

The Experience of Pervasive Loss: Children and Young People Living in a Family Where Parental Gambling Is a Problem

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Gambling research has contributed much to our understanding of the effects of gambling on families, yet we have only the most cursory understanding of the child's perspective on what it is like to grow up in such a family. The aim of this qualitative study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of Australian children who live in families where a parent or caregiver has a serious gambling problem by exploring the perspectives and understandings of the children and young people themselves. This paper reports a central finding, the experience of 'Pervasive Loss,' from our interviews with 15 young people, 11 males and 4 females, aged between 7 and 18 years. Their sense of loss encompassed both physical and existential aspects of the child's life,

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including their parent(s), relationships, trust, security, sense of home, and material goods. The dimensions of this experience of pervasive loss are explored from the child's perspective. Children living in families where gambling is a problem experience threats to their overall well-being to the extent that parental problem gambling must now considered to be a significant child health as well as social problem.

KEY WORDS: qualitative; children's experiences; parents; pervasive loss.

Despite the well-documented effects of problem gambling on families, we have only a cursory understanding of what it is like to be a child living in such a family and almost no research which seeks to explore this phenomena from the young person's perspective. This paper reports findings from a qualitative study of children's and young people's experiences of living in a family where a parent has a serious gambling problem.

Problem gambling in Australia is particularly worrying given the evidence presented in the recent landmark report, "Australia's Gambling Industries" (Productivity Commission [PCR], 1999a). The Commission indicated, not only that "problem gambling is significantly greater in Australia than in North America" but that "estimates are more likely to *understate* than overstate the number of people in Australia with a severe gambling problem" (PCR, 1999a, p. 22) [PCR's emphasis]. The PCR estimates that approximately 130,000 people, or 1% of the adult population have severe gambling problems, while another 160,000 or an additional 1.1% have moderate problems (PCR, 1999a, p. 19).

THE WIDER EFFECTS OF PROBLEM GAMBLING

Problem gambling has deleterious effects on many more people than the gamblers themselves. The PCR has emphasised that

"The evidence suggests that 5 to 10 other people can be directly affected to varying degrees by the behaviour of a problem gambler. In addition, there are demands on the resources of community and public services." (PCR, 1999a, p. 23)

Research has focused on the gambler's immediate family and studies have shown the wide-ranging damage caused. This ranges from

severe financial problems, through emotional and relationship problems, to physical and psychological abuse (Gaudia, 1987; Heineman, 1994; Jacobs, Marston, Singer, Widaman, Little, & Veizades, 1989; Ladouceur, Boisvert, Pepin, Loranger, & Sylvain, 1994; Lesieur & Rosenthal, 1991; Orford, 1994; Volberg, 1994) especially of a female partner (Franklin & Thoms, 1989; Lesieur & Rosenthal, 1991; Lesieur, 1989; Mark & Lesieur, 1992). As Abbott, Cramer, and Sherrets (1995) observed

“A compulsive gambler can devastate the family system adversely affecting the marriage, parent-child relationships and the psychological development of children.” (p. 260–261)

A potentially exacerbating factor for children is that increasing numbers of women, are developing gambling problems. In Australia, this can certainly be attributed to the increasing number and availability of electronic gaming machines (‘pokies’). The dramatic growth of pokies has helped to “feminize” problem gambling (PCR, 1999b, V3:Q12), to the extent where problem gambling can no longer be assumed to be an essentially male issue (Brown & Coventry, 1997; Mark & Lesieur, 1992). In one of the comparatively rare studies of women with gambling problems, Brown and Coventry (1997) found that more women were developing gambling problems, especially related to their “clear preference for electronic gaming machines, team lottery play and to a lesser extent, casinos” (p 11). This was supported by another Australian survey which noted that, “*all* the women problem gamblers in this study used gaming machines as their preferred form of gambling” (Dickerson, Baron, Hong, & Cottrell, 1996, p. 176–177) (our italics).

This is important in the Australian context where women are still generally the child’s primary caregiver. We do not wish to identify women as synonymous with mothers, nor do we wish to over-extrapolate from a small-scale study. However, we would highlight a perception among the authors that, of the children whom we interviewed, there did seem to be some difference in the nature and extent of their loss and distress experienced related to whether it was their mother or father who had the gambling problem. The question of the differential effects on children of paternal and maternal problem and of pri-

mary and secondary caregiver problem gambling certainly merits further research.

