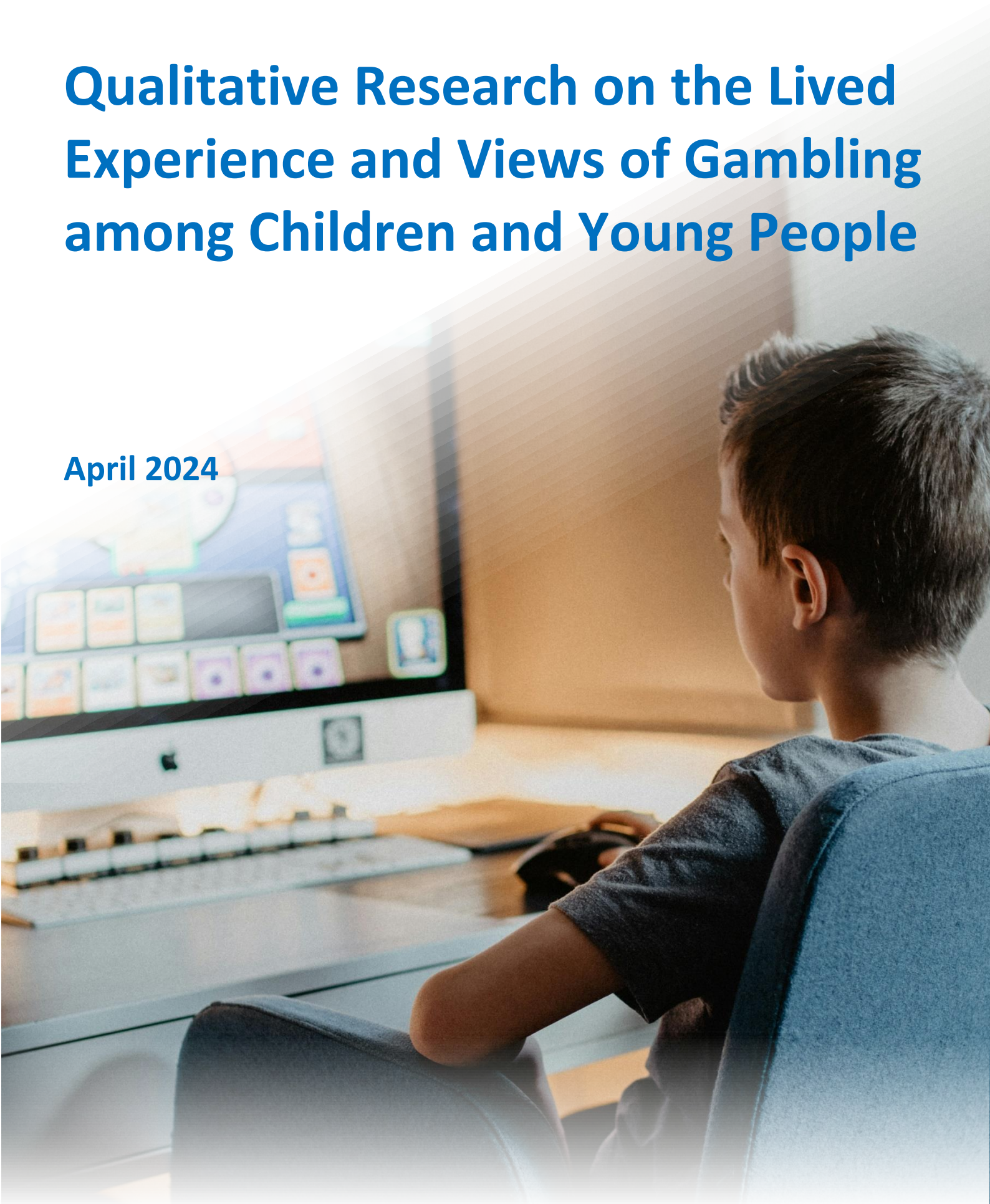


Qualitative Research on the Lived Experience and Views of Gambling among Children and Young People

April 2024



A qualitative research study for GambleAware

- 7-11 year old children
- 11-25 year old affected others
- 11-17 year old children defined as vulnerable¹

This research builds on a programme of work commissioned by GambleAware, which includes scoping research regarding children and young people from neither vulnerable or affected groups, and scoping reviews on i) effective interventions for children impacted by gambling, and ii) inequalities in gambling harm amongst children and young people.

About the commissioning organisation

GambleAware is the leading independent charity (Charity No. England & Wales 1093910, Scotland SC049433) and strategic commissioner of gambling harm education, prevention and treatment across Great Britain to keep people safe from gambling harms. GambleAware commissions the National Gambling Support Network (NSGN) which provides, free confidential treatment for almost 7,000 people, as well as the National Gambling Helpline which takes around 44,000 calls a year. The charity is independent and evidence-based, with a robust governance process in place to ensure the industry has absolutely no input or influence on our work.

Gambling harms can affect anyone, not just those who gamble, but also their families and communities. These harms particularly affect communities that already face inequality.

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¹ please see Appendix about the use of the word 'vulnerable' in this report

Contents	Page
Executive Summary	3
The Report	8
- Introduction	8
- Background	8
- Research Objectives	9
- Methodology	11
The Findings	14
Definitions, understanding of, and attitudes towards gambling and gambling-like activities	14
Gambling and gambling-like activities children and young people are engaging in	15
Gambling Pathways	16
Gambling Drivers and Motivations	22
Information given to children and young people about gambling-related harms	24
Lived experiences of gambling-related harms	26
Likelihood of children and young people seeking support if concerned	27
Summary and Conclusions	28
Recommendations	30
Appendices	32
- Additional information on recruitment	32
- Pre-task given to under 11s	34
- Semiotic analysis	34
- 'Vulnerable' children	35

Executive summary

GambleAware wanted to build knowledge about the lived experience of gambling harms among different subgroups of children and young people, including an understanding of their perspectives on gambling and how gambling impacts their everyday lives. The subgroups explored in this branch of the research commissioned by GambleAware included:

1. **Children aged under 11**
2. **Children and young people (CYPs) who were affected by a loved one's gambling (called 'affected others') aged 7-25**
3. **Children and young people (CYPs) who were considered vulnerable aged 11-17**

Note: This research was built on a programme of work commissioned by GambleAware, which included scoping research regarding children and young people from neither vulnerable or affected groups, and scoping reviews on i) effective interventions for children impacted by gambling, and ii) inequalities in gambling harm amongst children and young people.

Methods:

The methodology for each subgroup differed in order to gain the most from the research. However, the overarching objectives were the same: to investigate the lived experiences and realities of gambling and gambling-related harms amongst these groups.

Subgroup 1 - Children under 11 years old: Individual 90 minute online depth interviews were undertaken with parents present. A follow-up online focus group with selected parents from the under 11 group was conducted after the depth interviews were completed. ²

Subgroup 2 - Affected others aged 7-25: Individual 90 minute online depth interviews were undertaken for 7-18 year olds with parents present for under 11s and with the option for parents to remain present if requested for 12-16 years. For 18-25 years, two online focus groups were conducted. ³

Subgroup 3 - Vulnerable children and young people aged 11-17: a series of workshop sessions lasting 60-90 minutes took place in mainstream and special secondary schools across the country. Researchers worked with specialist teachers in the schools (e.g. Head of Safeguarding) to identify young people classified as 'vulnerable'.

² Additionally, semiotic analysis of the gambling landscape was conducted to help enrich and add context to the lived experience as described by children and young people in the primary research.

³ ditto

Research objectives of each subgroup:

1. Children under 11 years old

This element of the children and young people programme was designed to understand the lived experiences and realities of gambling and gambling-related harms amongst children under 11 years old. This was either through their own gambling, their exposure to a family member's gambling or gambling activities and imagery or influences in everyday life that might create a pathway towards harmful gambling in future.

This element of the programme explored the reality and lived experiences of children under the age of 11 and their engagement with and experience of gambling and gambling harms, including what they thought of gambling, how they felt towards gambling, and if they recognised different types of gambling.

2. Children and young people who are affected others

Gambling harms are felt beyond the person who gambles. Affected others include people in the immediate circles of the person who gambles, as well as peripheral and distant relationships. Children and young people are among those likely to be directly impacted by another person's gambling. This element of the children and young people programme was designed to understand the lived experiences and realities of gambling and gambling-related harms among children and young people who had been adversely affected by another person's gambling (also known as affected others). This was either due to a family member's gambling, a caregiver's gambling, or a friend's gambling, which had impacted children and young people and may have influenced their attitudes or behaviour in relation to gambling.

This element of the research explored the reality and lived experiences of children and young people as affected others and their engagement with and experience of gambling and gambling harms, including how they were first exposed to gambling, how aware they were of gambling and gambling-related harms for themselves and in regards to the gambling-related harms experienced by their loved one, and what types of support they wished were in place.

3. Vulnerable children and young people

This element of the children and young people programme was designed to understand the lived experiences and realities of gambling and gambling-related harms among vulnerable children and young people. This was either through their own gambling, their exposure to a family member's gambling, or their exposure to gambling activities, imagery or influences that might create a pathway to harmful gambling in future.

