realities of daily life.

Problematic gambling during adolescence remains a growing social problem with serious psychological, sociological and economic implications. Pathological gambling has been shown to result in increased delinquency and crime, antisocial behavior, the disruption of relationships, and negatively affects overall school performance and work activities. Given that there are frequently few observable signs of gambling dependence among children and adolescents, such problems have gone relatively undetected compared to other forms of addiction (e.g. substance and alcohol abuse). The devastating impact upon the individual and entire family when a member has an addictive disorder has been well documented.

While occasional gambling should not necessarily be considered problematic, the probability of children and adolescents becoming problem or pathological gamblers remains worrisome. Given that there are frequently few observable signs of gambling dependence amongst children and adolescents, and the paucity of research in the area, such problems have gone relatively unnoticed compared to other forms of addiction. Our past research clearly shows that children are frequently gambling, for money, with their parents and other family members. Young children form partnerships with their parents on lottery tickets and play cards and bingo for money with relatives. Many of the children report receiving scratch lottery tickets as Christmas stocking stuffers. In yet another study, we found that by the time children leave elementary school less than 10% of children fear getting caught gambling. This certainly could not be said about cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption or use of drugs.

Today, children and adolescents are informed via their school system about the dangers inherent in smoking, alcohol, and drug consumption. Few, however, are informed as to the addictive qualities potentially inherent in gambling activities. Many schools inadvertently endorse gambling by having bingo or casino nights for their students as a form of fund raising. Frequently, adolescents only become cognizant of the potential addictive quality of

gambling after either they or their friends develop problematic gambling behaviors. It is believed that this lack of public awareness is contributing to the increasing number of children and adolescents who are currently struggling with gambling problems.

Educators have long advocated that the way to succeed in life is through hard work, study, and academic achievement. Yet, the government, through Provincial supported lotteries, argues that for \$1.00 you can become an instant millionaire. Our data suggests that sports pools and sports betting are particularly attractive to youth, especially boys. Allowance and lunch money are often used to purchase these tickets.

There remains little doubt that as school psychologists we need to change our focus from the "treatment of the dysfunctional or diseased model" to a prevention model aimed at an at-risk population. Together with Dr. Robert Ladouceur and his research team at Université Laval, we are developing a prevention model, which is built upon several premises: 1) the need for awareness, 2) the appropriateness of the school system to implement the prevention, 3) the teaching of successful coping and adaptive skills that would prevent the development of problematic gambling, and 4) the identification, assessment, and referral of students whose gambling behavior is indicative of them being at-risk.

Gambling venues and outlets continue to grow with our Provincial governments sanctioning and encouraging participation in spite of the rising social costs. While most gambling is illegal for minors, there is clear evidence that underage youth continue to actively participate in these activities with many reporting engaging in this behavior with family members.

Our research efforts are focused upon basic issues of assessment of gambling severity, and the identification of underlying physiological, psychological and socio-emotional mechanisms underlying excessive gambling behavior among youth. Why some individuals continue to gamble in spite of repeated losses is a complex problem. How to best educate, prevent, and treat these problems is the focus of our research program. There remains little doubt that gambling amongst youth remains an important area in need of further basic and applied research, additional funding, and responsible social policy.