

Children of parent(s) who have a gambling problem: a review of the literature and commentary on research approaches

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Abstract

Problem gambling is becoming an increasingly widespread and damaging social and health problem. As opportunities for gambling become more accessible, especially through lotteries and electronic gaming machines, it is likely that more people will develop serious gambling problems. Given the worldwide increasing spending on gambling activities and the increasing number of problem gamblers, it is unfortunate but likely that the children who grow up in problem gambling families will become an important area of concern for child health and social workers. Considerable research has been undertaken into problem gambling and the adult problem gambler, but within the gambling and child health literature there is almost no recognition of the experiences of children who live in problem-gambling families. Drawing on the findings of the landmark Productivity Commission Report, this review explores the marked increase in gambling and its social effects, especially from the Australian perspective. The damaging social effects of problem gambling on families and children are reviewed and the comparative invisibility of children and young people in such research is discussed. The pervasive influence of developmentalism is critiqued and highlighted in relation to the exclusion of children's perspectives from our research understandings. The review concludes by proposing that adoption of some of the emerging 'new paradigm' approaches to childhood and children's experiences could markedly enhance our understandings of the lives and experiences of this significant group of children and young people.

Keywords: children, effects on children, gambling, literature review, parents, problem gambling

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Introduction

Gambling in some form has been a recognised social activity spanning almost all cultures and historical eras in recorded history (McMillen 1996). Societal tolerance of gambling has oscillated between acceptance and condemnation, but currently there seems to be an increasingly widespread, worldwide acceptance of gambling

activities. Gambling expenditure is generally increasing as gambling opportunities become more easily available, as has been the case here in Australia. With this expansion there has been a concomitant expansion in problem gambling. Numerous studies have identified the serious effects of gambling for the problem gambler (Lesieur & Klein 1987, Wildman 1989, Lesieur & Rosenthal 1991, Lesieur *et al.* 1991, Fisher 1992, Fisher

1993, Ladouceur *et al.* 1994, Abbott *et al.* 1995, Goodman 1995, Dickerson *et al.* 1996, Griffiths 1996).

However, it is increasingly recognised that problem gambling affects not only the gambler, but that it also impacts significantly on the lives of family, friends and work colleagues. Several studies have focused on the effects of problem gambling on the family and the spouse of the problem gambler, but surprisingly few studies have specifically addressed the effects of parental problem gambling on children.

The purpose of this paper is to offer an overview of the scant existing literature concerning the children of problem gamblers and to identify the gaps in current research knowledge concerning this overlooked group of children. The particular context of gambling in Australia is established and the problematic concept of problem gambling is explored. The effects of problem gambling on the wider family are discussed before focusing the review more specifically on children who live in families where a parent has a gambling problem. The comparative invisibility of these children in gambling research is then highlighted in relation to the wider question of children and young people's participation in health and social research. We conclude by suggesting research strategies to address the shortcomings in our research understandings that this review identifies.

Gambling and the Australian context

The cultural and historical pervasiveness of gambling (Griffiths 1996) has led to the view that gambling is 'a universal phenomenon in human societies' (McMillen 1996, p. 6) and Australia is no exception. There is an established tradition of gambling in the Australian social ethos, and gambling is becoming an increasingly accepted part of Australian culture (Brown & Coventry 1997). Some researchers even claim that 'Australia has developed a distinctive gambling culture' (McMillen 1996, p. 17). This is especially so in relation to gaming/slot/fruit machines or 'Pokies' as they are known in Australia. According to the latest Productivity Commission (1999) on Australia's gambling industry, Australia has 20% of the total numbers of 'high impact' electronic gaming machines in the world' (v. 3, no. 21). Australians are also considered to be 'among the heaviest gamblers in the world, spending at least twice as much on average as people in North America and Europe'. Of even greater concern, however, is that 'just 10% of gamblers accounted for around 70% of total gambling expenditure in 1997–1998' (Productivity Commission 1999, p. 12).

The number of people worldwide participating in gambling activities has increased dramatically over

the last 10 years (Abbott & Cramer 1993, Crabb 1998). Australian governments have liberalised gambling and state governments have actively courted the gambling dollar, making recreational gambling available in an increasing range and number of venues. It is estimated that between 81 and 92% of Australian adults have gambled at some point in their lives (Griffiths 1996). The rise of gambling as a widespread form of recreation in Australia is evident in the speed with which gaming machines have altered hotel and restaurant culture (AAP 1998, Crabb 1998). The Productivity Commission Report (section 21) examined the position of sporting and other clubs in this respect and noted that the expanding club sector has 'an increased concentration on gambling as their main business' (Productivity Commission 1999, v. 2, 21.2). At what point a tax-advantaged 'sporting club' becomes in reality a gambling club remains undecided.

