What this research is about

A behavioural addiction can be defined by the failure to resist impulses or temptations to engage in a behaviour. This can lead to short-term rewards but can have harmful consequences in the long term. Gambling and video gaming are two behaviours that can lead to problematic or disordered engagement. Researchers have noted similarities between gaming and gambling. Both rely on reinforcing the behaviours through features such as giving out rewards at unpredictable schedules; stimulating effects such as increased arousal; and motivational urges for playing.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are negative experiences due to the presence of substance abuse, mental illness, or criminal behaviour in the household. It also includes psychological, physical, and/or sexual abuse of children, as well as emotional and physical neglect. ACEs might carry a risk for the development of mental health problems in general. Mental health issues can be categorized into two factors. The first is internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety. The second is externalizing problems that are manifested as outward behaviours, such as conduct problem or substance use. ACEs are commonly reported by people with gambling problems.

The goal of this study is to examine the impact of ACEs on gambling and gaming behaviours among adolescents. The researchers also looked at if internalizing and externalizing problems might explain the pathway between ACEs and risk for problem gambling and disordered gaming.

What the researchers did

This study used data from the 2022 Alcohol Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services (ADAMHS) Board/Wood County Educational Service Center Survey on Alcohol and Other Drug Use. The survey involved 10 public schools in Wood County, Ohio, USA. Overall, 7,050 students from grades 7 to 12 answered the survey. The researchers removed data from 496 students due to perceived insincere responses or missing data on sex and age. Data from 6,314 students were analyzed (male = 49%). The average age was 14.86 years old.

The researchers used the following to measure ACEs, mental health and problem behaviours, and gambling and gaming activities:

- A modified version of the Adverse Childhood Experience Questionnaire was used to measure ACEs. The total scores range from 1 to 10, with higher scores meaning higher childhood adversity. ACEs can be grouped into childhood...
maltreatment (e.g., abuse and neglect) and family dysfunction (e.g., divorce, drug and alcohol issues in the family, domestic violence).

- The Problem Severity Scale of the Ohio Youth Scale was used to measure mental health and problem behaviours over the past month. It includes 9 items on internalizing problems and 11 items on externalizing problems.
- Frequency of engaging in 8 gambling activities in the past year. The NORC DSM-IV Screening for Gambling Problems was used to measure risk for problem gambling. In total, 542 students (8.6%) were considered at risk of problem gambling.
- Frequency of gaming for at least two hours daily. Disordered gaming was assessed using the Gaming Disorder Test. Overall, 114 students (1.8%) were at risk of disordered gaming.

What the researchers found

When the researchers looked at ACEs and behavioural addictions, they found multiple significant associations. First, sex was a significant factor. Males were more likely to engage in frequent gambling and gaming. They were also more likely to be at risk for problem gambling and disordered gaming. Females reported more ACEs and greater internalizing and externalizing problems. Age was a significant factor for gaming. Older youth reported more frequent gaming and greater disordered gaming symptoms.

Youth who reported a higher number of ACEs engaged in gambling and gaming more frequently and had higher risk for problem gambling and disordered gaming. Regarding problem gambling, child maltreatment was linked with higher gambling frequency and increased risk for problem gambling. Family dysfunction was linked with higher gambling frequency only. Regarding disordered gaming, both childhood maltreatment and family dysfunction were associated with more frequent gaming and increased risk for disordered gaming.

The researchers found that externalizing problems mediated the relationship between ACEs and the risk for problem gambling. That is, youth who experienced more ACEs and showed more externalizing problems were at higher risk for problem gambling. This was not the case for internalizing problems. Finally, both externalizing and internalizing problems mediated the relationship between ACEs and disordered gaming.

How you can use this research

This study can inform practitioners and researchers on the effect of ACEs and the role of internalizing and externalizing problems in gambling and gaming.

About the researchers

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