

# "WHY WEREN'T YOU HIS FRIENDS?"

**By: Bob Greene**

Curtis Taylor was a boy whom other boys liked to push around.

"Some kids, it happens to," his father, Bill Taylor, said the other night.

It was happening to Curtis Taylor a lot this year. He was 14, an 8th-grader at the Oak Street Middle School in Burlington, Iowa.

"Curtis was bullied for at least the last three years," his father said. "He was a very needing boy. He never really knew where he might fit in."

His dad said that Curtis would come home from school in tears on virtually a weekly basis. "He would tell us that the kids were picking on him again," his dad said. "He was very unhappy with himself. He blamed himself for the other students not liking him."

According to his father, a group of boys at the school took pleasure out of making Curtis' life awful. "Curtis told us that the other students had grabbed his head and kept banging it into a locker," his father said. "They gathered around and tripped him in the hallways. When he was walking in the hallways, they would come up to him again and again and knock things out of his hands, and when he'd pick the things up they'd knock them to the floor again."

Curtis, his father said, didn't have many people he could turn to. "He really didn't have any friends," his father said. "He tried to make friends with some boys from another neighborhood. But then they joined up with the group of kids who were tormenting Curtis, and they ganged up on him, too. So he was alone again."

On numerous occasions in the last three years, Curtis' father said, he went to Curtis' school to talk to administrators about what was being done to his boy. "I didn't get much of a response," Bill Taylor said. "I tried to let them know what all of this was doing to Curtis, but I don't think they understood."

In many ways, it's an old story: Some schoolchildren, sensing weakness and lack of confidence in another student, take glee in making the weaker student's life agonizing on a continuing basis. In most cases, the tormented students somehow manage to get through it.

"He came home crying after a particularly bad day," Bill Taylor said. "It was getting worse. His bicycle had been vandalized twice at school. The name-calling had increased. He had broken his foot, and it had been in a cast, and they'd kick the cast. He had two books that meant a lot to him, and they stole the books from him. He had a sweatshirt that he liked, and they poured chocolate milk on it in front of other students."

"He was crying, and he said he just didn't want to go back to school anymore."

Bill Taylor wanted to talk to the administrators again, but his boy asked him not to: "He said it would only make things worse. He said that if people found out we were complaining, they would hurt him more and the harassment would increase."

Although Curtis' life was lonely, his father said that the boy tried to do good things. "He was on the honor roll," Bill Taylor said. "He interviewed Vietnam veterans in this area about their lives. He volunteered to help disabled students during first period at school."

On March 22, according to both Curtis' father and school officials, Curtis went to a school counselor, extremely upset -- so much that he was talking about suicide. The counselor reportedly talked with Curtis until he seemed calmer, then sent him home with some literature and the telephone number of a suicide hotline. Curtis and the counselor were supposed to meet again the next morning.

That night, at home, Curtis went into a bedroom and shot himself to death. He was found by his 5-year-old brother. "You can't go back and change what happened," said Bob Cameron, the principal at Oak Street Middle School. "Could all of this have been handled differently? Obviously, it could have. Would it have made any difference? That, I don't know."

But people need to stop closing their eyes to the kind of meanness that has long been considered an inevitable part of the school experience -- it's long past time to stop pretending it's somehow excusable.

Parents, teachers, other students -- it's time for all of them to start comprehending the kind of indelible pain this can bring. Curtis Taylor was the third teenager in the Burlington area to commit suicide in a four-day period. "We are all trying to figure out what all of this means, and what can be done," said Bill Mertens, editor of the local paper, the Hawk Eye.