This expansion in the visibility, availability and acceptance of recreational gambling has been accompanied by an increase in personal financial expenditure on gambling, and an increase in what some would argue is a worrying appreciation by states and governments of the revenue-raising potential of gambling taxation. As Brown & Coventry (1997, p. 11) have noted:

Australia has witnessed a 'normalising' of gambling and an upsurge in its popularity, concomitant with increasing recognition of its significant revenue raising capacity.

Australians are losing more money than ever through gambling. At present, the Australian government receives AU\$80 billion per year in gambling taxes, and the total amount lost by Australian gamblers in 1997–1998 is estimated to be AU\$11.3 billion (Productivity Commission 1999, p. 8). In South Australia, AU\$395 million was lost by poker machine players *alone* for the financial year 1997–1998 (Crabb 1998). Clearly it is possible that governments as well as individuals can develop a dependence on gambling.

When does gambling become a problem?

The increase in gambling has resulted in an increase in the number of people for whom gambling has become a problem (Lorenz 1987, Volberg 1994). Gambling behaviour is generally defined in terms of a continuum that extends from controlled to problematic/pathological gambling (Corless & Dickerson 1989, Volberg 1994, Brown & Coventry 1997). This seems deceptively simple, but defining problem gambling can be more problematic. As with all attempts to define and label, there is a danger that this may be seen as a value-free or objective process of applying attributes to individuals. McMillen's caution is surely apposite where she explains that:

Understandings of gambling are determined more by the perspectives and purposes of the analyst than by the inherent nature of the subject. All commentaries on gambling, even the most determinedly 'objective', proceed from a particular historically and socially determined point of view (McMillen 1996, p. 7).

Thus, a spokesperson for the gambling or clubs and hotels industry would wish to present a different definition of the problem gambler than a gambling counsellor or antigambling activist. For the former, problem gamblers may be viewed as 'people with problems who happen to gamble' (gambling industry leader cited in Productivity Commission 1999, v. 1, p. 26) or a person who will not or cannot gamble 'responsibly'. This is a linguistic approach that locates the problem within a dysfunctional individual while simultaneously absolving from blame the gambling industry and the wider socio-political context. For an antigambling activist, however, the problem gambler may be constructed as a victim of the various political, economic and social forces comprising the gambling industry that have ruthlessly targeted the person's disadvantage for their own financial ends. This position of course contains its own linguistic 'spin', which may frame people as helpless victims or cultural dupes who are incapable of exercising choices and personal responsibility. In short, there is no morally neutral or Archimedean point of detached certainty from which to define the problem gambler.

For the purpose of this review, we have defined problem gamblers in relation to the more widely agreed-upon criteria of the damaging effects that problem gambling has on individual and family lives. People can be defined as problem gamblers when their gambling is out of control to the extent that it is damaging their lives in various ways. Market Solutions & Dickerson (cited in Productivity Commission 1999, p. 18) give one of the clearest definitions when they state that problem gambling is:

the situation when a person's gambling activity gives rise to harm to the individual player and/or to his/her family and may extend to the community.

Considerable research has been conducted on problem gambling in a variety of countries (see Lesieur 1989 and Lesieur & Rosenthal 1991 for an overview of the literature). Studies indicate that problem gambling is a serious socio-economic and indeed public health problem. Studies have also shown that a significant proportion of the Australian population has a moderate or serious gambling problem, with *understated* estimates indicating that there are 293 000 problem gamblers in Australia (Productivity Commission 1999, pp. 19–22). The Productivity Commission's landmark report on Australia's gambling industry also shows that Australia has one of the highest levels of problem gambling in the world,

higher even than North America. These statistics become even more significant in human terms when we consider that the individual with a gambling problem is not the only person who is affected. The Commission's report also highlights the collateral effects of problem gambling when it validates the concerns of many counsellors in the field, by stating that *at least* five other people, such as family, friends and work colleagues are affected by this problem in addition to the gambler themselves. As Abbot & Cramer (1993, pp. 260–261) attest, 'a compulsive gambler can devastate the family system adversely affecting the marriage, parent-child relationships and the psychological development of children'.

