

# Briefing Paper: Digital Technologies, AI and Gambling Harms (Children and Young People)

**Newcastle Safeguarding Children Partnership (NSCP)**

**Date:** 30<sup>th</sup> June 2026

**Audience:** Statutory and relevant safeguarding partners across education, local authority services, health, police, voluntary and community sector

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## Purpose of this briefing

This briefing summarises key safeguarding risks and implications arising from a rapid evidence review into the relationship between digital technologies, artificial intelligence (AI), and gambling-related harms among children and young people.

It is intended to inform partners' understanding of emerging risks within online environments and support a coordinated safeguarding response.

## Context and Rationale

Children are growing up in a highly digitised environment where gambling-like mechanisms are embedded within everyday platforms such as video games, apps, and social media.

These mechanisms—including loot boxes, microtransactions, influencer promotions, algorithmic nudging, and online betting—blur the distinction between gaming and gambling and are frequently unregulated or poorly understood.

The evidence highlights a significant safeguarding gap driven by:

- Limited awareness among parents and carers
- Lack of consistent coverage in school curricula
- Rapid technological development outpacing policy and research

Children are particularly vulnerable due to developmental factors such as impulsivity, susceptibility to peer influence, and limited understanding of financial risk.

## What the Evidence Tells Us

### 1. Gaming and Gambling Are Converging

Digital games increasingly include gambling-like features such as loot boxes, in-game purchases, and simulated betting systems.

These features:

- Normalise gambling behaviours within non-gambling contexts
- Present as low-risk and entertaining
- Can act as a pathway into real-money gambling and addictive behaviours

Accessibility is high, with weak age verification, free-to-play models, and limited adult recognition of risk.

## 2. Children Experience Continuous Exposure

Gambling-like content is no longer confined to dedicated environments; it is encountered frequently through everyday digital use.

Portable devices and pervasive advertising mean these features are directly accessible within the home, removing traditional safeguards such as physical supervision and restricted access.

## 3. Marketing and Influencers Normalise Gambling

Children are exposed to gambling through:

- Social media and influencer content
- Sports sponsorships and advertising
- Family attendance at betting-related events

Marketing strategies are designed to:

- Make gambling appear fun, social, and low-risk
- Use rewards, humour, and celebrity endorsement to build trust
- Encourage repeated engagement through promotions and incentives

Repeated exposure contributes to the normalisation of gambling behaviours from an early age.

## 4. Recognised Harms to Children and Young People

**Short-term harms include:**

- Impulsive or excessive spending
- Emotional distress, frustration, and anxiety
- Disrupted sleep
- Family conflict linked to spending or behaviour

**Long-term harms include:**

- Normalisation of gambling behaviours from childhood
- Transition from simulated to real-money gambling
- Increased risk of financial harm and debt
- Associations with mental health concerns (depression, anxiety, internet addiction)

Evidence also links gambling-related features to psychological distress, poor sleep, and loss of control over spending.

## 5. Emerging Risk: AI and Algorithmic Systems

AI-driven systems are identified as an emerging and under-researched safeguarding risk.

These systems can:

- Track user behaviour and personalise offers
- Encourage increased spending and engagement
- Tailor rewards and pricing to maximise consumption

The pace of development is outstripping current regulation, and there is limited evidence on long-term impacts for children.

## What This Means in Practice

The evidence reframes digital gambling-related harms as a public health and safeguarding issue, rather than solely a regulatory or behavioural concern.

In practice, this means:

- Exposure to gambling-like mechanisms should be considered in assessments of online harm and neglect
- Risks may present before a child reaches the legal age for gambling
- Harm can occur within ordinary, widely accepted activities such as gaming
- Safeguarding responses must extend beyond traditional definitions of gambling

Children cannot be expected to recognise or manage these risks independently, due to the sophistication of design and marketing models.

## Key Messages for Partners

- Gambling-like features are embedded within everyday digital environments used by children.
- Exposure is frequent, normalised, and often unsupervised.
- Harms range from financial issues to emotional and mental health impacts.
- AI-driven systems are likely to increase both exposure and risk.
- Current safeguarding systems and education do not consistently address this area.

## Safeguarding and Partnership Implications

### For Schools and Education

Gambling-related risks should be incorporated into digital literacy, online safety, and financial education, with content tailored to age and developmental understanding.

Schools should also be alert to indicators such as unexplained spending, sleep disruption, anxiety linked to gaming, and reduced concentration.

## For Parents and Carers

Parents should be supported to:

- Understand gambling-like features in games and apps
- Have open, non-judgemental conversations with children
- Use practical safeguards such as spending controls and parental settings

## Engagement and Next Steps

Partners should consider how this emerging risk is reflected within:

- Local safeguarding policies and thresholds
- Online safety and harm frameworks
- Training and workforce development
- Multi-agency prevention and early help approaches

A coordinated, system-wide response is required to address the scale and complexity of digital gambling-related harms for children and young people.

*This briefing is based on the webinar on “Digital Technologies, Artificial Intelligence, and Gambling Harms Among Children and Young People”, delivered by Dr Nomisha Chandran Kurian and colleagues at the University of Warwick (UKRI-funded).*