

GROWING UP IN THE DIGITAL AGE

By Karissa Niehoff, Executive Director of the National Federation of State High School Associations and Ron Laird, Commissioner of the Wyoming High School Activities Association.

From the Greatest Generation to Baby Boomers, Generation X to Millennials, teenagers in every era have had challenges growing up.

In today's digital world, high school students are being tested in unique and demanding ways. *The Washington Post* confirms that 73 percent of all American teenagers own their own smartphone and, on average, spend almost nine hours a day texting, chatting, gaming, blogging, streaming and visiting with friends online.

Although conclusive research showing a direct correlation between the mental health of teenagers and smartphone usage won't be complete for years, it isn't a great confidence builder for a student to discover online that everyone else seems to have more friends.

In addition, recent figures indicate that more than 31 percent of America's 42 million teenagers are overweight or obese, compared to only five percent in 1980. According to the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health, Wyoming is ranked the 38th most obese state in the nation with 27.1 percent of all teenagers considered overweight.

Not surprisingly, many psychologists and researchers agree that today's teenagers are more lonely, anxious and depressed than ever before.

As the new school year gets underway and social pressures increase, statistics like these verify how important it is for teenagers to participate in high school sports and other activities such as marching band, choir, speech and debate.

The most recent survey by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) indicates there are almost eight million participants in high school sports and more than four million in performing arts activities. Most of these students would agree the primary advantage of playing a sport or participating in an after-school activity is the opportunity to meet new people and develop meaningful friendships. An online chat is no substitute for working toward a common goal face-to-face, side-by-side for weeks on end with teammates.

And positive social relationships are only the beginning. Among other benefits, high school sports are instrumental in helping teenagers establish nutritional and exercise habits that will carry them for a lifetime. Participating in a sport in high school is a great way to maintain a healthy weight, establish good eating and sleeping habits, discourage the use of alcohol and drugs and develop a greater sense of self-esteem.

Additional benefits of participating in a high school sport or activity are shared by the NFHS on a new website at MyReasonWhy.com, where dozens of high school students address this topic in their own words through videos.

A new school year brings with it an opportunity for teenagers to make new friends and establish new lifestyle habits. Encouraging them to make friends on the field of play as well as online is great way to start.