The effects of problem gambling on the family

These potentially devastating collateral effects of problem gambling suggest that in order to develop a more complete understanding of this problem, researchers need to study the experiences of *all* those who are likely to be affected. While the majority of studies into problem gambling have focused on the gambler, several studies have widened the research lens to examine the effects on the families and the spouses of problem gamblers. However, the effects of parental problem gambling on children have seldom been investigated.

Research into the experiences of families of problem gamblers suggests that 'compulsive gambling creates serious problems for family members' (Lesieur & Rosenthal 1991, p. 19). These families can be severely disrupted, experiencing difficulties such as emotional distress from arguments, divorce and uncertainty, financial problems, and physical problems such as abuse (Jacobs 1989, Jacobs *et al.* 1989, Abbott & Cramer 1993, Heineman 1994, Orford 1994, Volberg 1994). Studies of the effects of problem gambling on the spouse have focused predominantly on the female partner (Mark & Lesieur 1992). This research indicates that the husband's or partner's gambling adversely affects these women. They may experience physical illness, depression, suicidal tendencies, financial problems, marital discord, and are also at increased risk of both physical and psychological abuse by their spouses (Franklin & Thoms 1989, Lesieur 1989, Lesieur & Rosenthal 1991).

The effects of problem gambling on children

As Brown & Coventry (1997, p. 11) have noted, 'children can sometimes be the unwitting sufferers (*sic*) of (parental) gambling behaviour'. It is difficult to determine the exact number of children affected by problem gambling. Jacobs *et al.* (1989) have calculated that in the USA the most conservative estimate of the prevalence of young people affected is 2.5 million. The Productivity

Commission in Australia reported that just under half of problem gamblers (49.4%) live in households with children and on average have two children, while the Commission's own survey estimates that there are statistically '0.6 children (under the age of 15 years) living with the average problem gambler' (Productivity Commission 1999, v. 1, 7.31–7.33). With approximately 290 000 problem gamblers in Australia, these figures suggest that there may be over 174 000 Australian children living within a problem gambling family. Given the large number of children likely to be affected by problem gambling in Australia, it is surprising that virtually no research has been undertaken to explore the ways in which living within a problem gambling family might impact on children's lives.

There is considerable community concern regarding the impact of parental problem gambling on Australian children (Hodgson 1995, AAP 1998, Kelly 1998). This is especially so in view of the increasing world-wide 'feminisation' of gambling (Productivity Commission 1999, v. 3, q 9–13) that accompanies gaming machines in particular. It is widely believed, and certainly here in Australia, that 'pokies' or gaming machines have contributed significantly to the move away from problem gambling being seen as an almost exclusively male problem (Dickerson *et al.* 1996, Brown & Coventry 1997).

Such concern has often been articulated in gambling 'urban legends' (Brunvand 1983, Brunvand 1987, Brunvand 1989), stories about parents (usually mothers) who would be so driven by the urge to gamble that they would leave their children in cars outside casinos or hotel gaming rooms. As with many urban legends, these stories catch the popular imagination by crystallising a very complex issue into an easily visualised moral narrative, in this case one of neglect of near mythical status, neglect that is readily perceived as almost the ultimate transgression of motherhood and its values. Sadly, however, for one 19-month-old boy in Victoria, the legend became a terrible reality when he died after being left in his mother's car for over 2½ hours where the summer heat reached 65 °C (Cant 2000, Pellegrini 2000).

While community concern around the issue of the effect of problem gambling on children has been clear, both Australian and international research in this area has been minimal. In a study of the needs of women with gambling problems, Brown & Coventry (1997) interviewed Australian women about their gambling problem. These women indicated that their gambling resulted in mood swings, stress, guilt, a sense of isolation, and neglectful behaviour, which negatively affected their children. American research suggests a link between parental problem gamblers and behavioural, physical, psychosocial and psychological problems experienced by their children.

The results of many of these studies appear to mirror the results found in similar research conducted on the effect of parental drug or alcohol dependency on children. In an exploratory qualitative study involving interviews with 10 participants who were affected by drug and alcohol problems, Raine (1994–5) identified a range of 'recurring themes' in the interviewees' accounts related to children. Family life for these people was characterised by impaired communication and social relations, marital discord, domestic violence, isolation and stigma. Emotional and behavioural disturbances in the participants' children were also noted. In a study of the social and psychological needs of children of drug users, Hogan (1997, p. 35) found that:

The greatest parenting difficulties appeared to be associated with active drug use, when parents were preoccupied with warding off withdrawal and led chaotic lifestyles centred around the pursuit of drugs.

