

Perceived parental knowledge as a protective factor against adolescent gambling behaviour

What this research is about

Parents influence adolescents' risky behaviours through direct actions, such as monitoring their activities and setting a positive example, as well as through indirect ways, including knowing where their children are and who they spend time with. Adolescents' perceived parental knowledge (PPK) refers to their belief about how much their parents know about where they are and who they spend time with. PPK has been linked to lower involvement in risky behaviours among adolescents.

In the Italian context, a previous study by Canale et al. (2016) found that adolescents who reported higher levels of PPK were less likely to approve of gambling. They were also more aware of gambling's harmful nature and less likely to think that their friends gambled, which in turn was linked to lower gambling frequency. However, a decade has passed since that study, and there have been major societal and technological changes, including the rise of online gambling.

The purpose of this study was to reassess the link between PPK and adolescent gambling. Similarly to Canale et al. (2016), the researchers examined if perceived harmfulness of gambling and perceived peer gambling explained the link between PPK and adolescent gambling. They extended the previous study by looking at whether adolescents' awareness of legal gambling age limits might also play a role.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data from two waves of the nationally representative survey ESPAD® Italia 2022–2023. High school students aged 15 to 19 years old

What you need to know

This study examined the link between adolescents' perceived parental knowledge (PPK) and gambling. PPK refers to adolescents' belief about how much their parents know about where they are and who they spend time with. The researchers used data from two waves of the nationally representative ESPAD® Italia survey (2022–2023). They examined responses from 24,631 Italian high school students aged 15 to 19 years old. The findings indicate that adolescents who reported higher levels of PPK were less likely to gamble frequently. This relationship was partly explained by these adolescents being less likely to believe that gambling is common among their peers and more likely to recognize gambling as harmful. Perceived peer gambling was the strongest and most consistent factor that helped explain the link between PPK and gambling behaviour. Awareness of gambling age limits was a significant factor for females only.

were recruited for the survey. First, schools across Italy were randomly selected and invited to participate, stratified by geographical area and school type. In both the 2022 and 2023 waves, 85% of invited schools agreed to participate. Within each school, one or more classes from the first to fifth grade were selected. All students present in class on the day of data collection were included in the study.

The researchers used data from a total of 24,631 Italian adolescents aged 15 to 19 years old across the two waves. In Italy, the minimum legal gambling age

is 18 years. The researchers classified participants as either underaged (15–17 years; 64.35%) or legally eligible (18–19 years; 35.65%).

In the survey, participants were asked about the following:

- The extent that they believe their parents know about their whereabouts and who they are with.
- Frequency of engaging in 13 types of gambling and online gambling in the last 12 months.
- Perception of the harmfulness of gambling.
- Perception of gambling among peers (estimation of number of friends who gamble).
- Awareness of legal gambling age limits.
- Demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and household income.

What the researchers found

Most participants did not gamble (44%) or gambled occasionally (once a month or less; 37%). About 13% gambled monthly, and 6% gambled frequently (at least monthly in more than two gambling activities). Girls were more likely than boys to not gamble, while boys were more likely to gamble monthly (17% vs 9%) and frequently (11% vs 2%).

Participants who reported higher levels of PPK also reported less frequent gambling. This association between PPK and gambling frequency was explained, in part, by these adolescents being less likely to think that their peers gamble and more likely to believe that gambling is harmful.

Perceived peer gambling was the strongest factor that explained the link between PPK and gambling behaviour. This suggests that higher PPK may reduce gambling by making adolescents less likely to believe that gambling is common among peers.

Perceived harmfulness of gambling played a smaller role and was mainly important among males. In contrast, awareness of legal gambling age limits was a significant factor only among females. The stronger role of risk perceptions among males may be because males are more likely to seek rewards and take risks, making their views about gambling harms more influential in their decision to gamble.

When the researchers focused on online gambling, awareness of legal gambling age limits did not have

a meaningful impact on whether adolescents gambled online.

How you can use this research

This study can inform gambling prevention programs for adolescents. It suggests the need to involve key adult figures, especially parents, and strengthen communication about gambling risks among youth and peer influences. Prevention efforts may also be tailored for males and females, such as highlighting gambling harms for males and raising awareness of gambling regulations among females.

About the researchers

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