

EFFECTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF GAME-BASED ADDICTIONS



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Don Bosco**

The Don Bosco Confederation has collaborated with Joaquín Manuel González Cabrera, MSc, PhD (University of Granada, Spain) in Psychology, to publish this material as part of the "Pasaporte 0,0" Programme within the association's Education for Health line. Both awarded by the University of Granada, he holds a master's degree in Psychology and Social Intervention and another in Research and Advances in Preventative Medicine and Public Health. This has been created as a guiding resource and is therefore open to the contributions and experience of the social agents who are going to use it. We hope the information and practices contained in this guide are useful to you in your addiction-prevention work. We would like to acknowledge and highly commend the work undertaken by young volunteers for promoting a healthy lifestyle and habits and their dedication to the cause.

GAMING: HOBBY OR ADDICTION?

For some people, games of chance can be considered a hobby, but it can become an addiction for others. Game-based addictions or gambling addictions are characterised by the compulsive and uncontrollable need to place bets. This can lead to financial, social and mental health problems.

It is important to make a distinction between what is a game-based hobby and what is a game-based addiction. It is possible for someone to enjoy games of chance/gambling without it having a negative impact on their lives. This is when it is considered a recreational activity. However, someone who plays these games compulsively, placing bets without control or regard for the consequences, should be considered to have a game-based addiction (or gambling addict). It is important to always remember that minors should not engage in gambling activities, regardless of how it is presented. It is not admissible for anyone to gamble before they are of legal age.

GAMES OF CHANCE: FROM TRADITIONAL TO ONLINE BETTING: PREVELANCE OF THE PROBLEM.

Building on the previous point, it is important to properly define and provide a more in-depth and technical explanation of problem gambling. We use the American Psychiatric Association's definition of problem gambling as a base for this paper. The definition has been extracted from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)¹ and its revised version (DSM-5-TR)². They describe it as a behavioural addiction. Some of the symptoms associated with an addiction to playing games of chance and behaviours and you should be responsive to, if seen within the group, are: 1) the need to bet increasingly more to enjoy the game (playing more, betting more); 2) the attempt to recuperate losses by betting more; 3) lies about how much money they have spent; 4) lack of keeping up responsibilities to play the game; 5) their actions are having consequences on their personal life; and 6) denial of the addiction problem.

Although American Psychiatric Association's recommendations does not define on-line gaming as a prevalent problem, in the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision (ICD-11)³ it is identified as a problem area and says it is predominant. Both traditional and on-line gambling problems have been associated with various health and social issues which can manifest in a gambler's life. These include poor mental health, social and family problems, and even resorting to criminal behaviour to fund their addictive lifestyles^{4,5,6,7}.

On-line betting is a social and clinical problem of the highest magnitude. It can start to become prevalent and problematic during adolescence. Although there has been a lot of recent development into the study of on-line problem gambling, it dates to the 1990s. During this decade, there was an exponential growth in on-line problem gambling and became a common leisure activity in which millions of people were engaged. Due to the injection of technology and the internet into daily life, on-line gaming has become a popular pass-time activity. Games of chance are available in many forms such as bingo, card games (for example, poker) or sports betting. Official figures collated by the Government Delegation for the National Plan on Drugs, part of the Spanish Ministry of Health, show that for the age group 14-18 years, 17.2% confirm having played in-person games involving money in the past 12 months and 9.4% having played on-line games involving money in the past 12 months. 6.4% of respondents report to have played both on-line and in-person



games involving money for the same time period. This data was collected in 2022.⁸ The average age at which the respondents started to play in-person games was 14.6 years and rising to 15 years for on-line games, according to a data set from 2021. The prevalence rate of on-line problem gambling amongst minors is 2.1%. The prevalence rate in the adult population is three-times higher.⁹ Another study indicated that almost 33% of surveyed teenagers had betted in the last 12 months and that 1% of these were linked to cases of on-line problem gambling. Furthermore, just over 6% were deemed to be in situations of risk⁷.

WHEN SHOULD ENGAGING IN THIS ACTIVITY BE CONSIDERED A PROBLEM?