While previous research has tended to focus on the effects of problem gambling on the spouse or partner, or on children and young people who gamble, there seems to have been very little research interest in the lives and experiences of children living in families where a parent has a pathological gambling problem.

CHILDREN AND PROBLEM GAMBLING

How serious is the issue of children who grow up in a problem gambling family? Jacobs et al. (1989) estimated a conservative prevalence of 2.5 million young people affected in the USA. In Australia, the PCR estimates that there are approximately "0.6 children [under the age of 15 years] living with the average problem gambler" (PCR, 1999a, V1:7.31–7.33). With approximately 290,000 problem gamblers in Australia, this means that around 174,000 Australian children are living within a problem gambling family.

THE EFFECTS OF PARENTAL PROBLEM GAMBLING ON CHILDREN

By any criteria, the situation of children living in problem gambling families represents a significant social and child health issue. Early studies in this area acknowledged a lack of research and suggested that children raised in families where serious gambling was present not only faced a wide range of problems but were "the most victimized by the illness" (Lorenz, 1987, p. 83). Lorenz suggested that these children experienced abuse, emotional deprivation, poor role modeling, and display destructive behaviour problems (Lorenz, 1987). Jacobs' studies also found a similar range of problems in high-school children whose parents had serious gambling problems (Jacobs, 1989; Jacobs et al., 1989). Jacobs et al. (1989) found that these young people had inadequate stress management skills, poor interpersonal relations, diminished coping abilities and that they were at greater risk of developing health-threatening behaviours. In a similar vein, Leiseur warned

of “serious levels of pathology” in the children of problem gamblers (Lesieur, 1989, p. 236). These children could experience severe global psychosocial disruption, as both they and their home lives were caught up in the chaotic and unpredictable behaviour of the affected parent[s]. Research has also suggested that these children may experience serious problems in later adolescence and adult life, most notably, that they may be more likely to gamble (Browne & Brown, 1993; Fisher, 1993; Griffiths, 1995; Ladouceur et al., 1994; Lesieur & Klein, 1987; Moody, 1989), and could be as much as four times more likely to do so (Abbott et al., 1995).

Given the potentially serious implications for children and young people of growing up in an environment where a parent or caregiver has a serious gambling problem, it is surprising that little or no research has been undertaken which seeks to explore the child’s understandings and perspective of living in such a family. This gap in research knowledge was identified by Lesieur as early as 1988, when he recommended that

“some *basic* research is needed to find out *from the child’s point of view* what it is like growing up with a compulsive gambler.” (Lesieur, 1989, p. 237) [emphasis in original]

This current research has addressed this conspicuous omission through systematic qualitative inquiry by asking the question: “What is it like as a child or young person to live in a family where a parent or caregiver has a serious gambling problem?” We sought to answer this question by engaging children and young people directly and by inviting them to share their understandings and experiences with us.

RESEARCH AIM, APPROACH, AND METHOD

Research Aim

The aim of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of children who live in families where a parent or caregiver has a serious gambling problem by exploring the perspectives and understandings of the children and young people themselves.

Research Approach

The research approach was driven by the question and, as this question related to perceptions, meanings, understandings and experiences, it was appropriate that a qualitative design was employed. Qualitative methods are increasingly used in child and youth health and social research as they have considerable strengths in enabling researchers to uncover and interpret the many ways in which young people make sense of their life experiences (see, for example Alderson, 1993; Bernheimer, 1986; Bricher, 1999; Deatrick & Faux, 1991; Faux, Walsh, & Deatrick, 1988; Garley, Gallop, Johnston, & Pipitone, 1997; Hogan, 1997; Hood, Kelley, & Mayall, 1996; Hymovich, 1995; Krahn, Hohn, & Kime, 1995; McAuley, 1997; Morningstar, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 1996; Nespore, 1998; Ryan-Wenger & Walsh, 1994; Williamson & Butler, 1995).

Method

Fifteen children and adolescents, eleven males and four females aged between 7 and 18 years, participated in the study. Eleven participants were interviewed individually, three being interviewed twice. Two group interviews were also conducted with two sets of three siblings. The interviews followed an open, loosely structured format, which were more akin to attentive conversations (Fielding, 1994; Rose, 1994). Interviews lasted from approximately 30 to 60 minutes. While the interviewers made it clear to participants that the focus of the conversation was on their parent's gambling and its impact upon their lives, the interviews were sufficiently open and flexible to allow participants to talk freely about the issues that they perceived to be most salient. The interviewers were either one or two of the authors and all interviews took place at the participants' homes or with one participant, at the office of one of the authors [PD].

