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CHAPTER 1

Adolescent Aggression Goes Online

Carson Bride was a big-hearted, sensitive 16-year-old from Lake Oswego, Oregon, with beautiful blue-green eyes and a smile that lit up the room. Described by loved ones as funny, witty, and affectionate, Carson loved scary movies, *Magic: The Gathering*, skiing, acting, and his family and friends. Like many of his peers from school, Carson kept in touch with others using Snapchat and some of the third-party plugins that added greater functionality via their SnapKit API (technology that allows for software to connect to each other and work together). Two specific third-party apps (YOLO and LMK) gained a lot of traction among the student body at his high school as they integrated with Snapchat to allow for anonymous communications. Through these connected apps, though, classmates began to viciously cyberbully Carson while hiding their identities and avoiding detection and sanction. Perhaps what hurt the most was that Carson's Snapchat was set to "private"—meaning that the people sending these hateful messages were on his "friends list" and not just random strangers. On those messages, Carson asked his abusers to "swipe up" to find out one-on-one who had an issue with him and so they could talk it out, but no one ever responded. If he publicly responded to the harassment, the app was designed in a way that the original messages would also be made public—which would reveal the cruel sentiments to perhaps the entire student body. In the face of the humiliation, Carson tried to be resilient; he stayed engaged with his peer group on Snapchat and even invited a few of them to come get pizza and hang out where he worked. But those efforts were met with more insults, hate, and even sexually explicit taunting. This lack of basic decency and humanity displayed by his schoolmates via the app seemed to be the final straw. Early one morning in the spring of 2020, Carson's mom Kristin checked her phone and saw a text from her son referencing a suicide note. In a panic, she ran to his bedroom but couldn't find him. She then hurried to the other side of the house and found him hanging in the family's garage. The unfolding of this incident and its tragic outcome serves as both a cautionary tale and a case study depicting how communication technologies are used so naturally to meet adolescents' social and

relational needs, but they can also be used as weapons to cause immeasurable pain to others.

Carson's story raises important questions. Obviously, we wonder what could have been done to prevent this situation from escalating to the point of such desperation. Why are some teens so cruel? These teens not only initiated the hate and harassment but also continued it even as Carson attempted to shrug it off and stay connected positively to his peers. What could have been done by others in Carson's life? Could the school have done more? Would it have mattered? What more could his family have done if they were made aware of the true extent of what was happening? What could—or should—the social media platforms have done?

Carson could have been our son or one of our kids' friends. He could have been someone whose parents are friends of ours, who we barbeque with during the summer. He could have been on the same sports teams as other kids we know and love. It is devastating to think about the loss in this case—how a young boy with everything in front of him will not be able to live up to his potential because of the way he was treated, and how the world was prematurely robbed of someone who could have contributed to it in amazing ways. But this is the reality. While the details of Carson's story are extreme, and the vast majority of peer harassment situations do not lead to such horrific outcomes, they vividly illustrate what *can* happen. And every incident we see or hear about involving kids traumatized at the hands of others—regardless of the severity—motivates us in the same way to do all we can about this problem. Because it is not right, and no one deserves to be mistreated. Ever. We are sure you feel the same way.

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Before we can dive into the details about what exactly cyberbullying looks like (and what you can do about it), we need to first take a step back and provide a foundation by reviewing what we know about school bullying. This backdrop should help you fully appreciate the harm that often stems from bullying and understand how cyberbullying can be as

bad (or worse). Perhaps you have a conception of bullying based on your personal experiences, news headlines or stories, television and movie scenes, or other sources. Those are important stories but may not represent the typical bullying experience. Over the past few decades, scholars have actively researched bullying to identify trends and patterns across the personal experiences of thousands of youth. We now summarize what you need to know from this body of knowledge.