Problem gambling is a mental health illness characterised by the uncontrollable need to play and bet. It results in negative consequences in the player's personal and professional life, as well as having a negative effect on their financial situation. It is important to distinguish this from recreational behaviour in which someone may play or bet on occasion or even someone who has a slight habit to play games of chance but not doing it compulsively. These behaviours should be considered risks and could be identified as problematic. Nevertheless, we can apply, as a rule of thumb, the following maxim: "There is no gaming problem, if there is no bet." (This is the best protective factor).

If one of the members of the group exhibits any of the behaviours detailed below, speak with them, their parent(s) or legal guardian(s). These are important indicators of a potential problem:

- Playing and betting in a frequent and persistent manner, even once they have suffered large financial losses.
- Lying about how much time and money they have spent playing.
- Experiencing anxiety, stress and irritability when they are prevented from playing or placing bets (for example, when at camps or school).
- Ignoring personal and professional responsibilities in order to play and bet.
- Using the game to avoid interacting with difficult emotions or participating in daily life.
- Playing and betting increasingly more to achieve the same levels of satisfaction.

SPORTS BETTING: FUN + PROBLEMS

Sports betting has become hugely popular over the last few years with fans having the opportunity to bet on their favourite sports and sporting events. This type of betting is particularly attractive to teenagers and young adults as it brings together the element of random reward mechanisms with a widely engaging and popular area of social life: sports. Although most sports bets are done recreationally to enjoy the sport, it can also become a problem and affect a person's well-being and quality of life. Whilst betting shops make the risks of gambling known to their customers, those of sporting nature are considered higher risk due to the contingency between the stimulus (betting) and the reward (knowing if you have won/lost). The Government Delegation for the National Plan on Drugs, in their 2022 report⁸, conclude that sports betting (both on-line and in-person) is the more frequent form of gambling for the 14–18-year age group. As a result, it is recommended that this is to be one of the points addressed when engaging with this age group on this topic.

Firstly, it is important to highlight the great financial risks that come with sports betting. Betting large sums of money or betting frequently can lead to financial problems and the accumulation of debts. These can also result in poor mental and emotional health for the gambler.

Furthermore, sports betting can become addictive despite being seen as something that is socially engaging and a fun experience with a format that "seen better". It should not be forgotten that the development of a gambling problem can start as a need to play more frequently and invest larger sums of money to try and achieve the desired emotional result. This may manifest as needing to increase the amount to get the same desired effect as before. This can spiral into an addiction and have negative consequences on someone's life.



LOOT BOXES: CLANDESTINE BETTING IN VIDEO GAMES

Recently, there has been a lot of interest in an insidious problem that particularly affects teenagers: loot boxes. These can also be referred to as "loot crates" or "prize crates". In plain and clear language, we can quickly identify these boxes as "covert gambling within a video game". However, this is a very general statement and requires further clarification. Loot boxes are a form of micro transaction that takes place in the game as a purchase, but they have the same characteristics as games of chance. The player is not sure what they will get as a result of the purchase, and they are often ignorant to the probability of getting what they want. A loot box and a micro transaction can be distinguished on their outcome. With a micro transaction, you make the purchase knowing what you will receive as a result. With a loot box, you are purchasing the possibility, which is usually quite low, of getting the desired outcome. It is not the same to spend one Euro on a "flaming sword" for your in-game character than to spend one Euro on a loot box that offers the play a 10% chance of getting the sword or even a 1% chance of getting a better sword. When a loot box is acquired through the transaction of real money, whether that be a direct in-game purchase using a card or through the exchange of a fictional in-game currency acquired through a transaction of real money, this is a bet. It can be hard to spot as it is often hidden within the realms of a fun gaming experience that many minors interact with.¹⁰ Loot boxes appear consistently in mobile, PC and console games; minors often demonstrate interaction with them. Their mere existence within the game's ecosystem is the biggest problem. Minors playing these games, many of which target under 18s, are then exposed to the loot boxes and presents an opportunity to engage with the problem behaviour. It is of vital importance to talk to minors about the reality of what they are doing when they use a loot box. They may not realise that they are gambling. They need to be aware of and understand the risks associated. It is also important to work with their family on this issue.



