

Understanding gambling and substance use behaviours from preadolescence to adolescence

What this research is about

Earlier onset of addictive behaviours is linked to increased risk for later gambling and substance use problems. Developmental theories suggest that gambling and substance use may arise from shared risk factors, like a tendency to act impulsively, adverse family situations, and peer influences. At the same time, gambling and substance use differ in meaningful ways. For example, gambling is often seen as more socially acceptable and harmless. Youth who engage in both behaviours may be at especially high risk for later difficulties.

In this study, the researchers looked at whether starting to gamble, use substances, or both between the ages of 10 and 12 years old predicted later gambling and substance use behaviours at 17 years old. In the analysis, they also considered the potential influence of individual, familial, and social risk factors known to contribute to these behaviours.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data from the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development. Participants were a cohort of children who were born in Quebec, Canada, between 1997 and 1998 and assessed at various timepoints starting from infancy. A total of 1,270 participants who provided data on gambling and substance use at ages 10 and 12, and again at age 17 were included in this study (57.1% of the original cohort).

Between 10 and 12 years old, participants completed questionnaires on how often they played games for money and bet on sporting events in the past year. They also reported how often they used tobacco and

What you need to know

In this study, the researchers looked at whether early onset of gambling or substance use between age 10 to 12 predicted later gambling and substance use behaviours at age 17. In the analysis, they also considered the potential influence of individual, familial, and social risk factors known to contribute to these behaviours. The sample included 1,270 participants who were part of a Canadian birth cohort born between 1997 and 1998.

Youth who started gambling or using substances between 10 and 12 years old were more likely to engage in these behaviours later in adolescence. Youth who were involved in both gambling and substance use before adolescence had the highest levels of later gambling and substance use problems. Early gambling also predicted later substance use, but not the reverse. The findings can inform prevention efforts in identifying youth at risk for later addictive behaviours.

alcohol in the past year. At age 17, participants completed the South Oaks Gambling Screen for Adolescents (SOGS-RA) and reported how often they participated in 12 different gambling activities in the past year. They also reported use of tobacco, alcohol, cannabis, and other illicit drugs in the past year.

Individual risk factors were based on reports from parents, teachers, and participants themselves at ages 10 and 12 years. These included internalizing mental health symptoms like anxiety and depression, and externalizing mental health

symptoms like hyperactivity/impulsivity, inattention, opposition, and conduct problems.

Family risk factors were based on mother's age at the birth of her first child, mother's and father's age at the birth of the participant, and family structure. Social risk factors included household socioeconomic status and interactions with peers who participated in deviant behaviour.

The researchers categorized participants into four groups based on whether they reported gambling or substance use between 10 and 12 years old: no early onset, early onset of gambling only, early onset of substance use only, or early onset of both.

What the researchers found

About 17.9% of participants reported gambling only between 10 and 12 years old, 5% reported substance use only, and 3.9% reported both gambling and substance use. At age 17, 14% reported gambling and 2.2% had at least one gambling-related problem. Most participants reported alcohol use (82.8%), while 40.7% reported cannabis use, 6.9% daily smoking, and 10.1% other illicit drug use. One in five (20.6%) had at least one problem related to substance use.

Compared to youth with no early onset of gambling or substance use, youth with early onset of gambling only reported more frequent gambling, as well as more frequent alcohol and other drug use, at age 17. They were also more likely to have a problem with substance use at age 17. Youth with early onset of substance use only reported more frequent alcohol, cannabis, and other drug use and were more likely to have a problem with substance use at age 17. But they did not gamble more frequently than youth with no early onset of gambling or substance use.

Youth with early onset of both gambling and substance use were more likely to report daily smoking and more frequent alcohol, cannabis, and other drug use at age 17 than youth with no early onset. They were more likely to have a problem with substance use and to participate in a greater variety of gambling types at age 17 compared to youth with no early onset, or early onset of one behaviour only.

How you can use this research

The findings can inform prevention efforts in identifying youth at risk for addictive behaviours.

About the researchers

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