Substitute gambling for drug taking here and many problem gamblers and their children would recognise this picture of a chaotic lifestyle governed by the desperate need to gamble. Hogan (1997) also identifies other features of her research participants' family life that resonate clearly with the experiences of children in problem gambling families. These include inconsistent parenting, difficulties in school progress, reduced or lack of parental interest and involvement, parental emotional unavailability, increased family tension and discord, parental separation, difficult peer relationships, parental irritability and volatility and varying levels of physical and verbal harshness, ranging from erratic and punitive discipline to more serious abuse.

Jacobs *et al.* (1989) and Jacobs (1989) found a similar range of problems reported by high school students who identified their parent(s) as having a compulsive gambling problem. Jacobs *et al.* (1989) suggested that these children of problem gamblers often have inadequate stress management skills, poor interpersonal relations and inferior coping abilities. The researchers concluded that:

The results reflect a definite linkage between parental problem gamblers and elevated risks for dysfunctional behaviours among offspring raised in what may be termed 'pathogenic families' (p. 266).

Other studies support the view that children who live in an environment where gambling is a problem may be exposed to the fallout from financial difficulties, marital discord, and inconsistent and confusing parenting behaviour. These children may become socially isolated and both physically and emotionally deprived, feeling abandoned, angry, depressed and suicidal (Abbott *et al.* 1995, Jacobs *et al.* 1989, Lesieur & Rothschild 1989). Other studies have suggested that children of problem

gamblers may also suffer from stress-related illnesses such as asthma and allergies, and perform poorly in school due to anxiety about themselves and about the stability of their family (Abbott *et al.* 1995, Franklin & Thoms 1989).

Franklin & Thoms (1989, pp. 140–142) present a 'potential profile of a child of a compulsive gambler', which highlights the extent of the problems that these children may face. They describe a child who lives with almost perpetual disappointment as their parent(s) fails to keep a range of promises. The child may try to rescue the situation by becoming the over-responsible 'family fixer', or the scapegoat or the peacemaker. Their schooling may suffer and their contact and relationships with peers and friends may deteriorate. Emotionally, they can experience isolation, depression, anxiety, and anger, which can be neither adequately expressed nor attended to within the family. Poignantly, these children will often protest that they will never gamble and subject their families and children to a similar fate when they grow up. Unfortunately, the research shows that this ideal may be more cherished than actual, and that these children are at greater risk of developing gambling and other addictive behaviours. Several researchers have noted a link between parental problem gambling and the likelihood of the child taking up gambling in later life (Lesieur & Klein 1987, Moody 1989, Browne & Brown 1993, Fisher 1993, Ladouceur *et al.*, 1994, Griffiths 1995). Abbott *et al.* (1995) found that children of problem gamblers were four times more likely to gamble than their peers. Children of problem gamblers have also been reported to be at risk of experiencing abuse by both the gambler and his or her spouse. Lesieur and Rothschild (1989) suggest that children of problem gambling parents are *two to three times* more likely to be abused than their peers. They are also at a higher risk of developing 'health-threatening behaviours' (Jacobs *et al.* 1989), such as smoking, drinking, drug use, overeating and gambling.

The research literature on the effects of parental problem gambling on children and young people indicates that they may be severely and negatively effected by their parents' behaviour. As Lorenz (1987, p. 83) has noted, 'children of the pathological gambler are probably the most victimized' by parental problem gambling. Some specific criticisms have been made of the sparse body of literature concerning children who live with a parent(s) who has a gambling problem. For example, Mark & Lesieur (1992, p. 555), as part of a wider critique of gender blindness in problem gambling research, noted that in Jacobs' study (Jacobs *et al.* 1989), there was no mention made of the gender mix of his sample of 'high school students', while in Lesieur & Rothschild's (1989) study, a breakdown of the sample's gender was given but results were presented homogenously. Similarly, in

Franklin & Thom's (1989) review of the effects of problem gambling on children, it is assumed that it is the father who will have the gambling problem. One of the effects of the widespread introduction of gaming machines in Australia has, however, been the increase in the number of women with gambling problems. Brown & Coventry (1997), in one of the few studies of these women, noted that:

The number of women experiencing problems with gambling seems to be on the increase, and this can be associated with their clear preference for electronic gaming machines, team lottery play and to a lesser extent, casinos (p. 11).