Interview questions focused on; the parent's "pattern" of gambling, whether and how the participant thought that the gambling affected them and home life in general; how they found out about the parent's gambling; how they dealt with their parent's gambling; what impact the gambling had on school and friendships; what would they want other children and grown-ups to know about living with a parent with this problem; what they thought had happened to their parent;

and what they believed might happen to them and to the family in the future. The interviews were audio taped, transcribed verbatim by an audio-typist and checked by the researchers for transcription accuracy.

Selecting the Study Participants

The selection of the participants was a necessarily flexible process which combined the need to find participants with the expressed aim of exerting no perceived pressure to participate upon either the children or their parents. Sampling in qualitative research is purposefully directed towards finding information-rich cases rather than towards ensuring randomisation and generalisability (Kuzel, 1999; Morse, 1991). Participants were therefore selected on the basis that they were children and adolescents who were living in or had recently lived in families where a parent had acknowledged a serious gambling problem. Most families were recruited through the 'Break Even' Gambling Rehabilitation Program run by Relationships Australia (SA).

The Ethical Comportment of the Study

Ethics approval for the study was granted by the Women's and Children's Hospital, Adelaide, Research Ethics Committee, and by the Management Committee of Relationships Australia, Adelaide, prior to the commencement of the study. The ethical conduct of this study was particularly challenging and involved balancing children's and parents' or caregivers' rights, negotiating meaningful, ongoing informed consent and assent and protecting privacy. Initial approaches were made through parents and signed parental consent and children's assent was obtained prior to involvement. Follow-up debriefing/counseling was also offered to both children and parents.

Sample Characteristics (see Table 1)

Eight families and fifteen children took part in the study. Four of the parents with the gambling problem were women and four were men. In each family only one parent had the gambling problem. At the time of the interviews, one young person had left home, four were living with both parents, seven were living with their non-gambling mother and three with a mother with a gambling problem. Since the

Table 1
Characteristics of Participating Young People and Their Families

<i>Interview Nos. & Participant Nos.</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age (Yrs) at Time of Interview</i>	<i>No. of Interviews</i>	<i>Individual (I) or Group (G) Interview</i>	<i>Gambling Parent</i>	<i>Predominant Gambling Activity</i>	<i>Duration of Gambling Problem (Yrs)</i>
1 & 15	M	17	2	I	Mother	'Pokies'	3
2 & 14	F	11	2	I	Father	'Pokies'	3
3-i ★ ^a	M	7	1	G	Mother	'Pokies'	3
3-ii ★	M	9					
3-iii	M	11					
4★	M	13	1	I			
5	F	13	1	I	Mother	'Pokies'	5
6	F	17	1	I (mother present)	Father	Horses & 'Pokies'	15
7	F	17	1	I	Father	Horses, casino and general "gambling lifestyle"	10+
8-i* ^b	M	7	1	G	Father	'Pokies'	7+
8-ii*	M	10					
8 & 10-iii*	M	11	2	G & I			
9 & 13-❖ ^c	M	13	2	I	Mother	'Pokies'	4
11-❖	M	8	1	I	Mother	'Pokies'	4
12-❖	M	11	1	I	Mother	'Pokies'	4

★-4 brothers from the same family, 3 interviewed once as a group. Oldest brother interviewed individually.

*-Second set of 3 brothers, interviewed as a group. Oldest brother also interviewed individually.

❖-Third group of brothers, interviewed individually, oldest brother interviewed twice.

interviews, two of the participants' parents have separated and they are now living with the non-gambling parent. Six of the children are seeing counselors for problems related to their situation. All but two of the gambling parents were, or had been, clients of the "Break Even" Gambling Rehabilitation Service at Relationships Australia [SA].

Interpreting and Analyzing the Data

The researchers repeatedly listened to the tapes and read the interview transcripts, during which the data were considered and questioned in order to answer the question, "what is the nature of the phenomenon [living in a family where a parent has a gambling problem] as the participant meaningfully experiences it?" (Van Manen, 1990). The thematic aspects of the phenomenon were outlined following both a holistic and a detailed approach (Van Manen, 1990). These nascent themes and findings were debated and discussed at regular research team meetings throughout the study and it was ascertained that each theme was supported by adequate data from the transcribed interviews. In this way the data were considered in detail and then constructed into a number of interpretive themes that attempt to capture the essential nature of the experience under study.