Whilst it is difficult to define exactly what characteristics would define a child or young person as 'vulnerable', there are several individual, social, or environmental factors that may lead to a child being disproportionately susceptible to gambling-related harms or other poor outcomes. These factors may include the child's physical/mental wellbeing, their educational needs, previous or ongoing adverse childhood experiences, the child's wider family environment (such as their housing situation, the

presence of caregivers with complex situations, poverty, abuse or neglect), the absence of supportive relationships, or aspects of the wider community or social conditions in which the child lives (such as crime, the built environment, or social cohesion).

In this research, we explored the reality and lived experiences of children and young people at greater risk of experiencing harm or who had already experienced harm due to one or more factors in their lives, as outlined above. More specifically, we explored what the journey to gambling looked like for vulnerable children and young people, for example, trigger points or routes into gambling, what the drivers/motivators for gambling or gambling-related harms within the wider ecosystem were (including imagery and social spaces), and the support pathways vulnerable children and young people would be likely to seek.

Main Findings:

Across all three cohorts of young people, most had participated in some form of occasional gambling activity, often led by a parent or family member. In some cases gambling and gambling-like activities were introduced, encouraged and facilitated by children's family members. For example children reported that adults around them had put money in fruit machines, placed bets on sporting events on their behalf or bought them lottery tickets.

The way children defined gambling, when asked, tended to be limited to more traditional, non-digital, types of gambling, such as placing bets on sporting events, buying scratch-cards, playing on slot machines in pubs, service stations and beachside arcades. Gambling-like online games, or gambling-like elements within online games, online gambling or apps were less likely to be mentioned in descriptions of what gambling was. However, when talking about the online spaces that they spent time in, (for example, YouTube or Fortnite) they described seeing (and sometimes engaging with) gambling and gambling-like content and advertising. Online gambling and gambling like content is not what they think of when asked to define what gambling is.

The research also found that children could not distinguish or articulate the difference between gambling and gambling-like content that they saw online – in either content or advertising. The look and feel of the two worlds felt interchangeable and they reported that gambling could look like gaming and vice versa. Children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) were particularly drawn in by the sensory nature of this type of content.

Some children explained that gambling and gambling-like activities were satisfying and exciting, could make them feel happy, gave them an adrenaline rush and relieved boredom. They also described how these moments could be shared family or social moments, or even money-making opportunities which they believed might boost their popularity.

Semiotic analysis undertaken as part of this study suggested that awareness campaigns of the risks of gambling might not resonate with children and young people because they tended to highlight the risks and fears that surround gambling and thus did not reflect unaffected children's understanding of the nature of gambling. In order to resonate with children and young people more effectively, campaigns

speaking to this audience about gambling risks should look and feel more like the content they are used to consuming in online spaces and games. In addition, the tone should feel more balanced and less fear-driven and alarmist so that it reflects the lived experience of many children and young people.

There seemed to be variances in how much schools covered gambling risks as a topic. In addition, there was wide variation in how much gambling was talked about within families - much more so within families of affected others - and much less so in unaffected households (although our sample only included unaffected others, under the age of 11). Across the sample of vulnerable children and children who were affected others, the majority wanted more information available to them about the harms of gambling and where they could reach out for information and support should they need to. The children in the 'vulnerable' cohort highlighted the importance of anonymity and inclusive channels of communication, such as text and sign language.

Affected others, including vulnerable children, became aware of gambling harms from primary school age and demonstrated an understanding of gambling harms in relation to excessive gambling. Under 11's and vulnerable children who were not affected others, were broadly unaware of gambling harms. For vulnerable children, there were barriers to seeking support should they need to reach out, for example shame and guilt about letting their families down, being criminalised or their parents being criminalised, communication difficulties and secrecy that could surround their gambling.

Summary and Recommendations:

This research identified a need for an updated definition of gambling to include a wider range of online activities, and highlighted the need for an awareness of gambling harm that broadens out beyond a focus on financial harm to include harm relating to excessive or compulsive engagement with online gambling or gambling-like elements within online games. The grey area between online gambling and gambling-like gaming is confusing and blurs the lines for children and young people, as well as their parents and caregivers, between what is and is not gambling. This means that the risks associated with more traditional forms of gambling, are not necessarily perceived to exist within online gambling, or gambling-like gaming mechanisms.

This grey area is further confused because gambling advertising (particularly online gambling) can often utilise the same visual and tonal expressions as those used in content explicitly targeting children (cartoon graphics and bright colours and sounds). Regulation is required to ensure that operators explicitly state that this type of content is not for children and young people.

A new lexicon of terms is needed to explain and draw attention to the overlap between traditional gambling, online gambling-like games, and social media mechanisms that potentially normalise gambling-like behaviours. Children and young people, as well as their primary carers, need information and support to better understand the potential harms in these newer forms of gambling, and the grey area between gaming and gambling. Further research with children and young people is required to establish what this new vocabulary should be.

Gambling harms awareness campaigns targeting children and young people need to acknowledge that gambling for many people is harmless and that it is prevalent in everyday life. This will help campaigns

to resonate more effectively and feel more relevant to this audience, whilst highlighting the potential risks and harms to some people, including children and young people.

We suggest encouraging open conversations about gambling and increasing the number of spaces that children and young people can seek support should they need it e.g. schools, online spaces and places they visit in the community - confidentiality and inclusive channels of communication such as text and sign language are important.

We recommend interactive in-person education of children in schools, delivered by young people with lived experience, and social media content detailing stories from young people with lived experience so it feels relatable and relevant to them. We also recommend educating parents and schools about the potential of introducing children to gambling, and the potential risks of online gambling-like games and features. Lastly, we recommend family support and interventions for vulnerable children and young people and peer group support for affected others.

The Report

Introduction

GambleAware commissions national research to improve knowledge of what works for whom in prevention, education, treatment and support services including proportionate evaluation of all funded activity. GambleAware research is independent, and is undertaken with a view to informing policy, facilitating evidence-based discussion, and supporting the commissioning of services for people experiencing harms associated with gambling. GambleAware adopts a public health approach to the reduction of gambling-related harm and its charitable objectives include a focus on prevention for children and young people and those who are vulnerable.

The qualitative research outlined in this document is part of a larger research programme which was commissioned by GambleAware, this included academic literature reviews, stakeholder engagement, service mapping, and general qualitative research on children and young people.

Background

Many children and young people are impacted by gambling harms, both directly as participants and indirectly as affected others⁴. Research suggests that 0.9% of 11–16 year olds in Great Britain could be classified as ‘problem gamblers’ as per the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI), while a further 2.4% could be classified as at-risk of experiencing problems due to gambling⁵. Furthermore, GambleAware’s 2021 Treatment & Support Survey suggests that up to 2 million children under 18 in GB are living with a parent who engages in ‘problem gambling’, as identified by the PGSI⁶. GambleAware wishes to learn more about the perception of gambling among children and young people, as it can be understood differently to how adults view gambling. For example, a social bet with friends in the playground is not illegal but does constitute a form of gambling⁷. The types of gambling children and young people may engage in could include activities such as: receiving scratch-cards as part of a birthday gift, buying lottery tickets, placing a bet on the Grand National, betting money on the outcome of a lunchtime football game at school, and elements of gaming such as the purchase of loot-boxes, amongst other things.

Loot-boxes (purchasable in game content with randomised rewards) have been known to hold similarities to gambling⁸. These types of unregulated gambling-like activities further normalise gambling and may, therefore, influence gambling-related harms experienced by children and young people throughout their life. Exposure to gambling imagery or opportunities was also an area of interest within this research. Previous research funded by GambleAware found that 96% of 11–24-year-olds had seen

⁴ Emond, A.M. and Griffiths, M.D. (2020). *Gambling in children and adolescents*, British Medical Bulletin, 136 - available [here](#)

⁵ Gambling Commission (2022). *Young People and Gambling* - available [here](#).

⁶ Gunstone B., Gosschalk K., (2020). *Gambling among adults from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities: a secondary data analysis of the Gambling Treatment and Support study* - available [here](#)

⁷ Gambling, as defined by the Gambling Act 2005, includes any activity that falls within the realm of betting, gaming, or participating in a lottery. [GA2005, s3] - available [here](#)

⁸ Close and Lloyd, (2022), *GambleAware Lifting the Lid on Loot-Boxes: Chance-Based Purchases in Video Games and the Convergence of Gaming and Gambling* - available [here](#)

gambling marketing in the last month from the date the research was carried out⁹. Further GambleAware-funded research has also shown that engagement with loot boxes in video games is associated with a higher risk of problem gambling as per the PGSI, and in some cases is effectively akin to unregulated gambling¹⁰.

