

Children start gambling for cash at 11

EXCLUSIVE

Julie Power

Children as young as 11 are gambling for money and playing video games and apps that simulate betting – and parents are most often funding and enabling them.

About 40 per cent of NSW children aged 12 to 17 are playing video games and apps with features that look and feel like gambling, according to major research commissioned for the NSW Office of Responsible Gambling. It surveyed 551 young people and held a range of focus groups.

Although underage gambling is illegal, about 80 per cent of these young people had bet for money in the past year. The most popular gambling activity was informal betting such as poker, often played at school or TAFE. The balance was commercial gambling such as sports betting, scratchies and lottery tickets.

The director of NSW's Office of Responsible Gambling, Natalie Wright, said the results showed that gambling among young people was more prevalent than ever.

The convergence of gaming and gambling was increasing the potential for gambling harm.

"Games are exposing young children to gambling at a much earlier age. And parents are the biggest enablers," Ms Wright said.

Of those young people who gambled, the report found 3.7 per cent were classified as at-risk or problem gamblers.

It found parents and advertising were the two key factors influencing young people to gamble.

Nearly 54 per cent of those gambling with money were doing so with a parent or a guardian, and 20 per cent with grandparents. About 58 per cent of those who gambled came from homes where adults did so too.

The most common way young people accessed online gambling was by using a parent's account with their permission, the survey found. Parents often gave children money specifically to gamble

BETS ARE ON FOR YOUNG GAMBLERS

The NSW Office of Responsible Gambling commissioned a study into gambling and simulated gambling among young people aged 12-17 years in NSW. These are some of the key findings:



Jacob Bull – on a path to a better life after overcoming his gambling addiction.
Photo: Matt Gilligan

How young people were able to gamble

Usually with:



Ways they accessed online gambling:



Gambling-like products (simulated gambling)

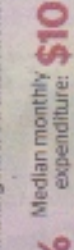
Of the respondents who played games with gambling components:



The most common gambling-like component:



Respondents who spent money on in-game gambling microtransactions:



The NSW Youth Gambling Study 2020 by CQUniversity also found children were gambling or playing games with these kinds of components from 11 to 12 years.

The report recommended more education of parents and young people on the dangers of gambling, and improved age and ID verification to prevent underage gamblers. It also called on regulators to examine ways to reduce the gambling components in online games and encouraged parents to examine the games children are playing.

Reverend Tim Costello, chief advocate of the Alliance for Gambling Reform, said the loot boxes in many games were "acting as a gateway to gambling".

About two-thirds of young people said they had opened or purchased a loot box in the last year, and another study found a third of young people had spent about \$10 a month on them.

"There are also serious risks of young

people accessing gambling apps and becoming addicted in their youth, or their brains effectively rewiring towards gambling behaviour that will worsen the more they gamble," he said.

Like the tobacco industry in the past, Rev Costello said the gambling industry was targeting young people to "get them hooked on gambling as early as possible, making it appear to be a normal part of life".

"That's why they spend millions on advertising and sponsorship of family-friendly sports such as the AFL. They want kids to think gambling is a normal part of sport."

Jacob Bull, 33, of Port Macquarie started his 15-year addiction to gambling as a teenager living in England, where he would use his pocket money to bet on his football team, West Ham.

When smartphones were introduced, he went from gambling once a week to gambling on his phone during a long

commute to work with a boss who was a big punter. "He groomed me into betting on new sports," Mr Bull said.

Mr Bull's mother died when he was only 12. After three years without betting and some help from a therapist, he recognises that gambling was "his escape" from the emotions of dealing with her death. "It takes away any feeling."

The new research found young people with lower wellbeing were more likely to gamble, and those with less impulse control or who had experienced trauma were more likely to experience problematic or at-risk gambling.

Mr Bull tried and failed many times to recover from gambling. It cost him work, sent him broke and unable to pay his rent, and destroyed his family and friends' trust.

Gambling was everywhere in Australia, he said. "We've got to the stage where kids need to be informed of the dangers from a young age."



SOURCE: NSW OFFICE OF RESPONSIBLE GAMBLING STUDY 2020