RESULTS

The interpretive analysis of these interviews created several important themes and provided a plausible account of these participants' lives. This paper presents one of the most salient interpretive themes, that of Pervasive Loss. In keeping with the tenets of qualitative research the discussion of findings is interwoven with illustrative excerpts from the participants' accounts. In all quoted extracts with more than one speaker, the interviewer is identified as PD, HC or CO and the participant is P. In a group interview, the participants are numbered as P1, P2, or P3.

The Experience of Pervasive Loss

Throughout the participants' accounts, their descriptions of encompassing loss were widespread. The experience of pervasive loss in-

cluded the loss of the gambling parent, in both a physical and an existential sense; the loss of the child's relationship with extended family; the loss of security and trust, as well as more tangible financial losses, such as the loss of savings and even the family home.

The Physical Loss of a Parent: "She Keeps Leaving, Leaving, Leaving."

The children described experiencing the loss of a parent as a result of problem gambling. We would not propose a strict Cartesian division between the physical and existential, for the two are so clearly interwoven. However, for the purpose of presenting results, we discuss both physical absence and existential loss. Most of the participants described their parent's extensive gambling-related absences. These ranged from the parent regularly leaving the home to gamble and thus being unavailable, to prolonged absences associated with separation or divorce.

The children saw gambling as the cause of this leaving. For example, two participants attributed the eventual divorce of their parents to the gambling parent's problem gambling

Dad keeps saying if you [mother] keep doing this I'm going to take us three kids with him and dad's gave her a good, like a chance to keep us kids by looking after us properly and just stuff like that. [Interview 5, 13 year-old female]

Often more distressing for the children was to be at the centre of struggles where the gambling parent "kept on leaving" [Interview 3, 3 siblings] and then returning

Sometimes when we were mad, mum left and she said she wasn't coming back but she does (. . .) once mum went for three days.

HC: And did you know where she was?

P: No. [Interview 11, 8 year-old male]

Three siblings described a particularly poignant and distressing episode where their mother was trying to leave as one of her younger children struggled to wrest the suitcase from her grasp to make her stay

P3: Yeah. The first time mum tried to leave, mum was fighting P4 for the suitcase.

HC: Right.

P3: P4 had one end of it and she had the other and they were fighting and dad had to break them up. (. . .)

P4: Um, oh I had to block the door, don't let her get the suitcase and I was still doing it and she got past me. [Interview 3 with 3 siblings aged 7, 9 and 11]

That children benefit from stable home environments where the presence of a loving parent[s] or caregivers is central to their development “seems indisputable” (Burman, 1994, p. 77), although as Burman also notes, the precise arrangements which enable this are more debatable. For some of the children however, the unpredictable, frequent, physical leaving of their parent, who seemed to have discovered something more valuable and important than their children and home, was difficult to bear. Indeed some of the children described in an almost matter-of-fact way how their parents' separation and divorce was inevitable, and from the perspective of family stability, actually desirable, as this boy's account suggests

HC: Your mum's not here at the moment?

P: No, she's in [the city] . . .

HC: Did she leave this time because of the pokies?

P: Yep. She reckons it wasn't but it is.

HC: Mm. And how was that for you?

P: Oh, I'm just fed up with her leaving.

HC: It must be really hard.

P: No, not really. Just when she leaves you just, just hope it's for the last time and if she does come back she's on, she's got rid of the pokies addiction but it's usually, that's not the scenario. [Interview 4, 13 year-old male]

The children articulated clearly that this gambling-related physical separation from a parent and the parent's frequent, unpredictable absence were a significant loss for them. What seemed equally, if not more difficult to accept was the more existential loss of the parent. This was the sense conveyed by many of the children that their parent was no longer “there for them.”

The Existential Loss of a Parent: “She Didn't Care About Us At All.”

These children seemed to have lost one of the most vital and reliable touchstones in the parent-child relationship. Several participants described how their parent had changed from being a familiar and “ordinary” parent to someone whom they scarcely recognised,

who had little time for them, whose behaviour suggested that they did not really care about them, whom they could not talk to about their fears and concerns, and whose behaviour was interpreted as meaning that gambling was now more important to the parent than their child[ren].