This accords with the finding of an Australian survey by Dickerson *et al.* (1996) who warned that:

Given that *all* the women problem gamblers in this study used gaming machines as their preferred form of gambling, one prediction currently being explored is that the introduction of gaming machines will differentially impact negatively on women (pp. 176–177) [*italics added*].

Thus, as more women, and almost certainly more mothers, develop 'pokies'-related gambling problems, it is very likely that the number of children affected by parental problem gambling will increase.

A more serious criticism of this body of research could be that it tends to situate the children of problem gamblers as passive victims. There is an overall sense in the literature of children being passive recipients of and respondents to their parent's problem. Within these predominantly psychometric studies there is generally little attention paid to how children actively deal with this situation on an everyday basis, and certainly there has been little or no systematic qualitative research designed to directly seek and attend to these children and young people's accounts and understandings of their experiences. As Lesieur (1989) has observed:

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 (p. 237) [*italics in original*].

How could the situation arise whereby researchers have overlooked such a fundamentally important question in relation to the effects of problem gambling on families? To understand this invisibility of children's perspectives, an examination of the wider world of research with children is valuable.

Involving and consulting children in research

The tendency in the gambling literature to ignore children's perspectives is not an isolated one. Health and family research has generally been inclined to locate children as objects of research rather than respected participants in the process (Hill *et al.* 1996). The outcome of

this omission of children's viewpoints has been that their experiences and perspectives have largely been ignored (Backett & Alexander 1991, Levin 1995). Health and social research literature generally represents children by voices other than their own (Qvortrup 1997). For example, children's experiences in a variety of areas are often accessed indirectly through *adult* views of these experiences. Ross & Ross (1984), for example, in a study of children's experiences of pain, noted that 'with few exceptions the literature on childhood pain reflects an exclusively adult perspective' (p. 71), while a recent study of paediatric dialysis outcome standards revealed that quality outcomes standards for children 'are based on evidence derived from the experience of adult dialysis patients' (Jabs & Warady 1999, p. 97). This tendency confers an adult bias, or 'adult-centrism' (Tammivaara & Enright 1986), on our understanding of the child's world and of their experiences. The child's perspective has also been essentially ignored in the literature relating to children and families. This occurs particularly through familialisation (Oldman 1994), the process whereby children are seen only in terms of the family, rather than being viewed as independent beings and agents with experiences that can be understood in their own right, and not merely as extensions of family functioning (Brannen & O'Brien 1995, Mahon *et al.* 1996).

One of the main reasons for the exclusion of children's voices from the research literature is that their views may be considered irrational or invalid. It has often been assumed that children are unable to provide legitimate, insightful and coherent accounts of their experiences for the purpose of research (Ritala-Koskinen 1995). This perception of children is largely based on the developmental paradigm, which has long been the dominant framework for interpreting the nature of both children and childhood (Prout & James 1997). The developmental paradigm adheres to a stage model of childhood development, where children are understood to progress through discrete stages of development on their way to becoming adults. As a result of this paradigm, children have often been seen as irrational and incompetent, and as essentially immature, until they 'reach maturity', i.e. adulthood (Hood *et al.* 1996, James *et al.* 1998).

A danger inherent in an over-reliance on the developmental view of children and childhood is that this may render the child's perspective invalid by assigning it to the marginalised position of 'immaturity'. Similarly, the child's perspective can only gain legitimacy through adult explanation and validation. The developmental perspective also tends to view children as innocent, vulnerable, and essentially unable to make a 'serious' decision, and so the authority to consent and to participate in research, for example, is invested in parents, caregivers and/or professionals.

The developmental paradigm and its dominance have been critiqued by various social science researchers for a number of reasons. Firstly, it has been criticised for its creation of a culture that fails to listen to children (Lansdown 1994). Second, the developmental framework has legitimised the exclusion of children's participation in research and decision-making, resulting in children's needs being represented by adult interests that may be significantly different from their own. The assumption that adult views are more accurate than those of children is not necessarily correct. As Backett & Alexander (1991) have pointed out, 'greater legitimacy has been unreflectively accredited to the knowledge, experience and power of (children's) caretakers' (p. 35). Children's competencies, it has been proposed, need to be seen as *different*, rather than lesser compared to those of adults (Morrow & Richards 1996). Third, the developmental notion that children's views and understanding are inaccurate and invalid can have a negative impact on professionals who deal with children. An unquestioned adoption of this view may lead them to plan and provide services for children that are designed and operated by and for adults, and almost entirely uninformed by the child's understandings and perspectives. Gaining access to and attending respectfully to children's views and experiences is important in order to provide services that more accurately reflect their needs. Finally, developmentalism has been criticised for failing to see children as active participants in their culture. Instead, childhood is seen as a stage when children are passive recipients of socialisation, and therefore excluded from participation in constructing their own lives (Hood *et al.* 1996). Through this construction of children as passive recipients, developmental views of childhood can be seen to privilege and naturalise adult social norms and perspectives (Prout & James 1997, Qvortrup 1997).