Research Objectives

GambleAware wanted to build their knowledge about the lived experience of gambling harms among different subgroups of children and young people through targeted and specialist qualitative research. The subgroups GambleAware want to learn more about included:

- 1. Children under the age of 11**
- 2. Children and young people who had been adversely affected by another person's gambling (affected others)**
- 3. Children and young people who were considered vulnerable**

1. Objectives for research with children under 11 years old

This element of the children and young people programme was designed to understand the lived experiences and realities of gambling/gambling-related harms among children under 11 years old. This could be through their own gambling, their exposure to a family member's gambling or gambling activities, and imagery or influences that might create a pathway towards harmful gambling in future.

In this element of the programme, we explored the reality and lived experiences of children under the age of 11 and their engagement with and experience of gambling and gambling harms, including:

- What children under the age of 11 thought of when they thought about gambling
- If children under the age of 11 remembered their first interaction with gambling, how it made them feel
- If children under the age of 11 knew of anyone who gambles
- How children under the age of 11 felt towards gambling
- If children under the age of 11 recognised different types of gambling

2. Objectives for research with children and young people who are affected others

Gambling harms are felt beyond the person who gambles. Affected others include people in the immediate circles of the person who gambles, as well as peripheral and distant relationships. Children and young people are among those likely to be directly impacted by another person's gambling. This element of the children and young people programme was designed to understand the lived experiences and realities of gambling/gambling-related harms amongst those who have been adversely affected by another person's gambling (also known as affected others). This could have been due to a family member's gambling, a caregiver's gambling, or a friend's gambling, which had impacted children and young people and may have influenced their attitudes or behaviour in relation to gambling.

⁹ IPSOS, on behalf of GambleAware, (2020). *The effect of gambling marketing and advertising on children, young people and vulnerable adults* - available [here](#)

¹⁰ Close and Lloyd, (2022), *Lifting the Lid on Loot-Boxes: Chance-Based Purchases in Video Games and the Convergence of Gaming and Gambling* - available [here](#)

This element of the research explored the reality and lived experiences of children and young people as affected others and their engagement with and experience of gambling and gambling harms, including:

- What types of gambling or gambling-like activities children and young people as affected others engage in and where this engagement occurred
- How are children and young people as affected others were first exposed to gambling
- What gambling looked like for children and young people as affected others
- What types of harms children and young people as affected others may have experienced from their own gambling or another person's gambling
- How aware children and young people as affected others were of gambling and gambling-related harms for themselves and in regard to the gambling-related harms experienced by their loved one
- If there were any drivers/motivators for gambling or gambling-related harms within the wider ecosystem for children and young people as affected others (including imagery, social spaces, etc.)
- Who the main people in children and young people's lives that engage with gambling were
- The types of support children and young people wanted or wished were in place
- If children and young people were more likely to seek help and support if such provisions existed
- If they believed there was anything missing in current services which may have helped prevent children and young people being an affected other at a preliminary stage

3. Objectives for research with vulnerable¹¹ children and young people

This element of the children and young people programme was designed to understand the lived experiences and realities of gambling and gambling-related harms among vulnerable children and young people. This could have been through their own gambling, their exposure to a family member's gambling, or their exposure to gambling activities, imagery or influences that might have created a pathway to harmful gambling in future.

In this element of the programme, the reality and lived experiences of children and young people at greater risk of experiencing harm, or already experiencing harm due to one or more factors in their lives, as outlined above, were explored.

More specifically, we explored:

- What types of gambling or gambling-like activities vulnerable children and young people engaged in and where this engagement occurred
- How vulnerable children and young people were first exposed to gambling
- What the journey to gambling looked like for vulnerable children and young people, for example, trigger points or routes into gambling
- What types of harm vulnerable children and young people may have experienced from their own gambling or another person's gambling
- How aware vulnerable children and young people were of gambling and gambling-related harms

¹¹ While it is difficult to define exactly what characteristic would define a child or young person as vulnerable, there are several individual, social, or environmental factors that may lead to a child being disproportionately susceptible to gambling-related harms or other poor outcomes. These factors may include the child's physical/ mental wellbeing, their educational needs, previous or ongoing adverse childhood experiences, the child's wider family environment (such as their housing situation, the presence of caregivers with complex situations, poverty, abuse or neglect, etc), the absence of supportive relationships, or aspects of the wider community or social conditions in which the child lives (such as crime, the built environment, or social cohesion).

- What the drivers/motivators were for gambling or gambling-related harms within the wider ecosystem for vulnerable children and young people (including imagery, social spaces, etc.)
- What pathways to support vulnerable children and young people were likely to seek (for example, trusted adults or community members if formal authority figures were not appropriate)
- How a vulnerable status impacted children and young people's experience of gambling or gambling-related harms. This included an exploration of the characteristics that led to their vulnerable status (e.g., do children and young people with mental health conditions feel their mental health could increase or exacerbate gambling harms)

Methodology

This report is a synthesis of three separate research studies carried out across Summer 2023, exploring the lived experience of gambling amongst three different subgroups of children and young people. Fieldwork took place over a period of four months, and in total 89 children and young people were engaged in the research across the three projects. Different methodological approaches were developed for each subgroup to ensure the most valuable outputs. The approaches are outlined here with further detail in the Appendix.

The research with vulnerable children was carried out by Dr Barbie Clarke and Anouchka Wolfman and team at Family Kids & Youth. The research with under 11's and affected others was carried out by Hanna Chalmers, CultureStudio and Nicki Karet, Sherbert Research. All team members have enhanced DBS clearance.

Project 1: Children under 11

In August 2023, Sherbert and CultureStudio carried out qualitative online 90 minute in-depth interviews with 18 children aged between 7 and 11 years old from around Great Britain.¹² Five of the children in the sample were affected others. Parents accompanied the children during the interview. After the depth interviews, five parents of unaffected children were selected to reflect a range of perspectives and experiences and invited to participate in a follow-up focus group to reflect as a group on the findings of the depth interviews and clarify the narrative of the younger children.

Project 2: Affected others aged 11-25

In August 2023, Sherbert and CultureStudio carried out online individual depth interviews with 16 children and young people aged between 12-25 years old, from around Great Britain, all of whom were identified as affected others.

In addition to primary research, semiotic¹³ and cultural analysis was undertaken¹⁴. This involved exploring visual and textual representations of gambling, and gambling adjacent, culture in everyday life - with a specific focus on areas which children and young people are more likely to be exposed to such

¹² Please see Appendix for additional information on the sampling frame for each study.

¹³ Semiotics is the systematic study of communication, experiences and aesthetics to reveal how culture shapes the ways we think, feel, behave and believe. Because it uncovers how implicit meanings are created, semiotics helps us to understand the role of brands and cultural phenomena in context.

¹⁴ Please see Appendix for additional information on what this involved.

as YouTube advertising, loot boxes and point of sale scratch-cards. It was felt to be an important component of the study, adding context to the perspectives and voices of children and young people, in helping to identify, surface and explain gambling narratives in culture and how they relate to and interact with the types of content that children and young people are engaging with. Whilst interviews with children and young people provided invaluable insight into their conscious understanding of gambling and gambling related activities, so much of the way in which people build understanding is based on subconscious thinking - and this is particularly true for young people.

By first exploring, and considering, the cultural terrain of gambling in contemporary British society we can start to build a more multi-dimensional picture of the way in which gambling is communicating its meaning in everyday life.

Project 3: Vulnerable children aged 11-17 years old

From July to November 2023, Family Kids & Youth carried out six workshops in UK mainstream and special schools with 55 children from different ethnic backgrounds (including children with English as a second language). All children were considered to be 'vulnerable'.¹⁵ Some of the children involved in the workshops had professionals working with them and their families e.g. social workers and school counsellors. Workshops were between an hour to an hour and a half depending on the child's concentration levels. FK&Y spoke to children in the third person and made extensive use of projective techniques (such as those used in counselling¹⁶) to allow them to feel comfortable about sharing their own experience, behaviour, beliefs, and feelings by projecting their opinions and beliefs onto other people rather than to themselves e.g. how might children and young people feel if a family member is gambling.

More about the research teams:

CultureStudio is a research consultancy, launched by founder Hanna Chalmers in 2020. Hanna is a cultural expert with over twenty years experience in the sector. Prior to setting up her own practice, Hanna worked at senior levels in global media organisations specialising in children and youth audiences and latterly as a senior director at Ipsos MORI in the media and technology division. CultureStudio takes a holistic approach to understanding people's needs, thoughts and behaviours all within the framework of culture and everyday life and works with a broad range of clients from public sector organisations and charities to some of the world's largest media and technology organisations. Since launch, Hanna regularly partners with Sherbert Research on challenges that require deep expertise in both children and youth audiences and cultural and social research. In 2023 Hanna became a Board Trustee at the charity Youth Music.

Sherbert Research is a boutique agency that specialises in generating genuine, grounded insights from research with children, teens, families and other important people in their lives. Sherbert is made up of a senior team of researchers and associates with skills and experience drawn from a range of complementary backgrounds including primary teaching, developmental psychology, marketing,

¹⁵ Please see the Appendix for the definition of 'vulnerable' used in this research and more information about projective techniques and their value in research

¹⁶ Caroline Poor, PhD, Maria Mayan, PhD et al, March 2011 The evocative power of projective techniques for the elicitation of meaning - available [here](#)

anthropology and community outreach. Sherbert's diverse client base (both UK and Global) ensures the team has a holistic view of what real life is all about for children and young people around the world and they are always up to date with emerging trends and changing behaviours to ensure that all clients (whether a brand, products or service) are able to stay relevant and resonant by adapting to this unique audience need. Founder Nicki Karet is a former primary school teacher.

