**Martin Snapp: Kids need to learn kindness**

By Martin Snapp

Last week, Phil Catalfo of Berkeley posted a message on his Facebook wall that touched me deeply:

"Special request to all kids returning to school in the next few days. If you see someone who is struggling to make friends, being excluded or bullied because they don't have many friends or because they are shy or not as pretty or not dressed in the most 'in' clothes, PLEASE step up. Say 'hi' or at least smile at them in the hallway. You never know what that person might be facing. Your kindness might just make a big difference in someone's life."

His words struck me because I, too, was bullied when I was young. Every morning, I woke up dreading having to face another day at school. I tried faking illness until my mother caught on and made me go anyway. The worst part was the humiliation. I was so embarrassed, I stayed in the closet about it for years. I was angry; but there was nothing I could do. My sole comfort was sitting in the back of the classroom and fantasizing about killing my tormentors.

Thank God I was living in a place and time where there was no access to guns. Otherwise, I might have ended up like those killers at Columbine. Trust me: Kids under pressure are incapable of making mature choices. The scars lasted a long time. The experience turned me into a lonely, mistrustful person.

You'd think it also made me a more compassionate person, right? Wrong. I was so pathetically desperate to fit in with the crowd that when the opportunity finally came to pick on someone even more vulnerable, I jumped at it. He was a developmentally disabled boy named Barry. I don't know if he's still haunted by the memory of my cruelty. I sure am.

But there's a way out of this vicious circle: Turn over enforcement to the kids themselves.

At Park Day School in Oakland, for instance, on the first day of school every kindergartner is assigned a 6th grade buddy who escorts them to lunch, sits with them, and generally takes them under his/her wing. If a little kid is being bullied, he can go to his/her older buddy for help.

The little ones learn that big kids are their friends. And they excitedly look forward to the day when they'll be in the 6th grade and can mentor a kindergarten buddy of their own.

Even that dreaded childhood jungle, the playground, is kinder and gentler.

If you spot someone sad, you're responsible for finding out if that kid is OK and how you can help, even if he or she isn't necessarily a friend of yours. The result is a complete change in the campus culture. If you're in the first grade you might not pay attention to what a grown-up says, but a fifth or sixth grader is the coolest thing on earth. And if that older kid tells you that bullying is totally uncool, you believe it.

That's the way the system operates at Park, but you can find variations at other local schools, public and private. If your child's school doesn't have a similar program, tell your principal about it. It really works. And teach your kids to be kind to each other.