

When will there be zero tolerance for bullying?

by *Bob Greene*

THIS ONE you most likely have not heard about.

Last week, an accused criminal was led into a courtroom in northern Indiana. The accused criminal wore a detention uniform, and was shackled and handcuffed as he stood before a magistrate.

He was 10 years old.

His mother and her boyfriend were not in court.

The child was attending a motions hearing prior to his trial.

The child -- a 3rd-grade special education student -- had been incarcerated at the Frederick Juvenile Justice Center for a month.

He had been charged with taking a loaded handgun to the Monroe Elementary School in South Bend, Ind., on Jan. 23.

The child allegedly had been bullied, beaten up, teased and pushed around by other students at the school. By his own account, he had turned to his teacher and recess monitor about the bullying, which he said had been going on for four months.

The boy was distraught. According to relatives, he had recently lost two younger brothers in a house fire. The tormenting at school was driving him to despair.

So in an effort to stop the bullying, he allegedly took the gun to school to try to make his tormentors leave him alone.

The reason you have not heard about this case is that the boy never fired the gun.

Children at the school saw it in his pocket. St. Joseph County Prosecutor Chris Toth took the case to a grand jury. The grand jury did not indict the child's mother or her boyfriend, who had left the gun where the child could find it. But the child was charged.

So there he was in court last week for the pretrial hearing, 10 years old -- and his mother did not show up.

Andy Williams' mother -- or his father -- did not show up for his arraignment last week in Santee, Calif., either.

Williams' name you know. Charles Andrew Williams, 15, is charged with two counts of murder for what happened at Santana High School. When San Diego sheriff's deputy Ali

Perez tackled Williams in the boys' restroom, and other deputies began looking for accomplices, Williams reportedly said:

"It's only me."

It is seldom useful to try to quantify pain; for the devastated families of the two dead boys in Santee, and the families of the injured students, it is undoubtedly asking too much to expect them to understand the murder suspect's life.

But if only a fraction of what is being reported about the torment of Andy Williams turns out to be accurate, then a quite vivid picture of what drove him to grievous violence is already visible.

The comments to reporters from those who knew him are stark:

Other teenagers "stole shoes off his feet or stuff from his backpack, and he never fought back." "Even the people who got picked on picked on him. . . . He would never defend himself at all. You could take the money out of his wallet, you could take the shirt off his back and throw it in the gutter and he would just walk away." Back in Maryland, where he used to live, his bedroom had been vandalized, and a treehouse he had taken pride in building had been torn apart by bullies, according to reports; in California, bigger youngsters had twice stolen the skateboards he loved, just because they could.

We tell young people to bear up and get through this; we tell them that all painful things will eventually pass.

And most young people do make it through the years of being bullied; most endure.

But some cannot. There are those who end up killing themselves, whose names we never hear. Lately, there have been others: Those who aim the bullets not into their own heads, but toward others. It is an awful thing -- but to say it is beyond understanding is not really true. When a person is pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed. . . .

Most people are able to endure the pushing. A few are not.

It is a complicated and tragic mix. The president of the United States, upon first hearing what happened in California, said that 15-year-old Andy Williams, about whom the president knew virtually nothing, had undertaken "a disgraceful act of cowardice." The boy may have done a terrible thing, but George W. Bush has been fortunate enough to live a life considerably more blessed than that of the anguished soul he calls a coward. With all due respect to the president's high office, if this is the best he can do in a situation as complex as this one, he ought to consider keeping his mouth shut.

Zero tolerance for guns in schools? Of course. If only we could figure out a way to institute zero tolerance for those who take pleasure in tormenting the weak -- those children who attack the children who have nowhere to turn.

In Indiana last week, a 10-year-old boy in shackles, with no one who loved him in the courtroom, prepared for trial. In California last week, a 15-year-old boy in terrible trouble, with no one in the courtroom who loved him, prepared for trial.

The prosecutor in California made plans to attempt to lock the 15-year-old in prison, perhaps for the rest of his life. And perhaps that will be just; perhaps it will be the only just way that society will be served. But as the confused and solitary boy embarks upon his likely path to prison, here is a question for the prosecutor:

When will you be arresting the people who stole that sad child's skateboards?