Family Kids & Youth (FK&Y) is a well-known research agency, working for some of the leading names in the child, youth and family markets, as well as the education and health sector. FK&Y has carried out many global studies on children's use of digital devices, multimedia platforms, parenting, play, advertising and communication, diet and activities. Director Anouchka Wolfman has wide experience of working with children and young people, including neuro-divergent young people. Barbie Clarke is an acknowledged global child and youth specialist, and is a trained child and adolescent counsellor, having completed her PhD in child and adolescent psychosocial development at the University of Cambridge. Anouchka and Barbie are supported at FK&Y by a team of researchers with postgraduate qualifications in psychology, ethnography, sociology, media studies and teaching.

Barbie Clarke and Nicki Karet sit on the Market Research Society's Standards Board where they oversee the Code of Conduct in relation to research with children and young people.

The Findings

Definitions, understanding of, and attitudes towards gambling and gambling-like activities

In interviews with children under 11, a flexible, child-led discussion guide was developed, and gambling was not mentioned unless it was brought up by the child or agreed in advance with their parent or carer. Gambling is not a subject that came up unprompted for this cohort when their everyday lives were discussed - whether affected or unaffected. To introduce the concept of gambling, children under 11 were shown a variety of gambling images and asked if they recognised them and to describe what they saw. Nearly all children recognised offline gambling images and identified them as gambling. These images included a roulette table, horse racing, scratch-cards and the National Lottery symbol. A smaller number, but still a majority, recognised images from gambling-like games such as Candy Crush but did not consider them to be gambling. Children tended not to recognise images from television and radio competitions such as the Omaze House, and when they did, they did not recognise them as gambling. They recognised online games with gambling-like features such as Roblox and loot boxes, but again did not categorise these as gambling.

Children under 11 were asked to complete a pre-task with a 'media advertising diary'¹⁷ and asked to specifically look out for adverts with competition elements or where people might win something; we did not use the word gambling in the pre-task. Children noticed and made a note of several gambling adverts they saw, these included Coin Master, Monopoly Go and Foxy Bingo.

Whilst gambling was not top of mind for under 11's, when prompted this group were most likely to define gambling as 'getting lucky' or having the opportunity to 'win something'. It was parents (or occasionally schools) who taught them that the odds of winning might be low.

"People who use their money try to get more money"

Boy aged 10, unaffected other

The vulnerable children cohort gave the same definition of gambling as children under 11, but also acknowledged that there were risks involved. Some vulnerable children we spoke to believed that gambling with small amounts of money, or no money, was not gambling. There was also a belief held amongst some vulnerable children that if research and skill is involved, then it is not gambling. For example, cryptocurrency, stocks, and shares were not always considered to be related to gambling, although not all vulnerable children were aware of these activities.

For unaffected children under 11, gambling was understood to be a normal part of everyday life. It was not stigmatised, and as children described to us, was simply a part of their experience of growing up. Parents of under 11's who took part in the research were surprised that their children knew as much as they do about gambling.

¹⁷ See Appendix for example

“I wasn’t aware that [she] knew so much”

Mum, girl age 11, unaffected other

Affected others, some of whom were also considered vulnerable, said there are risks and potential physical, mental and financial harms when people gamble; they had lived experiences of these harms. They viewed gambling more negatively than children who had not been personally affected by gambling harms. (Please see the section on ‘lived experiences of gambling related harms’ for further detail).

“I’m scared my dad will go bankrupt or something”

Girl age 14, affected other

However, for affected others who are over 18, gambling was not always viewed negatively. This is particularly true for young people who did not identify as experiencing severe harm from their loved one’s gambling activity; they tended to draw a distinction between ‘harmless’ and ‘harmful’ gambling.

“I’ve seen [gambling advertising at the football] and I’ll admit I’ve gambled on football...I think it’s really common to do that”

Affected other, male age 19

Amongst all groups, definitions of gambling tended to be focused on more traditional types of gambling outlined above. Gambling-like online games, and gaming features or apps, were less likely to be considered gambling or to be perceived to share characteristics of gambling. Only a minority of children drew parallels between gambling and gambling-like features in gaming and within apps that are psychologically akin to gambling, such as loot boxes.¹⁸ Parents tended not to make the link between these activities either.

Gambling and gambling-like activities children and young people were engaging in and where this occurred

Whilst children under 11 were not participating in more traditional forms of gambling on their own or with their friends, most had participated in some form of occasional gambling activity when led by a parent or family member.

“I play Bingo with Nana at the caravan, 20p a go. [Mum explained that she “usually walks away with £5 by the end of it”] ...I use the money for sweets.”

Girl age 11, unaffected other

However, many of the children under 11 were participating in gambling-like behaviours in online gaming. This is the same for affected others and children who were considered vulnerable. From 11 years old and upwards, many children were also engaging in excessive social media use. (Please see the section on ‘gambling pathways’ *below* for more information, including research about possible

¹⁸ Close, Lloyd (2020) GambleAware. *Lifting the Lid on Loot-Boxes* - available [here](#)

links between social media mechanics and gambling).

For younger affected others, including vulnerable affected others, there was a stronger rejection of all types of gambling, as they defined it. However, they were engaging in gambling-like activities online, although they did not link this to gambling. (Please see the previous section on ‘definitions, understanding of, and attitudes towards gambling and gambling-like activities’ for more information). Older affected others (aged 18-25) had a more complex view of gambling; they identified distinctions between ‘harmless’ and ‘harmful’ gambling, and some of the participants in this cohort told us they had started to engage in gambling on football matches with friends.

For children and young people who engaged in gambling with their families, the most common forms of gambling engaged in offline were lottery tickets, scratch-cards, betting on horse races, boxing and football matches, and playing on gambling/slot machines in pubs or in arcades. Children and young people were also aware of adults gambling in other places, for example, casinos or pool/snooker and bingo halls. Additionally, within our sample, ‘vulnerable’ boys aged 11-17 shared with researchers that they engaged in dares and challenges and were occasionally secretly playing card games for money.

Online gambling and gambling-like activities were reported by children to be very accessible once they began to be online. The most common forms of gambling-like activity online, across the sample, included purchasing loot-boxes, online gambling apps, social gambling-like apps and apps with gambling-like features, for example Roblox, Fortnite, FIFA, Candy Crush, Coin Master and Omada. In addition, social media with similar mechanics to gambling were engaged with extensively, (please see the ‘gambling pathways’ section for more information).

“Apps – Betfred casino, 888 Casino, you just download the app and put your card details in...some people I know do that”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 15-16

“I try to keep up the streaks on Snapchat. My longest is 170 days. If you get more than 100 days, you get a notification and a badge. Me and my mates share our streaks in the group chat”

Boy, affected other, age 16

Gambling pathways

Children and young people in the sample were introduced to gambling in the following ways:

1. Children were unknowingly engaging in gambling-like behaviours in online games and apps and on social media
2. Online gambling advertising and content from online influencers and footballers
3. Offline sports advertising and gambling imagery and activities ‘out and about’ in everyday life
4. Families and peers participating in gambling.

The following sections explore each of these pathways and include evidence from the primary research, as well as supplementary literature.

1. Children were unknowingly engaging in gambling-like behaviours in online games and on social media

As seen in the previous section, children and young people were engaging in gambling-like activities on phone apps and when they were gaming online, for example, through purchasing loot-boxes or being rewarded for maintaining online 'streaks'. Additionally, many children and young people were engaging in excessive and sometimes compulsive social media use, as described by parents.

"Yeah definitely, you can get addicted to it [gaming]. I play it every day. I am addicted to it"

Boy age 13, affected other

"My [older] daughter would be on it [TikTok] from morning 'til night"

Mum, girls aged 7 and 12, unaffected other

Existing research^{19,20 21} links the mechanisms employed to engage people in gaming and social media to gambling mechanisms. So, whilst online gaming features such as loot-boxes or the so called 'random reinforcement'²² that comes with scrolling on TikTok were not considered gambling, the research cited this is normalising these practices and emotional responses that can be part of the gambling experience. The research suggests that aspects of the experience of being on social media sites like TikTok, or playing online games such as Fortnite, may serve as a pathway to normalising gambling-like practices.

Children and young people, as well as their parents, told us that excessive and compulsive social media use and gaming was a concern and worry for them.

"I've just put a thing on her phone that limits the amount of social media after I checked and she'd spent 30 hours on TikTok in one week"

Mum, girls aged 7 and 12, unaffected other

"Procrastination is a challenge, and I feel bad when I spend too much time on Snapchat"

Boy age 17, affected other

"[I worry about] getting addicted to screens and not being able to stop."

