

GUEST COLUMN

Back-to-school challenges

It's the beginning of another school year. The back-to-school shopping is done, and you are ready for the hectic schedules, driving your children to their various activities, and picking up the pace after a languid summer.

For your children, it's just back to homework, back to books, back to teachers' dirty looks. But for nearly one-fifth of the student body, back to school can mean fear, resignation and dread.

Twenty years ago this week, a naïve but very bright boy started seventh grade. He was ready – sort of – because he'd already seen the year before what middle school could bring. Imagine a 12-year-old kid who's known all of his school life that he's "less than," having been utterly confused by the rules of school beginning back in kindergarten, and who was exiled to the special education (SPED) classroom shortly thereafter.

Throughout elementary school, this boy was castigated, thought to be stupid or odd by his peers and teachers, could not write legibly, had a horrible time reading, and trouble sitting still, all because of his learning disability.

He (and his beleaguered parents) had to sit through countless IEP meetings, where the list of goals read more like a list of New Year's resolutions written by a CEO ("Michael will



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improve his handwriting 85 percent in four out of five instances" – what?).

Entering middle school meant meeting the SPED kids from all over town, who, though all bullied and teased by the "normal" students, shortly organized themselves into a hierarchy. Recognized learning disabilities (dyslexia and ADHD) were at the top. Autistic and Down Syndrome kids were off-limits because they were defenseless. Everyone else was fair game. That left our hero, as yet undiagnosed, as one of the prime whipping boys.

He knew that, as soon as lunch recess began, he'd be out on the field, being dared by – and usually failing to meet – the challenges of the other kids. It didn't matter what their beef was that day. Watching an NFC game instead of the Patriots? Gut punch. Listening to the wrong kind of music? Bloody nose. Wearing the "wrong" clothes? Body slam. Every single day. Summer was such a relief. But now here it was again, September. Oh, great.

And this was in the days

before cyberbullying.

OK, so this boy managed to survive – physically, if not entirely emotionally – and managed to fumble his way through four – count 'em – four colleges before finally getting a correct diagnosis and graduating from Clark University with honors, even picking up a master's degree after that.

But those early school years? He wouldn't wish them on anyone.

Where do you – the parents of the bullied and the bullies and those who just stand by – fit into this story? Make it a back-to-school priority, even if you're sure they already know, to talk with your children about treating others with respect, especially those who are "different," about what it means to have compassion, and that bullies often are the kids you'd least expect (most often those who themselves feel marginalized or "less than" in some way).

And if your kid is the one being bullied? Well, chances are good you won't know it – at least not directly. Watch for the signs (the aforementioned bruises, torn clothing, missing lunch money). Ask your child – hypothetically, because for many young teens that's the only way in – "what would you do if you were being bullied?"

Then you have some choices to make.

Are you going to insist that your child tell you everything, being oblivious to the fact that when he or she squeals and you tell the school administration, that the bullying will double? Good luck with that.

Are you going to support a "zero tolerance" policy which criminalizes good-natured teasing and ribbing, rubber band-shooting, and "yo mama" jokes, and which in another community has led to an arrest for biting a Pop-Tart into the shape of a gun?

Are you going to turn a blind eye, saying "boys will be boys," or "the girls will work it all out"? Or chalk it up to "character building"?

Are you going to teach your child to walk away and try to ignore it?

Or are you going to show your child how to take a moral stand, defending not just himself or herself but others who are younger, weaker, or viewed as "less than," and raise your child to fight back by fighting injustice?

It's your call. Welcome back to school.
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