

Who Chooses?

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My son recently graduated from Middle School, sort of.

Baseball takes a front seat in our family each spring. My two teenage sons have played on teams since they were little. My husband and I are devoted fans of theirs and we cheer loudly from the stands. When they are not playing baseball themselves, my sons are dedicated to following the stats of their favorite team, the Boston Red Sox.

So it was a bit of a conundrum when we learned that Noah, our 8th grader, had a baseball playoff game scheduled at the *exact* same time of his middle school graduation. We had never missed a graduation ceremony (our oldest child is now in college) but Noah had been teammates with many of the players for five seasons and he felt a deep connection to them. My husband and I had logged in over 200 hours cheering for these kids as we witnessed them grow in skill, confidence and sportsmanship. We had enjoyed a sweet camaraderie with the parents who shared our commitment to carving out time to be present in moments that mattered most to our kids.

We paused to consider the significance of 8th grade graduation. Hmm...middle school culmination ceremony vs. a baseball playoff game. While I did have a sentimental moment or two, I knew that this was not really a tough decision. Having parented Noah's older siblings -now 19 and 17- through their early teens, my husband and I are clearer about which decisions are appropriate for 14 year olds to make, and which ones are best left with us.

Noah does not *always* get to choose. As parents, we are sticklers about which school he attends, that schoolwork takes priority, and that everyone shows up for family events and Jewish holidays. We keep the Big Picture in mind when we take the lead on those non-negotiable parts of his life.

Noah gets to choose his friends, his hair and clothing styles, his iPod tunes, books, TV shows (mostly), and what his room looks like (messy!). He also chooses which sports he plays, which clubs he joins, and all of his extracurricular activities.

Thus, this decision seemed like a good one for us to leave to Noah.

To him, this decision was a "no brainer." For Noah, there was no Graduation Ceremony vs. Playoff Game conflict. He wanted to be loyal to his teammates and let's face it, to get to play in the game. He was not thinking about a meaningful ceremonial transition from middle to high school. He was wondering how many innings he would get to play as Short Stop and how many as Catcher.

He is 14, after all.

Teens feel passionately about so many things. They *must* see this movie with *these* friends on opening night. They *must* hang out with a particular friend *that very day*. The action feels critical. But like those on the extended guest list for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah party, some friendships turn out to be only temporary. And just as ephemeral is the sincerely scribbled end of year message, “*Love ya! Will miss you sooo much!!*” in a middle school yearbook.

At age 18, our daughter chose a college that I would have not initially imagined for her. It turns out she knew better; in fact, she knew best. She was able to sift through her choices and to make a thoughtful, well-reasoned decision. As a high school senior and young adult, she had a mature sense of herself as a learner that she did not possess when she was 14.

We parents have the gift of guiding our young teens in directions that will have an enduring impact on their lives. Parents can guide wisely using both hindsight and foresight. Parents can more easily keep the Big Picture in mind.

In our family, we chose for our children a values-driven high school that grooms leaders who are nuanced and thoughtful, knowledgeable and wise. We chose a high school whose teachers are role models for children as they emerge from young adolescence into young adults. We chose New Community Jewish High School.

And so it was that on graduation day, we found ourselves sitting in the bleachers as our son took batting practice. At that same moment, I received a text from my friend who was at the graduation ceremony, saying, “The Principal just called Noah’s name.” I looked up to see Noah rounding the bases and sliding into home plate, wearing his red graduation robe proudly. At the end of the game, he high-fived his teammates and grinned while each of them savored the sweet frosting on their team snack, “Grad 2011” cupcakes.

Some decisions are best left to 14 year olds – hairstyle, room cleanliness, which friends to see when. But we adults must always keep our eye on the ball, ensuring that the big decisions – prioritizing family time, maintaining healthy habits, and choosing an appropriate high school – remain with us.



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