Girl age 10, unaffected other

¹⁹ Natasha Dow Schüll (2012) *Addiction by Design*, Princeton University Press - available [here](#)

²⁰ Dr James Ash, Dr Rachel Gordon and Dr Sarah Mills (2022) *Between Gaming and Gambling Children, Young People, and Paid Reward Systems in Digital Games* ESRC - available [here](#)

²¹ Close, Lloyd *GambleAware*(2020) *Lifting the Lid on Loot-Boxes* - available [here](#)

²² Dr Julie Albright (2019) *Left to their own Devices; How Digital Natives are Reshaping the American Dream* - available [here](#)

The language used by many across the sample when discussing social media use and online gaming was one of compulsion and addiction, and of being out of control with the amount of time spent on them and then being disparaging of themselves.

“I spend more time online than I’d like to, I forget to do other things like hobbies that are more ‘active,’ I just waste time, it’s addictive”

Male age 19, affected other

“TikTok feels like time just passes, it is addictive”

Girl age 12, affected other

“I have a bad habit of as soon as I wake up going on my phone and scrolling and it takes out the day, if I could take it out I would”

Boy age 17, affected other

It is for the most part left up to parents, and children’s own ability to self-regulate, to control the time they spend in online gaming and on social media. Children whose parents were not monitoring their time online were spending longer online than other children of their age.

“I think 100% - it’s our job as a parent to manage [online gaming] and you know, keep on top of it. Certain days, they’d be on the iPad for 12 hours if we didn’t sort of snap them out of it. So yeah, I think they are very addictive”

Dad, girl aged 8 unaffected other

2. Gambling advertising and content from online influencers, footballers and ‘get rich quick’ schemes

Across all the subgroups we spoke to, children and young people saw gambling advertising and imagery online, on television programmes and in films. Vulnerable children recalled more online, television and radio gambling advertising than other children of their age.

“[Adverts for gambling] They’re always in bright colours, like the Betfred logo, like bright blue and red. The Bet365 one is green”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 12-13

Children also described how their online spaces could feel saturated with gambling and gambling-like content and advertising. The bright, loud and eye-catching nature of gambling adverts drew children in. Semiotic analysis²³ undertaken as part of the research underlined how extensively gambling imagery permeates the media and online spaces that children and young people spend time in.

Children explained they find it difficult to distinguish between gambling and games in online spaces. Semiotic analysis showed that gambling and gaming imagery online share characteristics with much of

²³ See Appendix for more information on the semiotic analysis

the content directly targeting children. Gambling imagery in content and advertising often used brightly coloured cartoons that look similar to media content that is specifically designed for children and they can often be drawn in by this style of content. The semiotic analysis showed there is no clear demarcation of where play ends and gambling begins and that gambling communication focused on harmless narratives of discovery, belonging or playfulness and omitted any communications about the potential risks.

“888 Casino advertising, they make it look like a game, it does not look like gambling”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 15-16

Additionally, there appeared to be a lack of distinct terminology to distinguish gambling and gaming, and children and young people tended to resort to a traditional, fairly narrow definition of gambling, for example the lottery, slot machines and betting on sports events - definitions that had not kept up with the evolution of gaming and gambling online.

Children also described online advertising messaging as compelling. Semiotic analysis found the language of gambling content was optimistic, light-hearted and breezy, and communicated that gambling is fun, with nothing to lose.

“[Gambling adverts] make me feel excited cos I might win money”

Girl age 10, unaffected other

“[Betfred advertising] it comes up on YouTube and it says you have no chance of losing pretty much... when you sign up it says you get a 10 pound free bet...and 100 free spins... it says there is a high chance of winning”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 13-14

The chosen language and information included in these online adverts could lead children to believe that there are no risks, as the language for this was either hidden overtly (e.g. ‘risk free bet!’) or covertly, by not mentioning any possible negative outcomes.

“The ads on YouTube make it look like this really fun activity that has no consequence outside of using or winning some money”

Girl age 14, affected other

The risk of gambling via this pathway was greater for vulnerable children in the sample, particularly children with SEND. These children spoke to us about impulse control difficulties, being drawn in by the sensory stimulation²⁴ of gambling imagery online, and of how they experienced an adrenaline rush in relation to gambling and gambling-like activities. Overall, boys who were identified as ‘vulnerable’ had higher awareness of gambling brands online than other children and young people. Some older vulnerable children called for more regulation in online gambling advertising to protect children and young people, others however believed it is the responsibility of parents to keep children and young people safe from content such as this online.

²⁴ Jewel E. Crasta, William J. Gavin, Patricia L. Davies (January 2021). *Expanding our understanding of sensory gating in children with autism spectrum disorders*. Elsevier: Clinical Neurophysiology - available [here](#)

“I’ve never seen a gambling ad online before this year... it’s annoying, you kind of get drawn in, you get curious... there are lots of noises and bright lights, like a casino... the voice is loud, they say Go Gamble ... I know loads of people that could be drawn into [gambling advertising]”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 13-14

“I don’t think it should be down to these streamers to stop [promoting gambling] ...I feel like you’re taking away from people’s jobs... it should be up to the parents to protect their children”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 16-17

Children with SEND can be more impressionable and trusting than their peers²⁵, and there can be developmental and cognitive differences. This can impact their ability to recognise other’s thoughts (theory of mind²⁶), decision making, reasoning and (executive functioning²⁷); this can increase impulsivity^{28 29} and risk-taking behaviours. Factors such as these can impact their understanding of risk, as well as their engagement with gambling.

Some children and young people also noticed and described being influenced by gambling content created by influencers, footballers and ‘get rich quick’ training schemes. Some older vulnerable children called for more regulation of this type of content online whilst others believed it was their own responsibility to decide if these were safe or not.

“Speed [influencer], he promoted that fake Crypto”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 15-16

“Some of these [get rich quick] schemes are actually legitimate... it’s all down to whether you want to take the risk... it’s not necessarily the company’s fault, it’s your fault”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 16-17

“They should stop the advertising or do an age thing where they ask for ID or a passport”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 15-16

²⁵ Dr H Pitt, Prof. S. Thomas, Dr J Watson, Prof. S. Balandin (2020). *People with intellectual disability and their lived experiences of gambling*. Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation, Melbourne - available [here](#)

²⁶ Mishon Letcheler, Michelle Bischofberger (January 2020). *A matter of perspective, an exploratory study of a theory of mind autism intervention for adolescents*. Sage Journals: Psychological Reports - available [here](#)

²⁷ Hsuan-Chen Wu, Sarah White et al., (October 2018). *Executive function in high-functioning autism: Decision making consistency as a characteristic gambling behaviour*. Elsevier: Cortex - available [here](#)

²⁸ Samuel R. Chamberlain, Betual Aslan, et al., (April 2023). *Autism and gambling: a systematic review, focusing on neurocognition*. Elsevier - available [here](#)

²⁹ John E. Grant, Samuel R. Chamberlain. (July 202) *Autistic traits in young adults who gamble*. CNS Spectrums: Cambridge University Press - available [here](#)

3. Offline sports advertising and gambling imagery ‘out and about’ in everyday life

All children interviewed noticed and are aware of lottery tickets and scratch-cards in shops and supermarkets.

“Me and my son were in a shop and the man in front bought 10 scratch cards at £3 each. And my son whispered to me, ‘wow, that man must be really lucky’, and I had to say to my son - that’s not the way it works mate - it made me think”

Mum, boy aged 9, unaffected other

Across the sample, many boys had a strong recall of sports gambling advertising from football stadiums, transport and billboards.

Vulnerable children and affected others were much more likely to be aware of gambling advertising, shops and casinos when they were ‘out and about’ in everyday life. Vulnerable children in the sample, particularly children with SEND, spoke to us about being drawn in by what was clearly the sensory stimulation of shops and casinos, and also the sensory nature of gambling machines in the places they visit.

“In pubs you can see them [fruit machines], sometimes I press the buttons without money, it is satisfying. Lots of bright lights, it’s very enticing, it draws you in...the big bright lights and sounds – blub, blub”

Boy age 13, affected other

“[Gambling areas at service stations] there is a room and it is like all lights, really pretty”

Girl, with vulnerable characteristics, age 14-15 (Special school)

4. Families and peers

Across the sample children saw family members and friends participating in various forms of gambling, from scratch-cards and bingo to online social gambling apps. For unaffected children this normalised gambling and meant there was no, or little stigma attached to it. In some cases gambling and gambling-like activities were being introduced, encouraged and facilitated by children’s family members, for example children reported that adults around them had put money in fruit machines and placed bets on sporting events on their behalf and had bought them lottery tickets.

“My dad plays on the social casinos online...he plays like Poker or Solitaire...it looks pretty good”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 15-16

[Scratch-cards] “My mum used to buy ‘em for me, I love scratching them...I won £6”

Girl, with vulnerable characteristics, age 12-13

Some vulnerable children viewed gambling with their families as harmless fun and positive family time and believed that gambling with a family member was the *safest* way to gamble. This was not the case

for all vulnerable children however, with others believing that the gambling habits of family members encouraged them to gamble.