One 13 year-old girl gave a vivid account of a child's need for her parent's care and concern, and the distress that ensued when this was felt to be absent, as she described seeking help and support from her mother by asking her to let her know when she was going out, where she would be and when she might return home

Most times whenever she's been out, she never leaves a note for me and she never tells me where she's going and I [crying] always get really scared. And if she does tell me where she's going and she um, she says that she'll be back sometime, she might be two or three hours late or maybe a little later. And then when she was going, I want to talk to her and she'd just say, well P5, I don't really give a stuff. This is my life not your life, and it was like, well you're my mum and I get worried and so she doesn't seem to understand that [child becomes upset] (. . .) [I'd like] her to keep her promises, like saying that she'd let me know where she's going because I wouldn't get so frightened if she'd told me where she'd going and said, and if she said I'd be back by 10.30pm, she'd be back by 10.30pm. [Interview 5, 13 year-old female]

She also described how, while her brother "shut himself off," she was left to care for her younger sister while her mother was gambling

P: Well whenever mum goes out my [older] brother locked himself in his bedroom, because my [11 year old] sister's always like home and making arguments between us, so then he just locks his door to ignore her, and so, and then I get left with my sister saying that she wants mum, she's scared and stuff, and she just wants mum to stay home. So I get left with my sister plus me worrying where she is and my sister crying makes me a little bit more upset.

PD: So she gets really upset as well?

P: Only when mum goes out (. . .)

PD: So you end up looking after her as well.

P: Yep. And I always say to mum, look I'm stuck here, I'm only 13 and I've got to look after my sister and mum goes just ignore her, (. . .) but it's not as easy as that. [Interview 5, 13 year-old girl]

This participant's comments about her mother "not giving a stuff" revealed another prominent theme within the participants' accounts—the chilling perception that their parent no longer really loved or cared about them as gambling was now their top priority. As one young boy angrily explained

When she went to the pokies, all she's become is a selfish person, only thinks about herself. She didn't care about us at all. [Interview 4, 13 year-old male].

This perceived corruption of the basis of the parent-child relationship was particularly difficult for the children to comprehend and to deal with. One young man put this most eloquently when he remarked of his mother that "In the end, she just wasn't the mum that I knew" [Interview 1, 18 year-old male].

The Loss of the Relationship with the Gambling Parent: "She Just Wasn't My Mum That I Knew."

The children we interviewed described a marked change in the gambling parent which soured their relationship, usually explaining this as a "personality change." They described their parent as having become deceptive, unreliable, irresponsible, irrational, uninterested and selfish. Some children also noticed them smoking more, drinking more coffee or sleeping more during the day and evening. They also described a loss of dependability and trust in their parents.

One young man's account was especially illustrative here as he described how his mum had "moved herself away" from the family as her gambling problem worsened

P: I just sort of had a feeling that they [pokies] were bad from the beginning, and I noticed a partial change somewhere in the middle, I knew she'd changed, she was a lot more secretive, normally she'd tell me everything. Um, and then right at the end she just wasn't my mum that I knew. (. . .)

PD: What would you say was the hardest thing about all of this?

P: Probably mum changing the way she did, you know, like moving herself away from us as a family group, and then keeping all her secrets to herself and sort of not something that she did. Just a personality change I suppose from the person. For me it was really hard to come to terms with when you try to talk to your mum about something and she sort of fobs you off, whereas normally she'd listen to you (. . .) my opinion didn't sort of count too much, other stuff on her mind obviously. [Interview 1, 18 year-old male]

Loss of Trust and Reliability: "She Keeps on Breaking Promises."

Living with a parent with a serious gambling problem confronted children with a new set of rules and expectations. The children's accounts described vividly how the gambling parent's behaviour had forced a re-evaluation of their relationship. They explained that while

they still loved their parent, they no longer trusted them. Their gambling had breached previously held trust on so many previous occasions when they told lies to obtain money, or to account for its disappearance, or to explain their many absences or broken promises. Three siblings highlighted this when they spoke with almost weary resignation of how they no longer really expected their dad to keep his access visit promises

HC: If it's dad's turn to see you, how soon would you know that it wasn't going to happen?

PI: Well if he's about an hour late.

HC: Right so you don't really know until he doesn't come?

PI: Yeah. Oh, unless sometimes he calls.

P2: Sometimes he'll call us. (. . .)

