

The WAGER, Vol. 29(10) - Sources of influence on the gambling trajectories of Australian adolescents

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Worldwide, many [young people gamble](#) before they reach legal gambling age, with a portion experiencing [gambling-related problems](#). To reduce the potential for harm, we need to understand the factors that shape adolescents' gambling attitudes and behaviors as they grow up. This week, The WAGER reviews a [study by Nerilee Hing and colleagues](#) that examined the gambling trajectories of Australian adolescents at different levels of gambling risk, and what influenced these trajectories during various stages of development.

What were the research questions?

What are the gambling trajectories of Australian adolescents at different levels of gambling risk? What influences these trajectories during different developmental stages?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers recruited 89 adolescents from New South Wales, Australia in 2022. They participated in interviews and online discussion communities, where they recounted their gambling experiences chronologically from childhood to present time. Participants were grouped by level of gambling risk based on [a validated screen](#) for gambling-related problems: (1) non-gambler (NG), (2) non-problem gambler (NPG), and (3) at-risk gambling or problems with gambling (ARPG). The authors performed [thematic analyses](#) to explore the gambling trajectories and their influences for each group during three developmental stages: (1) childhood, (2) early adolescence, and (3) later adolescence.

What did they find?

Childhood

Many participants were first exposed to gambling in childhood (see Figure). Most ARPGs and NPGs were introduced to gambling through their parents, and

sometimes passively included in gambling (e.g., gifted scratch tickets). ARPGs, in particular, had positive memories of gambling and remembered it being a fun family activity. Parental gambling was less common for NGs, who became aware of gambling through other sources such as ads.

Early Adolescence

Participants became more aware of gambling options and opportunities during early adolescence through friends, family, ads, and mass media. NGs refrained from gambling, typically because of age restrictions or parental disapproval. Conversely, many ARPGs and NPGs began participating in gambling activities—usually betting privately with friends. Many participants became interested in sports-related betting during this time.

Later Adolescence

The gambling trajectories further diverged in later adolescence. NGs continued to refrain from gambling, and NPGs' gambling involvement remained consistent or declined. However, ARPGs began to participate in an even wider array of gambling activities, including some high-risk activities like sports betting and skin gambling. They saw gambling as a way to bond with peers—friends often taught and encouraged gambling. Some ARPGs viewed gambling as a way to make money or to demonstrate their skill, unlike most NGs and NPGs.

Sources of influence on the gambling trajectories of Australian adolescents at different levels of gambling risk*

CHILDHOOD: EARLY EXPOSURE TO GAMBLING	EARLY ADOLESCENCE: INCREASED PEER, SPORT, AND MEDIA INFLUENCES ON GAMBLING	LATER ADOLESCENCE: CONSOLIDATING GAMBLING ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to gambling through parents (<i>NPGs and ARPGs</i>) • Attitudes to gambling being shaped by family experiences • Exposure to gambling through media and advertising • Some ARPGs were exposed to harmful parental gambling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing awareness of gambling and opportunities for more involvement • Private betting activities with peers (<i>NPGs and ARPGs</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Gambling as a social/bonding activity (<i>ARPGs</i>) • Growing interest in sports-related betting (<i>NPGs and ARPGs</i>) • Greater awareness of gambling risks and harms • Increased exposure to gambling advertisements (online and social media) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased divergence of gambling behaviors between groups (level of involvement and activities) • Friends teach and encourage gambling (<i>ARPGs</i>) • Attitudes to spending money <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Reluctant to gamble with their own money (<i>NGs and NPGs</i>) ◦ Gambling to make money (<i>ARPGs</i>) • Gambling for competitive reasons to demonstrate skill (<i>ARPGs</i>) • Simulated gambling as a gateway to monetary gambling (<i>ARPGs</i>) • Increased awareness of gambling harm, but no acknowledgement of their harmful gambling by <i>ARPGs</i>

* Levels of gambling risk: NG=non-gambler; NPG=non-problem gambler; ARPG=at-risk gambling or problems with gambling

Figure. Sources influencing the gambling trajectories of Australian adolescents (n = 89) at different levels of gambling risk and during different developmental

stages: (1) childhood, (2) early adolescence, and (3) later adolescence. Themes pertaining to a specific risk level are indicated as such. Adapted from Hing et al. 2024. Click image to enlarge.

Why do these findings matter?

Young people's gambling behaviors evolve as they grow up. This evolution is shaped by multiple interacting sources of influence, including parents, friends, advertisements, and sports. Youth gambling prevention should focus on specific sources of influence at different developmental stages. Educational initiatives, like the [Gift Responsibly Campaign](#), should inform parents of the potential risks of involving their children in gambling activities (e.g., via scratch tickets). Adolescents may also benefit from initiatives that focus on the development of social skills, like [resisting peer pressure](#) to gamble.

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations of this study?

Findings from this study might not be [generalizable](#) to adolescents in other Australian states or countries, where the gambling landscape and norms are different. This study relied on [self-reported data](#), which may be subject to [recall bias](#).

For more information:

Do you think you or someone you know has a gambling problem? Visit the [National Council on Problem Gambling](#) for screening tools and resources. The [Responsible Gambling Council](#) offers resources for teens who want to learn more about gambling. For additional resources, including gambling and self-help tools, visit our [Addiction Resources](#) page.

— Kira Landauer, MPH