“I think grandparents are the worst...cause they’re older. And it were more legal for them to do [gamble]...if you think about it, if your parents are gambling, they would’ve learnt it off the grandparents, so it gets passed down”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 12-13

“I think [gambling] has to do with how you were brought up”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 16-17

“In my family, grandparents, uncles and stuff, they like gambling. It’s like a tradition to gamble”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 16-17

Some of the boys in the ‘vulnerable’ cohort were placing bets with friends at school. They were also playing card games with friends for money, and this was hidden from the adults in their lives. In line with this, vulnerable children also explained that gambling amongst the adults in their lives was also secretive and hidden, and more widely engaged in than people realised.

Gambling drivers and motivations

Across the three subgroups we asked participants what they thought were the reasons people like them might try, or have tried, gambling. The answers were broad ranging, with the most common, perhaps unsurprisingly, being the opportunity to win money. There was a belief amongst children from lower income families who had seen a family member win money through gambling that gambling can be a way of making money, and they believed that having money can increase people’s popularity.

“It can boost your popularity if you get money”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 15-16

However, some children felt that seeing people they admired or looked up to engaging in gambling and gambling like activities would encourage/influence them to do so and across the sample we saw that gambling and gambling-like activities could feel satisfying and exciting, giving them an adrenaline rush, as well as relieving boredom.

“It [gambling] can satisfy you”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 15-16

In addition to challenging home lives, some of the vulnerable children in the research found school, schoolwork and peer and teacher relations challenging; this left them feeling isolated, lacking a sense of belonging and seeking friendships and social time online. This included spending time on gambling, social gambling, and on gaming apps and sites.

“You can meet new people”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 15-16

“Fantasy football, you make mates”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 15-16

These children held the view that gambling could provide a platform for positive family time.

And whilst some vulnerable children felt that drivers to gambling in adulthood were related to poverty, financial struggles and alcohol and substance misuse, this was not the case amongst non vulnerable children.

“[Low-income people feel] obliged to gamble. I feel like that’s where gambling addiction comes from...they sort of risk everything they’ve got, sort of high-risk high reward to sort of gain wealth”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 16-17

“Gambling is for drug addicts... if they win, they can buy drugs to feed their addiction”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 15-16

Other vulnerable children explained that they engaged in opening loot-boxes because their friends did this and because the Influencers they followed on social media posted content of themselves opening loot-boxes, which they found amusing. Older vulnerable children called for more regulation online – including the regulation of gambling-related content posted by the Influencers they follow.

In unaffected households this was not the case but amongst affected others one of the key drivers was felt to be the normalisation and celebration of gambling in everyday culture.

“Gambling is trivialised by the lottery. It’s almost glorified, like everyone’s nan seems to do it and the Omaze house draws are the same, they’re seen as good. Lotteries are seen as completely fine [and not harmful]”

Male aged 19, affected other

“You see advertising around the pitch at football stadiums, I don’t think it’s a good thing, just encouraging youngsters to bet and to download things and it’s also football shirts as well. I’ve gambled on football. I think it’s really common, I know people that have had addictions to football gambling- like every second of every day. I had a friend who was betting on the Peruvian Football League cos it was the only thing that was on.”

Male aged 19, affected other

Information given to children and young people about gambling related harms

Children, young people and parents in the research reported that schools and families vary in how much they talk to children about gambling, and across the sample children and young people over 11 called for more information about gambling. For vulnerable children who were in unstable or chaotic situations, where parents were struggling and lacking support, gambling harms were less likely to be communicated to them.

Parents of children under 11 did not see gambling as an equivalent risk to other potentially harmful behaviours, such as consuming alcohol, smoking or vaping. For this reason, it tended not to be a subject many parents have had, or were planning to have, a conversation about. However, whilst participating in this research, and thinking about gambling, the parents we spoke to said having a conversation about gambling with their children became more of a priority to them.

“Doing this research does bring a lot of it [how prevalent gambling is] to your mind”

Mum, girl aged 11, unaffected other

Where gambling had been discussed with children and young people, at school or with family members, children told us that conversations had often been focused on the low chances of winning and about losing money, rather than risks relating to compulsive behaviours and excessive gambling and possible harms.

The potential harms of gaming-related gambling and social gambling with no money were often not understood by children and young people. They did not automatically see a parallel between gambling and gaming features, and social gambling with no money. Loot-boxes, social gambling apps, and apps with gambling features were not generally understood to be gambling or to encourage gambling. As mentioned, some children drew parallels between gambling and gambling-like elements in gaming, but they did not appear to comprehend an understanding of how this might lead to excessive or compulsive behaviours. Parents were not always making this link either.

As discussed in the section ‘definitions, understanding of, and attitudes towards gambling and gambling-like activities’, children under 18 were confused about what gambling is, in both an online and offline context. For example, if the activity does not involve money, or just small amounts of money, they did not always believe this could encourage gambling or include it in their definition of gambling.

“The lottery is not gambling”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 12-13

Findings from the semiotic analysis demonstrated gambling is highly visible and an inherent part of British culture, and that communications about gambling harms were rarely encountered by children and young people.

Gambling related content moves along a spectrum



Content geared towards CYPs is mostly positive and diminishes a sense of risk involved, leading to more addictive behaviours. Narratives on the opposite of the spectrum feel alarmist – negating the positive & healthy developmental traits/urges in CYPs that gambling narratives play into – this messaging is easy to ignore as sensationalist or overly cautious.

Fig 2. Semiotic analysis reveals distance between gambling related imagery and content and warnings relating to gambling.

Children over 11 said they would like more information at school and called for information about places they could reach out should they need information and support. Vulnerable children also highlighted the importance of anonymity and inclusive channels of communication such as text and sign language.

“PHSE, they said it [gambling] is dangerous... but it didn’t proper like get through because they didn’t give us a lot of information about it”

Girl age 13-14 affected other

“[Text facility and sign language] They might be shy or disabled and they can’t get it out... they might have autism or down syndrome... they would need to have sign language”

Girl, with vulnerable characteristics, age 12-13

“Probably a text because if people ask what is wrong some people start crying at random...and some people don’t like speaking to people”

Girl, with vulnerable characteristics, age 12-13

Children called for interactive sessions in school from people with lived experience, and suggested adverts and social media posts detailing stories from young people with lived experience, raising awareness of where children and young people can seek support should they need it. Affected others, as well as vulnerable children who are affected others, called for awareness of gambling harms, and the destruction and damage it can have on physical and mental health and families, to be highlighted to a wider audience.

“[Visits to schools from] someone that is passionate about gambling awareness”

Boy, with vulnerable characteristics, age 16-17

“Whatever video you are watching [online] there should be adverts about gambling and numbers that you can call”

Girl, with vulnerable characteristics, age 13-14

Lived experiences of gambling related harms

Affected others, including vulnerable children, said they became aware of gambling harms from as young as primary school age. This was in contrast to unaffected children who had very little awareness of gambling harm, beyond ‘not winning’.

“I was around five I reckon [when first became aware] - yeah, it's everywhere, slot machines in service stations, slot machine places - there's one in my village.... Mum's boyfriend does it occasionally. I got angry about this - he spent £500 in a slot machine place, he won £200 of it back and then put it back in and he spent it in like an hour”

Boy, affected other, age 13

Children and young people who were affected others demonstrated an understanding of gambling harms in relation to excessive gambling. They were more aware of gambling harms as they had experienced the consequences of their family members' gambling. Some parents who gambled had confided in their children about this, with children and young people sometimes learning about gambling harms this way. However, for other affected others, including vulnerable affected others, children and young people reported gambling to be a subject that is often hidden and taboo.

“It felt quite taboo. I couldn't talk about it”

Man, affected other, age 19

Affected others, including vulnerable affected others, believed that gambling could escalate, leading to challenging and uncomfortable emotions and outcomes. Examples of this included people who gamble becoming selfish, neglecting their families, finding themselves in debt, having substance and alcohol issues, poor mental and physical health, and an increased risk of suicide.

“The more addicted you get, the more you lose”

Girl, with vulnerable characteristics, age 12-13

“Gambling is dangerous – it affects people around you; you won't be able to pay bills and things will fall apart”

Boy age 16, affected other

“They could end up in mental hospitals, sectioned...they might kill themselves”

Girl, with vulnerable characteristics, age 12-13

Affected others, including vulnerable affected others, said they felt a number of emotions such as anger, frustration, fear, anxiety and sadness when a family member gambles.

“Whenever dad leaves, probably because I don't know when he's going to be back or what he's going to do...I distract myself. I go on my favourite apps - and I also play a strategy game - it's called Age of History Two. I also like making fun of my brothers”

Girl age 14, affected other

Likelihood of children and young people seeking support if they are concerned about their own or another person's gambling

This subject was discussed with affected others and vulnerable children. The participants said that they tended to look to the internet if they want information about things they are concerned about, YouTube and TikTok were cited. They believed there was a lack of places to seek support and information about gambling, an example of this is an affected other who felt a sense of isolation with her concerns, and could not find a group with other young, affected others to share feelings, concerns, and experiences with. Vulnerable young and affected others also suggested the need for support groups with other affected others. Note, after the interviews and workshops, the children were provided with GamCare details and helplines.³⁰

For vulnerable children, there were barriers to seeking support should they need to reach out. Vulnerable children and young people believed people their age may feel too ashamed, and guilty about letting their families down, to reach out for support. Reassurance about not being criminalised is very important for vulnerable children; they explained they would worry that they or their parents would be in trouble with authorities if they were to reveal they are gambling underage.

