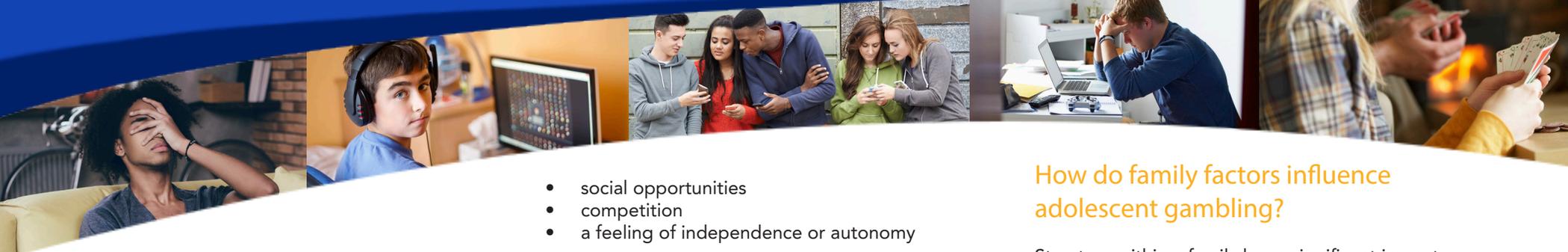


FOCUS ON ADOLESCENTS & PROBLEM GAMBLING

EVIDENCE ROUNDUP



Why do adolescents gamble?

The period between puberty and maturity, typically between ages 10 and 19 years, is known as adolescence (1,14). Due to the rate of risk-taking behaviours within this age group, adolescents may consider gambling (2). The two most common reasons for under-age gambling include to make money and to get easy access to alcohol (free drinks) at the casino (3). Many adolescents also admit to pursuing gambling as a form of rebellion during teenage years (3). Some report that they gamble to improve the thrill of sports games, or gain knowledge and new skills, while several others state that their interest in gambling was sparked because of its accessibility and availability (4). Indeed, adolescents are most often introduced to gambling by visits to casinos with family, where they gain insight into the world of gambling (3). While they are not permitted to play any games, some casinos allow minors to walk through the area.

How do adolescents perceive the benefits and risks of gambling?

A qualitative study revealed adolescents believe gambling provides benefits including (4):

- a solution for boredom
- feelings of excitement or enjoyment

- social opportunities
- competition
- a feeling of independence or autonomy

The chance to win money was the most common response from adolescents, regardless of gender or level of education (4).

While adolescents list many benefits to gambling, they also acknowledge some risks involved in participation, including: the burden of the financial costs, negative feelings from losing money, loss of control and the possibility of addiction (4). Adolescents also report conflict among family members as a problem that could arise from excessive gambling (4).

What is the prevalence compared to other age groups?

In North America, approximately two thirds of adolescents under the legal age requirement have gambled for money (5). From the over 15 million teenagers that have gambled in this population, 2.2 million reported serious problems related to gambling (5). Canadian rates are comparable to those in the United States and other countries. Specifically, about 80% of adolescents in Quebec took part in gambling for money, and 10% to 15% were at risk of having a gambling problem (6). A survey conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) reported that 2.8% of the students participating were considered to have an issue with pathological gambling (6).

How do family factors influence adolescent gambling?

Structure within a family has a significant impact on adolescents and their likeliness to gamble. Research supports the idea that if parents frequently gamble or struggle with a gambling problem, an adolescent is more likely to follow in the same pattern (7). If there is a strong sense of communication or trust between an adolescent their parent(s), they are less likely to gamble, and less likely to do so problematically (7).

What games are younger gamblers more inclined to play?

Among adolescents, common gambling games are playing cards, lottery tickets, bingo, sports pools, electronic gambling devices, sports lottery tickets, and games of skill (10). Gambling activities that attract adolescent gamblers can include scratch tickets or government lotteries, cards, board games, dice, and sports betting (2). Online gambling has also become more prevalent amongst youth. Being colourful and fast paced, similar to video games, online gambling may be particularly enticing for younger individuals (5). In fact, when asked why internet gambling was so popular, adolescents reported that it was due to a combination of competition, convenience, accessibility, privacy and other related factors (5).



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What other health problems exist?

Adolescents that struggle with a gambling problem also tend to deal with other mental health issues including (11):

- depression
- risk of substance abuse disorders and/or suicide
- higher levels of anxiety
- poor general health

Research also shows that increased levels of stress within relationships and criminal behaviour develop with adolescents who deal with problem gambling. Adolescents who start gambling at a younger age may be more likely to have problems such as substance abuse, compared to those that begin to gamble in early adulthood (2).

Are there differences between male and female adolescent gamblers?

Males and females tend to be equally active in gambling (12). Whereas males tend to engage in gambling at an earlier age, females develop a problem with gambling at a faster rate (12). The motivations for gambling also differ between genders. Males gamble to seek thrill through risk taking, while females use gambling as an escape from other health issues or circumstances. In one study, problem gamblers that were female were more likely to borrow or steal to pay off gambling debts and hide signs that indicated that they had a problem (13). Males, on the other hand, tended to report having negative feelings about the losses they incurred through gambling (13). Recent research suggests that males in college have a higher risk of becoming problem gamblers on the Internet because of familiarity with technology (5).

How can you screen for gambling problems?

There are many ways for health care providers, friends, and family to screen adolescents for a gambling



problem. Concern about a youth's emotional health, a decline in academic performance, trouble sleeping, involvement in criminal activity, suspected substance abuse, and strained relationships can indicate that an issue may exist (6). Questions regarding gambling frequency, limits and changes in behaviour should be asked by health care professionals to screen for a potential problem (6).

What are the best treatment options?

Current treatment options for adult problem gamblers include pharmaceutical options, changing cultural practices and the delivery of patient therapy (9). However, minimal research has analyzed evidence-based treatment of adolescent problem gamblers (8, 9). Treatment options that have been validated for other age groups have not been assessed in this age group (8). Due to the lack of evidence-based treatment options, providers are forced to adapt typical paradigms used with adults (9). Few treatment centres for adolescent problem gamblers, the lack of need or desire for treatment at this developmental age, lack of funding for this type of research, and a general lack of awareness of the scope of the problem are to blame for the lack of evidence in this area (9).



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