The importance of ascertaining children's understandings and experiences is being increasingly recognised. Children are now seen to have rights as individuals in addition to being the responsibility of their parents or caregivers (Ireland & Holloway 1996, Mahon *et al.* 1996), and greater importance is being placed on child-centred research (Bricher 1999, Saporiti 1994). A rights-based impetus towards seeking and valuing children's perspectives is supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which promotes children's right to have their voices heard. Article 13 for example, notes that, 'the child shall have the right to freedom of expression ... to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds' (Alderson 1995, p. 70). Researchers are now attempting to address childhood issues from viewpoints that differ markedly from the developmental framework (see James *et al.* 1998, for

an overview of this work). Within these emerging frameworks, children are increasingly being recognised as competent, rational beings whose views and accounts of their experiences are worthy of serious consideration. Note, however, that this is not the same as claiming that children are 'always right' or that their accounts 'speak for themselves' and are thus interpretively unproblematic, for this claim would be no more sustainable than a similar claim that 'adults are always right'.

Researchers are increasingly acknowledging the value of children's accounts of their own experiences (Ross & Ross 1984, Ritala-Koskinen 1995, Mahon *et al.* 1996). For example, Ireland & Holloway (1996) note that 'children are a valuable source of information, and useful data can be collected by interviewing them' (p. 155), while Alderson (1993) also notes 'how acutely aware many young children are, how potently they express themselves through their words and behaviour, and how much they need to be listened to and respected' (p. 67).

Research conducted by directly engaging children and young people as active participants alerts us to the value of what children and young people have to say. While this 'new paradigm' of research with children has focused on many health and social issues (e.g. Bernheimer 1986, Faux *et al.* 1988, Deatrick & Faux 1991, Alderson 1993, Hoppe *et al.* 1994, Ryan-Wenger & Walsh 1994, Hymovich 1995, Ireland & Holloway 1996, Morningstar *et al.* 1996, Bricher 1999), to date children's accounts of their experiences of living with a parent(s) who has a serious gambling problem have not been adequately sought. According to Qvortrup (1997, p. 102), this failure to 'account for the impact specifically on children of important events, whether at the familial or societal level' is a way of depriving these children of the right to be heard.

Conclusion

Children who grow up in a family where a parent(s) has a serious gambling problem face clear risks to their overall health and wellbeing. Given the increasing availability, visibility and uptake of gambling opportunities in Australia and worldwide, it is entirely possible that parental problem gambling will become even more of a child-health as well as a social issue in the future.

The limited number of studies that have been carried out into the effects of parental problem gambling have shown a wide range of health and social problems affecting these children and young people, which may lead to a related range of problems in adult life. While this research literature is limited in volume, it is also limited in its scope and in its research approaches. There appear to have been no studies undertaken that

sought to discover the perspectives, understandings and experiences of the children and young people themselves. This reluctance to engage directly with children and their accounts may arise from an adherence to particular views of children's capacities and of the nature of childhood itself, by those who see children as essentially immature and lacking essential 'research competence'.

New paradigms of research with children are emerging, however, which question these assumptions of deficit and which seek to engage children and young people in systematic qualitative research about their lives. If we are to gain a deeper understanding of what it is like to be a child growing up in a home where a parent has a gambling problem, we need research evidence that sensitively elicits and explores the child's world as they see and articulate it.

This is not a plea for the over-privileging of children's accounts, for children can no more be 'always right' than can adults. Nor do we suggest that children's accounts can be held up as unproblematic representations of some external truth. We do suggest though, that before professionals begin to plan or to provide support services for children who experience such family discord, it would be wise to have a research-based understanding of such perceptions and experiences of children. As Oakley (1994) succinctly puts it:

The best way to defend the development of children's studies for children is to enrol them fully in the research process (p. 26).

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