Based on their personal experience, vulnerable children and young people felt that primary school aged children would be less likely to reach out for support.

“They might keep it to themselves and get depressed and upset...especially for young kids as they don't really know what is going on, like Primary kids”

Girl, with vulnerable characteristics, age 13-14

Communication difficulties were another perceived barrier to seeking support; vulnerable children and young people said that they and their peers have had difficulties in expressing themselves effectively, especially if they were feeling upset. Vulnerable boys who gamble alone, or with friends in secret, believed that the need for secrecy about gambling could be another barrier to reaching out for support.

³⁰ To access support or view what is available at GamCare for children and young people, find more information [here](#)

Summary and Conclusions

Definitions, understanding of, and attitudes towards gambling and gambling-like activities

Children were aware of gambling from primary school age in both on and offline settings, and they could have the belief that there is no risk when engaging in gambling. However, in an online setting there was confusion about what constitutes gambling and what is gaming. In addition, children often believed that gambling with little or no money is not gambling, and that if there was an element of skill involved it is not gambling. For unaffected children and young people, gambling was understood to be a normal part of everyday life.

Amongst all groups, including parents, definitions of gambling tended to be focused on more traditional types of gambling such as sports betting and gambling machines. Gambling-like online games and gaming features and apps were less likely to be considered to be gambling or perceived to share the characteristics of gambling.

Affected others, some of whom are also vulnerable, believed there are risks and potential physical, mental and financial harms when people gamble; they had lived experience of these harms. However, for affected others who are over 18, gambling was not always viewed so negatively.

Gambling and gambling-like activities children and young people are engaging in and exposed to and where this occurs

Most children had participated in some form of occasional gambling activity led by a parent or family member, with the most common forms of gambling offline being lottery tickets, scratch cards, placing bets on horse races, boxing and football matches, and playing on gambling machines in pubs and on days out in arcades.

Online gambling and gambling-like activities were reported to be very accessible to children and young people once they began to be online. The most common forms of gambling online, across the sample, were gaming loot-boxes, gambling apps, social gambling-like apps and apps with gambling-like features. In addition, social media with similar mechanics to gambling were engaged with extensively by children over 11.

Gambling pathways

Children and young people in the sample were introduced to gambling in the following ways:

Children were unknowingly engaging in gambling-like behaviours in online games and apps and on social media; existing research links the mechanisms employed to engage people in gaming and social media to gambling mechanisms. Online gambling advertising and content from online Influencers and footballers was another way children and young people were introduced to gambling. Children described how their online spaces felt saturated with gambling and gambling-like content and advertising. The sensory nature of bright, loud and eye-catching gambling adverts and the language drew children in and misled them, especially those vulnerable children with SEND. Vulnerable boys had

the highest recall of gambling advertising and gambling brands. In addition to challenging home lives, some of the vulnerable children in the research found school, schoolwork and peer and teacher relations challenging; this left them feeling isolated, lacking a sense of belonging and seeking friendships and social time online, which included time engaging with gambling and gambling-like activities. This reflected the findings of the semiotic analysis which revealed that gambling advertising often employed narratives focused on belonging.

Offline sports advertising and gambling imagery and activities 'out and about' in everyday life was found to be normalising gambling amongst children and young people. The risk of gambling through this pathway was found to be greater for vulnerable children, particularly children with SEND. They spoke to researchers about being 'drawn in' by what was the sensory stimulation of gambling shops and casinos, as well as the sensory nature of gambling machines in the places they visited. Some older vulnerable children called for more regulation of this type of content online.

Families and peers participating in gambling were also found to be normalising gambling amongst children and young people. In some cases, gambling and gambling-like activities were being introduced, encouraged and facilitated by children's family members. For example, children reported that adults around them put money in fruit machines, placed bets on sporting events on their behalf, and bought them lottery tickets. Vulnerable boys were playing card games with friends for money and told us that this could be hidden from the adults in their lives. In line with this, vulnerable children told us that they believe gambling amongst adults can also be secretive and hidden and was more widely engaged in than people realise.

Gambling drivers and motivations

Some vulnerable children explained that gambling and gambling-like activities can feel exciting and satisfying. They said it can make them feel happy, give them an adrenaline rush and relieve boredom; they also explained that it can provide them with good family time and a social life, and an opportunity to make money which they believed would boost their popularity.

Information given to children and young people about gambling related harms

Children, young people and parents reported that schools and families varied in how much they talked to children about gambling. Affected others in the sample described how the subject of gambling harms can feel taboo and secretive. Across the sample, children and young people over 11 years old called for more information about gambling, as well as where they could reach out for information and support should they need to. Vulnerable children highlighted the importance of anonymity and inclusive channels of communication such as text and sign language.

Parents of children under 11 believed that gambling is not seen as an equivalent risk to other potentially risky behaviours, such as consuming alcohol, smoking or vaping. For this reason, it tended not to be a subject many parents had, or were planning to have, a conversation about. The potential harms of gaming-related gambling, and social gambling with no money, were often not understood by children, young people and parents. However, whilst participating in this research, and thinking about gambling,

the parents we spoke to said having a conversation about gambling with their children became more of a priority to them, demonstrating the power of reflective thinking and discussion.

Lived experiences of gambling related harms

Affected others, including vulnerable children, became aware of gambling harms from primary school age. Children and young people who are affected others demonstrated an understanding of gambling harms in relation to excessive gambling. For some affected others, including vulnerable affected others, they reported gambling as being a subject that is hidden and taboo.

Likelihood of children and young people seeking support if they are concerned about their own or another person's gambling

Affected others and vulnerable children believed there was a lack of places to seek support and information about gambling. For vulnerable children there were barriers to seeking support should they need to reach out, including shame and guilt about letting their families down, being criminalised or their parents being criminalised, communication difficulties and a sense of secrecy that can surround gambling.

Recommendations

Children need more information and conversations about the range of gambling harms that exist - beyond just financial loss. There needs to be awareness that gambling, and gambling like behaviours, have evolved in different ways online. The risks that can come with gambling need to be communicated in a way that is not alarmist, and that also understands that gambling is not necessarily harmful. As we have seen, the current way in which gambling is portrayed in everyday life, in culture, and in advertising, is failing to communicate the risks to children.

There needs to be a broader definition of gambling and gambling harms that reflects the growing prevalence of gambling and gambling-like behaviours online, and in the gaming settings where children and young people are spending time. This should be communicated in the spaces they are in, from traditional media to online and within gaming. A new vocabulary is required to explain this grey area and its overlap with gambling.

Children and young people need to understand the broader terrain of gambling and gambling-like behaviours that now exists and that can lead to a broader range of gambling harms; these include gambling with no or small amounts of money, loot-boxes, social gambling apps, apps with gambling features and gambling with prior research and or skill such as trading cryptocurrency, stocks and shares and 'get rich quick' training programmes - as well as how to identify them as potentially risky.

Children and young people are not clear about what does and does not constitute gambling, and the difference between gaming, gambling, gambling-like behaviours, and elements of social media that also share some characteristics of gambling. Some gambling advertising makes it harder to understand whether or not it is gambling, looking and feeling like content aimed at children with a prevalence of

cartoon characters and bright, garish sounds and colours.

We recommend a stronger degree of regulation on online gambling advertising, so that it is clear that they are not for children or under 18's and that they are in fact advertising gambling.

In addition, whilst children feel the negative effects of gaming, and the compulsive elements of short form content in social media, there is currently little information or language directed to them communicating that it might be harmful to their emotional wellbeing, or that it might be linked to gambling-like behaviours. We recommend a communication campaign that highlights and explains this 'grey' area, the overlap between gambling, some gaming features, and some social media mechanisms, and the negative emotions or behaviours that can occur as a consequence of excessive use. Campaigns should explain why and how some gambling mechanisms can create addictive or compulsive behaviour in some people.

We recommend an interactive and in-person education programme for children in schools, and social media content delivered by young people with lived experience. We also recommend educating parents, caregivers and schools about how to speak about the potential dangers of introducing children to gambling, and the potential harm of online gambling-like games. Parents and caregivers also need more support in being able to understand what is and isn't potentially harmful gambling like gaming behaviour. Gambling and gambling-like activities can be viewed as harmless, fun family time, role modelled and sometimes encouraged and facilitated by children's family members. For example, children reported that adults around them had put money in fruit machines, had placed bets on sporting events on their behalf, and had bought them lottery tickets.

The research highlights the need for family support and interventions too as vulnerable children shared, they would feel guilty about letting their families down. Vulnerable children also expressed concerns about being criminalised or their parents being criminalised, reassurance and trusting, open relationships are needed, or vulnerable children might not reach out for support should they need it. We also recommend peer support groups for affected others as they shared, they would like to talk to other young people with similar experiences.

