

## Local View: The NFL Playoffs action we're not talking about: the surge of youth gambling

Opinion by Susan Sheridan Tucker | January 27, 2024

As parents and caregivers, we want to protect our kids from life's many risks. We encourage kids to bundle up for wintry weather and wear helmets and pads when playing hockey. When it comes to discussing risky behaviors such as drinking or vaping, we rely on those same instincts. We strive to empower our children to make safe, informed choices.

Problem gambling, a progressive fixation on gambling that disrupts development and growth, needs our similar vigilance. Gambling is surging among kids and teens, and sports betting can be a popular yet dangerous entry point. While sports betting is not legal in Minnesota, the NFL Playoffs and Super Bowl LVIII — and the games' plethora of commercial breaks — provide apt opportunities for adults to get informed and broach conversations about gambling addiction.

Super Bowl Sunday stands out as one of the biggest betting days, and we know youth are joining in. An estimated [50.4 million adults](#) — one in every five Americans — wagered on last year's championship game. Rates of youth gambling are growing, too. In the latest national survey, [60% to 80% of high schoolers](#) reported placing a bet in the past year. In the 2022 Minnesota Student Survey, more than 6,000



Guy Parsons/Cagle Cartoons

Minnesota high schoolers shared they're having issues with gambling.

With sports betting now legal [in 37 states](#), Super Bowl betting is expected to reach record levels this year. This raises concerns, too, about less trackable numbers: minors using offshore sportsbooks or betting on sports.

Children venture into gambling in different ways. Friends might bet on their favorite teams or tack on a winning pot to fantasy leagues. Others might wager behind screens, playing online or purchasing loot boxes, gambling to boost their chances of advancing a game. Gambling can also be an activity adults unsuspectingly spur on, like betting on a child's game performance or allowing them to scratch off lottery tickets. Even kids as young

as nine or 10 are impressionable, and they may be downloading apps with a parent's credit card.

Some adults might want to punt these conversations unless problems arise. After all, taking risks is part of growing up, right? However, youth gambling hinders cognitive development and increases one's risks of addiction. Gambling [revs up the brain's reward hub](#), priming the body to seek greater thrills over time. A still-growing prefrontal cortex can't fully weigh risks and decisions. Youths who gamble find it hard to set limits or stop.

Kids introduced to gambling by age 12 are [four times more likely](#) to struggle with gambling as adults. [Family history](#) of alcoholism, mental health issues, or trauma can ramp up risks. Like any addiction, gambling problems can spiral. Today's losses might mean a squandered allowance. Tomorrow's losses could jeopardize college scholarships, job prospects, or personal finances. Clear, honest communication can help you learn more about your child's familiarity with gambling. Maybe this conversation happens during a commercial break or timeout during the Super Bowl or conference championships. If you're hit with a wall of blank stares or closed doors, stick with it. Express your concerns and listen to their perspective. Remind them underage gambling is illegal, risky, and not a way to make money. (Statistically, they're [more likely to get struck by lightning](#) than to [win \\$10,000 on a scratch-off](#).) Reflect on your gambling habits, too.

Signs of a gambling problem may camouflage as typical adolescent or teen behavior. Watch for your child spending more time than usual online or giving questionable explanations for lost money or new items. Monitor bank accounts and track the apps and sites they visit. The Minnesota Alliance on Problem Gambling offers resources on identifying these signs in kids and how to help. A

digital toolkit geared to high schoolers and college students is coming soon. Minnesota parents can ask questions by calling [1-800-333-HOPE](tel:1-800-333-HOPE) or by texting HOPE to 53342.

Just as we remind kids and teens about staying hydrated and following the rules of the road, we should share and model cautions around gambling and sports betting. Gambling isn't a safe alternative to alcohol or drug use. It's an activity that poses dangerous risks for growing bodies and minds. As parents and caregivers, we have a chance to offer a positive example.

So, no matter which team you're cheering for or whether you're watching the big halftime show, consider a conversation about gambling addiction.

*Susan Sheridan Tucker is president of the [National Council on Problem Gambling's](#) board of directors and executive director of the [Minnesota Alliance on Problem Gambling](#), a statewide organization based in Roseville. She is the mother of two adult daughters. To learn more about youth gambling, she suggests visiting [mnapg.org/gambling-addiction/youth-gambling/](http://mnapg.org/gambling-addiction/youth-gambling/).*