PI: It's happened so many times I'm probably used to it now but, (. . .) I'm not sure if he's going to turn up. [Interview 8, 3 siblings, 7, 10 and 11 years old]

This loss of trust was echoed in the comments of another participant

P: Basically just felt, well I felt cheated. I was angry and whatever (. . .)

PD: What kind of things were you cheated out of?

P: Um, trust. (. . .)

PD: So you didn't really believe dad any more?

P: No. [Interview 6, 17 year-old female]

In addition to losing trust and reliability in a parent, some children also experienced the loss of other potentially supportive family structures as the parent's gambling drove not only the immediate family but also the extended family apart. Previously valued contact and relationships with extended family were often impaired or severed because of the parent's problem gambling. As one participant explained about his extended family

P: I mean they still sort of cared about her and that, but not the way they used to

HC: *Oh okay.*

P: They sort of, the whole family drifted apart. We were normally pretty close. [Interview 1, 18 year-old male]

Another participant told of a similar estrangement

And Nana and Grandpa . . . and Auntie X, they're really peeved off with her. Because she's on, she keeps on leaving and all that and they don't like it. So they won't talk to her any more. I don't blame them. [Interview 4, 13 year-old male]

The children described a chaotic and volatile home environment where previous familiarity, regularity and consistency had been lost—supplanted by increased parental moodiness, unpredictability, inconsistency, irritability and tension. In their group interview, one of the sets of siblings described how mum “didn’t have a happy face on her head all the time,” that she was more grumpy and cross than usual and that she “whacks us for no reason sometimes” [Interview 3, 7, 9 and 11 year old siblings].

Another significant loss that the children experienced was a loss of hope for the future. They had little or no confidence that their parent would be able to change and become more like their former self. The participants’ faith in their parent seemed to have been severely shaken by previous broken promises which made the children suspicious of any possibility of change. Many of the children attributed their parent’s problem not only to their “personality,” but to a personal weakness or even to a desire not to really want to change. As one boy put it

She doesn’t care about anybody else but herself. And she, she won’t stop it. She knows she can get rid of it, but she just won’t, she just likes it too much. She likes it better than what she likes us. [Interview 4, 13 year-old male]

Tangible Losses: “There Was Just Sort of Nothing There for Christmas.”

The majority of the participants also lived with loss in very tangible ways. Some lost money [the family’s and their own], their homes, their holidays, and some even lost important elements of their schooling. Four children described the loss of schooling as a result of their parent’s gambling problem, where the child stayed away from school to watch over the parent to dissuade them from going out to gamble

P: I sort of stayed at home for about a week I think it was, and sort of helped her out and did things for her.

HC: So you didn’t go to school?

P: No, I had a week off school. [Interview 1, 18 year-old male]

Sometimes she liked me staying home with her to just make sure she didn’t go because when I was there she wouldn’t go gambling. So sometimes she liked having me around so if I was sick that would be good for her because she used to say to me, “I’m glad I had you home because I would’ve gone gambling,” or something like that. [Interview 4, 13 year-old male]

Other children described how they found it difficult to concentrate and to keep up at school, due to their concerns about their parent and home

Because I only live across the road from the school, I get to come home for lunch everyday and sometimes my mum's not home and then I go back to school I can't concentrate on my work because I'm always thinking "where is mum?" Or before I go home I'll sometimes, like can't concentrate or something, you know, I hope mum's home so that I can see her, but sometimes she's not. (. . .) because I don't want her to be out spending her money and stuff. [Interview 5, 13 year-old female]

Another important aspect of the experience of pervasive loss was the loss of money. For most of the participants, the link between gambling and losing money was starkly obvious in their everyday lives when they noticed that the family had less money than it previously had.

I mean you could notice problems with the money in the home by Christmas time and birthdays and stuff like that, you know, there was just sort of nothing there for Christmas. (. . .) Sort of cuts into everyone's pockets. [Interview 1, 18 year-old male]

Another young woman was well aware of the scale of her father's gambling and its effects

HC: And when you said, "and we suffered," how did you suffer?

P: Well it's just kind of like having \$20,000 one day and then the next day having absolutely nothing. [Interview 7, 17 year-old girl]

For many participants there was less money for extras or even necessities. School trips could not be taken, the family's shopping habits changed with budget-priced "specials" being purchased and treats like going to see a movie became less common

HC: What do you think the impact was on [your younger brother]?

