

Risk and Protective Factors

When considering high school individuals who engage in sports gambling or betting, risk and protective factors play a significant role in determining the likelihood of experiencing healthy or unhealthy gambling behaviors. Here are the key risk and protective factors:

Risk Factors

These factors increase the likelihood of developing a problematic relationship with gambling among youth and emerging adults:

1. Peer Influence:

Adolescents and young adults may be more likely to gamble if their friends or peer group engage in gambling. Social pressure to fit in or emulate others, either online or in person, can drive risky behaviors.

2. Age of Onset:

The earlier one starts an activity without seeing or experiencing negative consequences, the greater the likelihood of developing a problematic relationship with gambling since patterns are being established while the brain is still developing.

3. Family History of Gambling:

A family environment where gambling is normalized or where parents and other relatives have gambling issues can increase the risk for young people. This is especially true the earlier one is exposed to the activity and instances where there are no perceived negative consequences.

4. Availability of Sports Betting Platforms:

The easy access and availability to online betting platforms, mobile apps, and advertising targeting youth increases exposure and temptation to engage in sports gambling.

5. Impulsivity:

Adolescents and young adults are still developing impulse control. High levels of impulsivity can lead to rash decisions, including excessive gambling without consideration of consequences.

6. Mental Health Issues:

Conditions such as anxiety, depression, or substance misuse can increase the likelihood of using gambling as a form of action or escape or coping mechanism.

7. Previous Gambling Behavior:

Early exposure to gambling mechanics or gambling like activities (even in non-financial forms, like video games with in-app purchases or prize packs or loot boxes) can increase risk for future problematic behaviors.

8. Financial Stress:

Economic pressures, including the need to pay for tuition, living expenses, or other personal costs, may push individuals to gamble in the hope of making quick money.

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9. Thrill-Seeking Personality:

Some young people are naturally drawn to risk-taking behaviors, and gambling offers a potential source of excitement or adrenaline, especially when linked to sports.

10. Low Perception of Risk:

Misunderstanding the actual odds or consequences of gambling, coupled with the illusion of skill in sports betting, can increase involvement and financial losses

11. Emotional Dysregulation:

Emotional dysregulation is the inability to manage or generally respond appropriately to emotional states. Gambling can become a way to cope with stressors and events in life while the intermittent reward schedule of wins and losses can create a maladaptive pattern of behavior.

12. Alcohol and Substance Use:

Engaging in alcohol or drug use, often common in college environments, can lower inhibitions and lead to riskier gambling decisions. 94% of people with gambling problems will have at least one co-occurring mental health or addictive disorder (including alcohol and nicotine dependence, depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder) (Pricel et al., 2021).

13. Cognitive Distortions:

Cognitive distortions are inaccurate or irrational thought patterns that reinforce maladaptive behaviors. Common distortions in gambling include the illusion of control (believing one can influence outcomes) and the gambler's fallacy (believing past events influence future probabilities). These distortions lead to persistent gambling despite negative outcomes, as individuals misinterpret losses as near-wins or opportunities for recovery.

14. Trauma:

Trauma refers to the emotional, physiological, and psychological response to deeply distressing or disturbing experiences. Trauma survivors may use gambling as a coping mechanism to numb or distract from pain. The dissociative states induced by gambling can temporarily alleviate intrusive memories or feelings associated with trauma.

15. Toxic Stress

Toxic stress results from prolonged exposure to intense, adverse conditions without adequate support or resources to manage it. Gambling, with the potential for immediate rewards, can offer a temporary escape from the pressures of daily life, but it ultimately may exacerbate stress through financial losses and relationship problems.

16. Loneliness / Social Isolation

Loneliness is the subjective experience of feeling isolated or disconnected from others. Gaming and gambling through online platforms often temporarily fills a void while providing a sense of community, however superficial, that appeals to lonely individuals. Loneliness can amplify the emotional highs and lows of gambling, making wins feel more rewarding and losses feel more isolating.

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Protective Factors

These factors can help reduce the likelihood of developing a problematic relationship with sports gambling:

1. Parental Involvement and Communication:

Active parental involvement and open communication about the dangers of sports gambling can reduce the appeal and engagement in risky behaviors.

2. Education and Awareness:

Awareness campaigns that educate young people about the risks and realities of sports gambling, including the role of luck versus perceived skill, can deter or reduce sports gambling engagement.

3. Positive Peer Influence:

Being part of a peer group that discourages underage or early onset sports gambling or promotes healthier alternative social activities can buffer against risk-taking behaviors.

4. Extracurricular Involvement:

Participation in structured activities, such as sports, clubs, or volunteer work, provides a healthy outlet for energy and reduces idle time that could otherwise be spent betting on sports.

5. Healthy Coping Mechanisms:

Developing effective ways to manage social isolation or stress, such as through physical activity, mindfulness, coping skills or counseling, can decrease the temptation to gamble as an escape.

6. Financial Literacy:

Teaching young people about responsible money management, budgeting, and the potential pitfalls of gambling can protect them from the allure of quick financial gains through sports betting.

7. Strong School and Community Support Systems:

Supportive environments at school and in the community, including access to mental health services and counseling, can provide young individuals and emerging adults with the help they need to avoid or reduce sports gambling-related problems.

8. Regulations and Legal Restrictions:

Stricter regulations and legislation on access for minors, including limits on advertising or the use of age verification processes, can reduce exposure and involvement in sports wagering.