

That Impulsive, Moody Preschooler May Grow Up to Be a Problem Gambler

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Give me the child at 3 and I will give you the adult compulsive gambler. That is the striking finding of a new study in [Psychological Science](#), a journal published by the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

Based on tests of over 900 individuals beginning in toddlerhood, the study found that “people who were rated at age three as being more restless, inattentive, oppositional, and moody than other three-year old children were twice as likely to grow up to have problems with gambling as adults three decades later,” says psychologist Wendy S. Slutske of University of Missouri, who conducted the study with Terrie E. Moffitt and Avshalom Caspi, both of Duke University and University College/London; and Richie Poulton of University of Otago, in Dunedin, New Zealand.

As the first study to establish a causal link between a so-called “under-controlled” temperament in early childhood and later compulsive gambling, said Slutske, it answers a crucial question: “How early can we tell a person is at increased risk?”

The study looked at individuals from the Dunedin (New Zealand) Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study, a longitudinal study of one birth cohort. Based on behaviors observed during a 90-minute assessment, 1,037 three-year-olds were categorized as having one of five temperaments: under-controlled, inhibited, confident, reserved, or well adjusted. Those children who were categorized as having an under-controlled temperament were more restless, impulsive, and negative and were less able to regulate their emotions.

At ages 21 and 36, 939 of the study participants answered questions about gambling behavior. At 21, 86 percent of the respondents had gambled, but only 13 percent in a “disordered” way—defined by such problems as a preoccupation with gambling; a need to wager more and more to get the same enjoyment; getting into financial, personal, or work-related difficulties because of gambling; and difficulty in cutting down or quitting. By 32, only about 4 percent of the participants still gambled at that level.

Among the compulsive gamblers, men were more numerous than women, as were those with low childhood intelligence and socioeconomic status. But under-controlled temperament in toddlerhood remained a significant predictor of disordered gambling in adulthood, even after gender, intelligence, and socioeconomic status were taken into account.

It is important to keep in mind that the number of people who actually end up becoming compulsive gamblers is relatively small. But the findings, said Slutske, are still important given “the ever-increasing number of [gambling] temptations our world presents,” such as the opportunities to place bets at home on the Internet at any time of day or night. Some vulnerable individuals may not be well-equipped to handle such temptations.

And the implications of the study may even go beyond gambling. “It fits into a larger story about how self-control in early childhood is related to important life outcomes in adulthood,” said Slutske. New programs for boosting self-control—even Sesame Street’s segments on the importance of saving money and waiting until later for goodies—might not only head off a painful future of compulsive gambling but also increase children’s chances of academic success, financial security, and personal happiness when they grow up.