P: I don't think he really understood exactly what was going on, you know, he'd ask for money for a school trip or something and it wouldn't be there so he wouldn't be able to do it, and stuff like that. (. . .)

HC: Was the way your mum looked after you, did that change as the gambling problem got worse?

P: Err, not really. There was always like food on the table and everything like that. It, I mean, the amount went down a little bit, but the way she shopped I mean, it was always the specials. [Interview 1, 18 year-old male]

PD: Would people notice that there wasn't as much money in the family as there should be?

P: Yeah sometimes, because sometimes mum, like every now and then she won't go shopping.

PD: Do you ever have to do without things because there's no money?

P: Yeah sometimes when my friends invite me to somewhere like the movies or something.

PD: And if you ask there's no money there?

P: Uhu. [Interview 5, 13 year-old female]

HC: So what's the difference, do you reckon when mum's gambling to when she's not?

P: Well now we can, now we get shopping whereas when she was gambling we didn't used to get shopping, and we used to miss out on a lot of things, (. . .) like just normal things that we always used to get, like in school I needed a jumper, I couldn't get one of them, and I couldn't go shopping. [Interview 9, 13 year-old male]

There were families where gambling was eating up money for food. Some children described how their diet had changed from being normal to consisting of sandwiches and cereals for meals. Some also noticed that the social practice of family meals had become “snatch and grab”

HC: What sort of food did you used to eat when Mum had a gambling problem?

P: Usually she just said “snatch and grab” and that's what, we just ate anything.

HC: Snatch and grab. So what sort of things were there to eat?

P: Nothing much, just a bowl of breakfast cereal or something. [Interview 11, 8 year-old male]

Other children described going to bed hungry

HC: What happened on those nights?

P: We probably wouldn't have tea.

HC: So you would be hungry?

P: Yeah.

HC: What was it like going to bed when you were hungry?

P: Not very good.

HC: Was it easy to go to sleep when you were hungry?

P: No. [Interview 12, 11 year-old male]

Phenomenologically, these children may well have lost the meaning of home, as a powerful metaphor for safety, security and belonging, a place where we can truly “make ourselves at home” or “feel at

home.” However, for some participants, the loss of home was more literal as the parent’s gambling problem led to the loss of the family home due to defaulting on the mortgage payments. Homes were also lost as a result of changed financial situations following the separation of participants’ parents as a result of the gambling problem

They [parents] actually got divorced after it all happened and I moved out of home. The house got taken off of them because she didn’t pay the mortgage payments. [Interview 1, 18 year-old male]

HC: Do you get frightened by all of that? (the prospect of losing the family home through gambling debts)

P: Err, well yeah I do, because he’s already lost a house before, and, yeah I guess. [Interview 7, 17 year-old female]

PD: So how do you see your mum getting on?

P: Oh yeah. As long as we don’t have to sell the house. We will though.

PD: You think so?

P: Yeah. I know we will. [Interview 2, 11 year-old female]

Perhaps the most painful aspect of financial loss for the children was when their parent had become so desperate for gambling money that they had stolen or “borrowed” money from their children’s savings or other funds. One group of siblings described their mother’s actions here, before angrily condemning her as being “just a stealer”

P1: She stole about \$30 out of P4 and P5’s account.

P2: Yeah.

P3: And she stole about \$1,000 out of dad’s account.

P1: She stole a heap of money out of dad’s accounts.

P2: She’s just a stealer! [Interview 3 with 3 siblings aged 7, 9 and 11]

One participant had been saving for a school trip to the USA when his mother told him that she would keep his bank ATM card “safe” for him so that he would not be tempted to withdraw his money

It got to the stage that with the America trip, she actually said to me that she’ll hold my key card to, save my money up to do, do the trip. Now silly me, I handed it over (. . .) she ended up taking the money out and spending that. [Interview 1, 18 year-old male]

There is nothing new in the fact that many families have to tighten their belts in times of financial stringency and to make do with

less. The situation that these children describe however is one far removed from this. They reveal a world where a child loses trust in the central adult whose trustworthiness had previously been taken for granted. It is almost a hallmark of parenthood that parents want to give their children all of the things that they themselves have enjoyed, or perhaps never had. When a parent has a serious gambling problem however, the familiar cultural script of parental self-sacrifice is rewritten into a scenario where any accessible family money may become a potential or actual gambling stake.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

“Everything that we had, it’s just all gone. Simple” [Interview 1, 18 year old male]

Thomas Szasz once remarked that problem gambling was not a problem—the real problem was problem losing. The odds are of course loaded to ensure that such losing is the norm, to the extent that the PCR found that

The odds of winning overall on poker machines or pokies for a regular gambler over a year are effectively zero. (PCR, 1999b, p. 16.36–16.37).