The reward system underscored by loot boxes is like a variable-ratio schedule of reinforcement present in games that involve on-line betting or in slot machines. This can

allow for the onset of cognitive distortions. It poses a risk for adolescents who are not familiar with these reward mechanisms and systems¹¹. According to a recent study, 1 in 5 games meet the requirements to be considered a betting game¹². One of the most concerning statistics taken from the data is that 56% of mobile games containing loot boxes are considered appropriate for children who are 7 years and older and 93% are considered appropriate for 12 years and older¹³. This figure has grown in recent years. A recent analysis carried out in Spain of this phenomenon on the prevalence of loot box purchasing, defined as at least one purchase in the last 12 months, is something that 28.9% of the respondents had reported to have done. The report surveyed more than 4000 people¹⁴.

CONSEJOS PARA MONITORES/AS

- It is suggested that they should not use betting games as a form of escapism: It is vital to make sure that a game does not become a form of escapism to avoid interacting with personal problems or difficult emotions. Try and find alternative methods of managing stress and negative emotions such as meditation, exercise or talking to a friend or therapist. You can also make yourself available, as the activity monitor, as someone to talk to.
- It is important to talk/learn about gambling, knowing the risks associated, its consequences, manipulation strategies used by companies for their financial gain, the hooks used, the real probabilities of winning, etc. It is important to discuss how gambling opportunities may manifest, particularly within a young person's surroundings, such as sports and loot boxes.
- Talk about responsible gaming: If children are exposed to games of chance, it is better to talk about how to responsibly deal with them. Explain the importance about setting a limit and being strict with it. Emphasise the importance of never using money loaned to you or never using money that is needed for something else.
- Speak about the values associated. It can be interesting to discuss the personal and family values and the relevance of making responsible and ethical decisions. It is important to define how our decisions may have an effect on ourselves and the on the people we love. Talk about how gambling can have a detrimental effect not on our own lives but also on the lives of family, partners, friends, etc. It can prejudice our



professional lives and/or our studies.

- Instruct children and adolescents on good practices they can do to help them make better informed and more conscious decisions. Give them skills they can use to weigh up a source's trustworthiness so they can be as objective as possible. It is important they know how to make healthy decisions and develop conflict resolution skills. There are many cognitive biases that often go unnoticed within gaming. It is essential to discuss these biases, so they don't go assumed.
- Building on the previous point, it is also important to discuss the psychological effects on how we process information. This is called cognitive bias. Discuss how cognitive bias may be present during game play:
 - The illusion of control which makes the player think the outcome of the bet is dependent on them. For example, thinking that a certain "totem/amulet" can help them win or practising a specific ritual increases their chances. People bet on sports confident in "their knowledge of their favourite sport".
 - Luck is responsible for winning, with people often confusing luck and chance. Luck is a subjective and individual factor, but chance is a phenomenon related to a series of random factors independent of human activity. We have no control over chance.
 - Chance as a process to right a wrong. This means that the probability of a future event (usually winning in this context) is greater, the more times the outcome has been negative (losing). This is a false association because the probability of chance is not dependent on the previous event. The probability of winning or losing stays the same regardless of the previous result.
 - Focusing on absolute frequency and, therefore, only paying attention to what they have won. It is important for the player to take note of how much they have lost, not just how much they have won.
- It is important to educate the children on the necessity to place clear limits on how much time and money they will spend playing the game. This can help to prevent a situation where they are tempted to keep playing beyond a reasonable point and spend more than what they should.
- Unfortunately, it is known that minors frequently and easily access premises that

allow in-person gambling (such as sports betting), but it is even more difficult to avoid on-line gambling. This activity can become private and difficult to supervise, so it is necessary to talk about the risks of having a "casino" in the "palm of your hand". Warn them about the risks of downloading apps that facilitate bets on their phone.

- Advise them to maintain an open dialogue with friends and family. It is an important communication method for discussing these types of issues. Talk about any concerns with the children they have about gaming/gambling and create an environment in which these concerns can be raised comfortably. Let them know they can raise any issues with you free from fear in the future.
- Provide healthy and positive leisure alternatives, particularly ones that do not involve on-line gambling. Encourage the children to take up different activities such as sports, music, art, and outdoor activities. This can also become a vital part of their personal and creative development and helping them to learn about themselves. This not only has the benefit of keeping them away from gambling activities, but can also help them to develop physically, emotionally and socially.
- Encourage them to seek out help when they need it or when they consider a member of their group needs it. If they think that gaming is beginning to have a negative impact on their life or on those around them, they should always ask for help, starting with themselves, if needed.



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