

# research snapshot

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## How parental attachment and difficulty with emotions shape gambling and other addictive behaviours

### What this research is about

Gambling has become prevalent among adolescents and young people. Some studies show that youths who experience gambling problems may also have problems with other addictions and mental health concerns.

According to previous studies, one's relationships with their parents could predict engagement in risky behaviours. Having insecure attachment to parents can place youths at risk of developing various addictions and problem behaviours. Another factor that is likely to shape gambling problems is alexithymia. This is a personality trait where people show difficulties in identifying, describing, and understanding their own and others' emotions. People with alexithymia tend to not know how to regulate their emotions properly. Thus, they may engage in gambling and other addictive behaviours to cope with their emotions.

Taken together, attachment and alexithymia have been linked to gambling and other addictions. However, there is not enough research to understand whether alexithymia can influence the relationship between attachment and gambling problems. Hence, this study sought to explore whether young people with and without problem gambling differed in addictive behaviours. These included alcohol use, drug use, video gaming, and compulsive spending. It also explored differences in alexithymia and attachment. Further, the study aimed to understand whether alexithymia could explain the relationship between attachment and addictive behaviours.

### What you need to know

This research examined gambling and other addictive behaviours among adolescents and young adults. It assessed how parental attachment and alexithymia might shape these behaviours. The researchers surveyed 599 young people from Spain. The results revealed that young people who experienced problem gambling were more likely to have other addictive behaviours (e.g., videogame use, drug use, compulsive spending). Gambling and other addictive behaviours were related to higher alexithymia. Gambling and other addictions were also associated with insecure attachment to parents. Finally, alexithymia helped explain why those with insecure attachment engaged in addictive behaviours.

### What the researchers did

The researchers recruited 599 adolescents and young adults from Spain. Participants were aged 12 to 21 years old. The majority were full-time students. The researchers asked them to fill out a survey either on paper or online. To measure problem gambling, the researchers used the South Oaks Gambling-Revised Adolescents (SOGS-RA). Based on the participants' scores, the researchers split them into two groups: (1) those who did not gamble or did not have a gambling problem (those who scored between 0-3); and (2) those who showed problem gambling (those who scored 4 and higher). About 91% of participants did not have a gambling problem (547 participants). The other 9% showed problem gambling (52 participants).

To assess addictive behaviours and associated social problems, the researchers used the MULTICAGE CAD-

4. This measure assesses eight behaviours: drug and alcohol use disorder, gambling disorder, substance addictions, eating disorders, gaming addiction, internet addiction, compulsive spending, and sex addiction. For each behaviour, it assesses self-perception of the problem, perception by those around, feelings of guilt, and withdrawal and impulse control symptoms.

To measure attachment to parents and peers, the researchers used the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA). To assess alexithymia, they used the Toronto Alexithymia Scale-20 (TAS-20). This measure assesses three main areas. The first is difficulty identifying feelings and mistaking them for physical symptoms. The second area is difficulty describing feelings, thus not being able to communicate feelings and using emotional language. The third area is having externally oriented thinking, where one tends to neglect inner emotional states.

#### What the researchers found

Results showed that participants with problem gambling were more likely to have drug use, alcohol use, video gaming, and spending problems. They also showed higher alexithymia and were more likely to have insecure attachment to their parents. Overall, gambling and all other addictive behaviours were related to higher alexithymia. They were also related to insecure parental attachment.

Finally, alexithymia influenced the relationship between parental attachment and addictive behaviours. This was especially the case where participants had insecure attachment to their mother. Specifically, young people with insecure attachment showed higher alexithymia. This could then lead to gambling and other addictive problems. Difficulty with identifying feelings was the main issue for most addictions, including gambling. The only exception was video gaming. In video gaming, difficulty describing feelings was the main issue.

#### How you can use this research

This research could be used by service providers and researchers. Service providers could develop prevention programs to support youths who show

problems with alexithymia. They could promote secure attachment during early years. Intervention programs could target youths who present with several co-occurring concerns. For example, youths with alexithymia and gambling problems could benefit from programs that enhance emotion regulation and reduce gambling behaviours. Future studies could examine how alexithymia shapes gambling in young people who are seeking treatment.

#### About the researchers

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#### About Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in safer gambling policies, standards, and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

Learn more about GREO by visiting [greo.ca](http://greo.ca) or emailing [info@greo.ca](mailto:info@greo.ca).