In Australia, problem gamblers are currently spending \$3.5 billion annually, and losing on average \$12,000 per year each (PCR, 1999a, p. 2). Sadly, such financial losses have serious personal and social ramifications. In this study we have enabled children and young people to describe how adults’ gambling losses translate into equally costly losses for themselves.

These children and young people’s accounts revealed extensive experiences of loss. They perceived that they lost parents, through both separation and divorce but also existentially. As the gambling parent’s centre of gravity shifted toward more gambling, their children lost the elemental aspects of the relationship that a child should enjoy with a parent, the sense of being loved and valued, the feeling of being cared for and cared about and the security of knowing that you are your parents’ top priority. At its most extreme, this “abandonment” by a parent can take the form of the much-publicized scenario where a

parent leaves their child in a car while they go to gamble, sometimes with tragic results (Cant, 2000; Pellegrini, 2000).

The young people also lost in more material ways, through missing out on many of the basic essentials of family life, such as adequate nutrition as well as on some of the treats which create some of childhood's most enduring memories, such as movie trips, and holiday breaks. It would be a mistake, we suggest, to view such children in any way as "spoiled" and simply hankering after the latest designer training shoes or larger allowances. The participants had sophisticated understandings of what was happening to their family finances. This was not perceived as a situation where money was tight and therefore everyone in the family was "doing it tough" in order to economize and survive. What the children understood was that gambling was consuming more and more of the family budget and that the rest of the family was paying for the parent's problem. Lack of money was not the problem, where the money was being spent was.

Children who live in problem gambling families may also have lost part of the meaning of home. This is not to suggest that they were homeless, although for some the threat or reality of losing the actual family home was very real. Van Manen points to the powerful meaning of home as more than just a physical space when he suggests that our concerns for homeless people reflect our appreciation that "there is a deeper tragedy involved than merely not having a roof over one's head" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 102). Having a parent with a serious gambling problem disrupts understandings and experiences of what it means to have a home and to be at home. The connotations of home are usually positive and home is generally associated with security, warmth, comfort, familiarity and freedom from anxiety and worry. Home also carries "wider connotations of values and good that we may return to after having left, the sense of 'coming home' or 'back to our roots' (Darbyshire, 1994, p. 169). Children living in problem gambling families may be 'homeless', long before the family home has been lost.

In hearing these children's and young people's accounts it also seems that for some, childhood itself was being lost. A naïve understanding of childhood as being a pre-lapsarian state of blissfully unaware innocence is untenable, but this study suggests that these children were shouldering responsibilities and concerns which should rightfully belong to adults and parents. It is, for example, perfectly reasonable to expect an older child to help with the care of a younger

brother or sister, but quite another for him or her to feel that she is responsible for them.

Qualitative researchers are rightly cautious of over-extrapolating from their data and we recognise the limitations of such a small-scale and exploratory study. We suggest however that this study strengthens the existing evidence that parental problem gambling represents a serious child health and social wellbeing issue. This case is eloquently made by the participants who shared their experiences. It is also supported by recent major surveys which reveal the extent of the deleterious economic and social impact of gambling on families (PCR, 1999a; PCR, 1999b).

The above would be more than sufficient cause for concern, but there is another threat posed to these children by parental problem gambling and that is the intergenerational effects which may yet blight their future as it has their present. Young people in this study had mixed views about gambling, with some claiming that they would never gamble as it was “stupid,” while others thought that they may occasionally play a pokie, visit a casino or buy a lottery ticket but would know when to stop. Research suggests however, that despite their expressed intentions now, these children are at increased risk of developing gambling problems (Bergh & Kuehlhorn, 1994; Fisher, 1993; Griffiths, 1995; Gupta & Derevensky, 1998; National Research Council, 1999; PCR, 1999b; Winters, Stinchfield, & Fulkerson, 1993).

In exploring the lives of children and young people who live in a problem gambling family, it is clear that it is not only the problem gamblers who have the odds stacked against them.

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