

The end of 2007 is close at hand. We look back on a year of ups and downs, personally and as a nation. We look forward with anticipation and hope to a year of presidential politics, another election, and our personal choices that will determine so much for each of us. Now is a good time to take a deep breath and think about the whole concept of choosing wisely.

The political juggernaut will touch us all at some point in the coming year. There are two choices: to vote or not and for whom. Don't fail to utilize this privilege.

Planning for our children's experiences is daunting. There are multiple choices of activities and advice abounding that encourages us to "introduce your child to everything" and "don't over-schedule your child". Looking ahead, many of us feel like the world is very competitive and kids need to hone those skills early. Others feel that kids need time to be kids. Parents must choose an approach and make selections, relying on the coaches and instructors to make good on whatever skill you've hired them to develop.

For parents, increasing the emphasis on competition and winning in anything from orchestra to sports, risks pushing a talented child to burnout or alienation. Taking a few minutes to think about where you want your child to be looking back from in 10 years is a good way to "reality check" your decisions. Want them remembering those years between 8 and 18 with smiles or with anger on a therapist's couch? Plan now for some period of time each year where your child is in charge of the schedule...even if for a month.

Keep your suggestions to yourself unless you are specifically asked and listen carefully to your child. When he tells you what he would like to do for the "off" time, don't offer all the reasons he should not do this. Support your child's desire to make an alternate choice and agree on the beginning and end of the time period.

In the years of school, lessons, sports, church groups, then part-time jobs, it seems like you are harnessed to the steering wheel. Yet, suddenly, there is a familiar stranger walking across a stage wearing a flapping gown and flat hat and before your eyes, your child is off into a chapter that you only get occasional glimpses of as the distances between generations widens. The decisions you encourage now, aid in your child's success as he or she takes the reigns.

Focusing your child's activities on competition can offer the life lessons of winning and losing gracefully; of setting goals and teamwork to accomplish them; of time management and focus; of leadership and support. You need coaches and teachers who share this concept. It isn't competition that is bad; it is how competition is integrated into the game, contest, audition, which makes the difference.

Each of us desires our children to be successful. Taking time to sort out our own definitions of success can help us guide our kids through the maze of choices that will influence their character. Trophies and titles get dusty and forgotten. Good friendships and a reputation for honesty and integrity shine brighter over the years. Happy New Choices this Year.