

Online Gambling: Case Study

Youth & Digital Technology: Growing Up Online Toolkit

The following clinical description is fictional. Any resemblance to real cases is purely coincidental.

Scenario

Matt, a 14-year-old boy in Grade 9, is referred by his school guidance counsellor for an assessment regarding potential problems with online gambling. Matt's parents are also very concerned about his increasing use of casino-based "freemium" games. Freemium games are initially free to download and play but eventually require real money to move to an enhanced "premium" level, where players buy tokens to gamble with other players.

Matt buys around \$25 worth of tokens daily and has bought more than \$4,500 in the past six months. He is forgetting to hand in assignments, he is skipping classes and has a pattern of going home for lunch and not returning to school, and his grades are falling. He recently skipped gym class and was found playing on his phone in a cubicle in the boy's locker room. Matt and his parents are in constant conflict about the amount of time he spends playing online games. Matt claims he is no longer interested in trying out for team sports. He resists spending time with friends outside of school and has no extracurricular activities.

At times, Matt enjoys engaging in competition with adults online and feels a sense of mastery and accomplishment when he wins. However, he mostly feels somewhat bored and continues to play despite a lack of pleasure. He finds it hard to stop in the middle of a game and usually plays until he's lost all his tokens. Matt lies to his parents about the total time he spends playing freemium games—he often plays up to 11 hours per day on school days and even more on weekends. He has used his father's credit card to buy tokens without permission.

Matt has never been involved with the mental health system. He had a stable childhood, and his parents provided a good balance of nurturing and limit setting. He has never had any problems with substance use. He began having academic difficulties in Grade 7; but his parents don't know if his gaming and dropping grades are connected. His parents work full-time. If Matt attends school, he gambles immediately upon getting home, until his parents get home from work at 6 p.m. He has access to his phone in his bedroom at night. His parents have no idea he plays online casino games when everyone has gone to sleep.

Practice question 1:

As a service provider, how do you support Matt and his family?

Possible answers:

- Review the signs of problematic gambling. Provide education on problem gambling vs. gaming addiction, explaining how freemium games can simulate real gambling experiences and create compulsive behaviors.
- Reduce any stigma the parents/caregivers are feeling, validate parents' concerns and normalize their struggles, reinforcing that they are not alone in facing this issue.
- Give parents information about the prevalence rates and risks of online gambling among youth to normalize the conversation and reduce stigma.
- Give parents a list of websites that explain gambling patterns and the negative impact of online gambling on financial, educational, emotional, and social well-being.
- If trained in process addictions, use validated assessment and screening tools to determine the level of problematic gambling such as:
 - Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI)
 - DSM-5 criteria for Gambling Disorder
 - Internet Gaming Disorder Checklist
 - Gambling Self-Assessment Tools (e.g., Problem Gambling Severity Index)
 - Assess for comorbid concerns (e.g., social withdrawal, academic difficulties, sleep disruption, emotional distress).
- Begin a treatment plan with Matt and his family or refer them to a counsellor with a specialty in process addictions.
- Offer information about counselling and family therapy to assist with strategies to increase routine and enhance positive family communication and relationships.
- Recommend parental controls and monitoring tools (e.g., disabling in-app purchases, setting screen time restrictions). Removing financial access, such as disconnecting credit cards from gaming accounts. Creating device-free zones and schedules, particularly before bedtime.
- Encourage parents to explore possible learning supports the school can provide to enhance learning and self-esteem such as learning accommodations (e.g., study plans, tutoring), peer mentorship or extracurricular involvement to rebuild confidence and social skills.
- Encourage parents to explore ways to increase family opportunities to spend positive quality time together regularly, and to discuss with Matt potential extracurricular activities he might be interested in trying.
- Help Matt develop self-awareness about his gaming habits and motivations.
- Encourage mindfulness and self-regulation techniques to manage stress without turning to gambling.
- Work with Matt on building financial literacy, including understanding real vs. virtual currency.
- Discuss healthy competition vs. compulsive gaming to help him reframe his need for mastery and challenge.
- Provide Matt and his family with additional support resources, such as:

For more information, contact

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- Educational Resources on Youth Gambling:
 - Responsible Gambling Council: <https://responsiblegambling.org/>
 - International Centre for Youth Gambling: <http://youthgambling.com/>
- Counseling and Helplines:
 - Alberta Addiction Helpline: 1-866-332-2322
 - Problem Gambling Resources Network: 1-866-461-1259
 - Alberta Gamblers Anonymous: 1-855-222-5542

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