There is a need for more information about the places children and young people can reach out for support should they need to, schools' online spaces and places they visit were suggested. Channels of communication need to highlight confidentiality and be inclusive, text and sign language were suggested. To maximise awareness, social media is key e.g. YouTube, TikTok and Instagram. Open conversations about gambling and gambling harms need to be encouraged. Secrecy about gambling from the adults in their lives is noted by vulnerable children, and gambling is something that vulnerable children, especially boys, can also be secretive about.

Appendices

1. Additional information on recruitment:

Project 1 & 2: Children under 11, Children and Young People, affected others, 11-25

How they were recruited:

Guinea Pig Fieldwork who are a specialist recruitment agency who specialise in championing the inclusion of diverse communities and amplifying seldom heard voices in market research recruited affected others and Beam Fieldwork in Manchester recruited the under eleven sample.

Locations

The sample is from a wide area within the UK and included the following 10 locations: London/Hertfordshire/Surrey/Leeds/Manchester/Cardiff/Sheffield/Belfast/Glasgow/ Edinburgh

We spoke to:

Eighteen children aged between seven and eleven (and their parents) online as a depth or sibling pairs, with a parent close by who listened in and took part when needed/at the end of the session

Two were sibling pairs and the other seven were individual depths

- **Four were aged seven**
- **Four were aged eight**
- **Four were aged nine**
- **Six were aged ten**

Within this there were nine boys and nine girls

Five of these were affected others

Five were from an ethnic background including Pakistani, Black British and South Asian

We also had a quick chat with their parents at the end of the online session as well as a more detailed follow up online focus group with five of their parents. This was to continue the conversation we started with some of the parents when speaking with their kids to ensure we got the voice of the parents of this younger age group.

The under 11s did a pre-task before we spoke:

They were asked to keep a media diary capturing advertising they noticed and media consumed on their normal screens/gaming devices over a few days (TV, tablet, phones, consoles) and to note down (writing, screen grabs) any advertising they see or hear and to bring this along to the session, especially any that involve competition like mechanics. This was to see if/how many times they might come into contact with gambling or gambling-like advertising and was used within the discussion (We did not use the term gambling but instead used terms like competitions or when you can win things like money)

All sessions with the under elevens were flexible, child led discussions with no mention of gambling until/unless brought up by child or agreed in advance with parent/carer

Affected others aged twelve to twenty five years in more detail

Locations

The sample is from a wide area within the UK and included the following 10 locations: London/Hertfordshire/Surrey/Leeds/Manchester/Cardiff/Sheffield/Belfast/Glasgow/Edinburgh

We spoke to

Sixteen young people aged between twelve and twenty five years who were affected others – nine males and seven females

Six individual depths and two sibling pairs with:

- **Two young people aged twelve**
- **One young person aged thirteen**
- **Two young people aged fourteen**
- **Two young people aged sixteen**
- **One young person aged seventeen**

Online mini groups with four individuals

- **One with four individuals aged between eighteen and twenty one years**
- **One with four individuals aged between twenty two and twenty five years**

Five were from an ethnic background including Pakistani, Black British and South Asian

Why depths and why groups?

The methodology was split in this way to ensure that the younger target (under eighteens) discussions were led by how much each child knows and understands about gambling.

For those young people aged eighteen+ we could have a much more upfront, structured discussion about their lived experience of gambling as an affected other.

For those aged twelve to eighteen years we moved onto an explicit conversation about the experience of being an affected other (with parental permission) after a broad exploration of their everyday lives.

Project 3: Vulnerable Children

Family Kids & Youth recruited children and young people from schools on their school panel which includes mainstream and special primary and secondary schools from across the UK. Following discussion with the schools, workshops included a range of children and young people:

- From high and low-income families
- Families with different levels of education
- Families who had struggled during the pandemic
- Those experiencing trauma and adverse childhood experiences who lack supportive relationships at home (including children in care)
- Those with adverse conditions in the wider community, including poverty, crime and social cohesion
- Children who have other professionals working with them, e.g. social worker or therapists
- Those with different educational needs – including children with SEND and EHCP's
- Those who have engaged in some form of gambling or gambling-like activity or have a family member who has engaged in some form of gambling or gambling-like activity.

The 6 workshops included:

- Two workshops carried out in July 2023 in a special school in the North-west of England - eleven children aged 11-12 and twelve children aged 14-15.
- Two workshops carried out in October 2023 at a diverse, mainstream secondary school in West Yorkshire - ten children aged 15-16 and ten children aged 15-16.
- Two workshops carried out in October 2023 at a diverse, mainstream boys' secondary school in London - five boys aged 16-17 and seven boys aged 13-14.

Projective techniques, including cartoons and pictures, were used with vulnerable children to encourage them to explain their feelings. These allow respondents to project their individual, subjective or true opinions and beliefs onto other people, or onto objects. Social desirability bias can be a common problem in research, where people, and especially children, tend to give answers they think are socially acceptable or desirable instead of what they really think or feel.

2. Pre-task given to under 11's

Thank you so much for taking part in this project, we can't wait to chat with you!

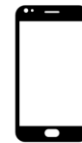
Over 4 days (before we meet) including at least one weekend day please spend 10-15 minutes each day...

1. Either **watching TV** (channels that have adverts on them)
 2. **Gaming on a console/tablet/mobile phone**
 3. **Watching YouTube on a TV/tablet/phone** (ideally over the 4 days do all of these)
- And when you are doing this at the same time show us by **taking photos with an adult's phone**:

1. **What you are watching/playing and what you like about it**
2. **Any adverts you see** (don't just flick past them like you might usually) although you don't need to watch all of it, if you don't want to – **we just need to see a picture of what it was, and especially of any where somebody might WIN SOMETHING**
3. Write down **how you feel/felt when you saw the advert** – e.g is it one you like, is for your age, appropriate, don't like it etc? (we will talk about this more when we meet)

We need to have at least **5-6 photos each day so a total of approx. 20-30 photos** – and please also use the next 4 pages to add thoughts and comments to – then take a photo of each page and WhatsApp the pages with the photos

When you're done, please ask a parent/adult to WhatsApp the photos and any comments with your **first name and age to xxx**
SPEAK SOON ☺



3. Further information on semiotic and cultural analysis

To provide a robust understanding of the subconscious narratives and implicit communication that shape CYP's behaviour, attitudes and perceptions on gambling, we completed a semiotic analysis of the cultural narratives in Britain when it comes to the gambling landscape. Semiotics is the study of communication, experiences and aesthetics to reveal how culture shapes the ways we think, feel, behave and believe. Because it uncovers how implicit meanings are created, semiotics helps us to understand the role of brands and cultural phenomena in context.

Focusing on materials most relevant to the core audience (both children under 11 and CYP), this work enabled us to identify the dominant cultural narratives in media, video games, sports and so on and helped us to understand the different narratives within the world of CYPs that are being activated by the gambling category (and in turn, helped us understand how GambleAware might tweak its comms to

appropriately to respond to them).

We explored what the key semiotic signifiers and narratives currently are in the world of gambling in Britain in 2023. What is the gambling advertising/marketing that children and young people see communicating? What is the gambling category communicating to this audience (implicitly or explicitly) and what is enticing about it?

This then gave us a deeper understanding of different kinds of gambling narratives to explore in the fieldwork stage.

We also gave particular attention to the digital spaces that children and young people are spending so much time in to provide rich context on how our audience is engaging with gambling and gambling-adjacent narratives.

4. A note on the term ‘Vulnerable’

Vulnerable

Since this research was commissioned and undertaken GambleAware have updated their position on the use of the word vulnerable. There is no commonly used definition of childhood vulnerability. The definition of vulnerable - No Child Left Behind (2022), Public Health England - states that a child can be vulnerable to risks and poor outcomes because of individual characteristics; the impact of action or inaction by other people; and their physical and social environment. Additional factors include:

- The child’s physical, emotional, health and educational needs
- Any harm the child has experienced or may be at risk of experiencing – these can include a specific set of childhood experiences known as ‘adverse childhood experiences’
- The capability of the child’s carers and wider family environment to meet the child’s needs, or indeed to cause harm – these might include homelessness or poor housing conditions, the presence of adults in the home with mental health problems, alcohol and drug dependence, or contact with the criminal justice system, domestic abuse and poverty
- The absence of supportive relationships in a child’s life
- The wider community and social conditions beyond the family including crime, the built environment, community cohesion and resilience. This list is not exhaustive, and children can experience one or several of these factors with different levels of consequences over the course of their lives including into adulthood. For the purposes of this report, vulnerable children are defined as any children at greater risk of experiencing physical or emotional harm and/or experiencing poor outcomes because of one or more factors in their lives. Some vulnerable children may also have adverse childhood experiences. These are a specific set of childhood experiences associated with negative outcomes in later life. Like other factors which make children more vulnerable, they do not inevitably lead to poorer outcomes, but their presence increases the risk of this happening.