

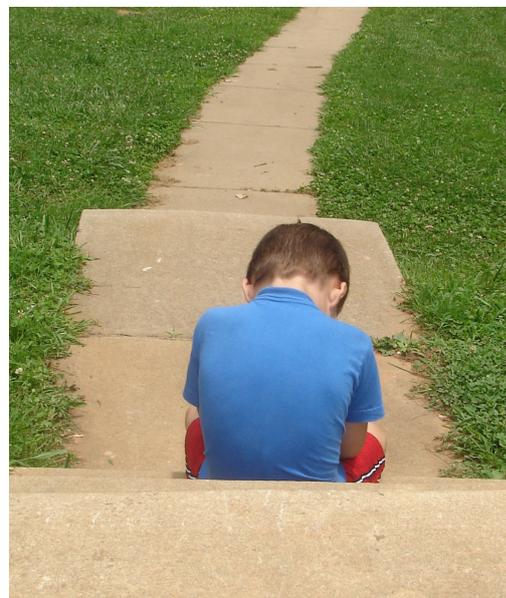


Children of problem gamblers

When parents have problems with gambling, it is often children who suffer most. Young children can miss out on basic essentials if a parent has gambled away household money. Gambling can lead to broken homes, damaged relationships, physical and emotional harm, and a higher risk of the children becoming problem gamblers themselves. A single person's harmful gambling can affect five to ten people¹, and children are vulnerable when it's their parent or other close relative.

Going without

One in six New Zealanders say a family member has gone without something they needed or a bill has gone unpaid due to gambling. This percentage was higher among Māori (38%) and Pacific (28%), and among those in more deprived (deciles 8-10) neighbourhoods.² A North American study found that children are often aware that their parents cannot provide them with items such as presents, school trips and even food not because of a lack of money but as a direct result of gambling behaviour.³



If children's needs are not being met, they can suffer from health problems due to poor nutrition or malnutrition, and the responsibility of meeting these needs may fall on extended family, schools and social services. This can cause those children to feel that they are not cared for – or cared about – by their parents.⁴

'Everything that we had, it's just all gone. Simple.'

18-year-old male⁶

In harm's way

News reports of children and babies left unattended in casinos or casino carparks while their parents gamble seem to occur with alarming regularity. This form of neglect was reported to the DIA 59 times in 2011 alone, affecting 101 children. That's just in casinos alone, not pubs or clubs, and the number is on the rise.⁵

For children of problem gamblers, feelings of neglect can be a daily struggle. The parent may spend a great deal of time in a pub or casino, move out due to arguments about their gambling, or just disappear unpredictably.

It can also be an emotional loss. The parent's personality can become unrecognisable to their children, who feel gambling has become more important than family. Their relationship with their child or children can be damaged as they become more secretive, unreliable and prone to breaking promises.^{4,6}

Children are more likely to suffer physical violence or abuse if they have parents with problem gambling, especially when combined with other problems such as alcohol abuse.⁷ One study found that six out of 10 communities had increases in reported domestic violence (including spousal and partner abuse) after casinos opened in the area.⁸

'Most times whenever [Mum's] been out, she never leaves a note for me and she never tells me where she's going and I always get really scared.' 13-year-old female⁶

'For me it was really hard to come to terms with when you try to talk to your mum about something and she sort of fobs you off, whereas normally she'd listen to you[...] my opinion didn't sort of count too much, other stuff on her mind obviously.' 18-year-old male⁶

Unhealthy living

Problem gambling, especially when it is present alongside other disorders such as alcohol and drug abuse,⁹ can increase the risk of children developing unhealthy behaviours. Alcohol abuse, educational difficulties, emotional disorders and suicidal tendencies are more likely when a parent gambles.⁸ Other associated problems include eating disorders, trouble sleeping⁷, asthma, allergies, and gastrointestinal disorders.¹⁰

Children of problem gamblers are more likely to have:

- Alcohol disorders (31% vs 4%)
- Major depression (19% vs 7%)
- Drug use disorders (5% vs 2%)
- Antisocial personality disorder (5% vs 0%)
- Generalized anxiety disorder (8% vs 0%)
- Any psychiatric disorder (60% vs 11%)

Data based on a study of problem gamblers' family members vs a control group.⁸

Continuing the cycle

One of the most consistent findings is that they are far more likely to become problem gamblers themselves. Children with a family history of problem gambling are between 2 and 10 times more likely to develop gambling problems later in life. If the person who gambled was their father, it may be as much as 14 times more likely.¹¹

A study of gambling in Māori communities outlines a model of how children are at risk if gambling is a part of their young lives. When exposed to gambling activities from an early age, in the form of housie games at home or marae fundraising activities played by their parents or whānau, children grow up seeing gambling as a normal activity and central to social life. They may be allowed – even encouraged – to participate from a young age. Dysfunction at home, in the form of financial problems or domestic violence, increases the risk that they will look to gambling for an escape. As they grow their gambling may become more intense until it has become problematic. From there, debt may spiral out of control, relationships may erode, and their children may be neglected.⁴

A Māori study participant, when asked what is lost when a parent gambles:⁴

'Just spending time, spending time with your kids, and just loving them... you put things like gambling first before your kids.'

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