Chapter 3
Losing a Friend:
Social Media's Impact on Child and Adolescent Grief

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the role of social media consumption on older children and adolescents during the bereavement process of a childhood friend. Using case study methodology surrounding an 11-year-old girl's tragic death, surveys were administered to peers and semi-structured interviews with peers, counselors, and the deceased's mother were conducted in order to collect in-depth information on the opinions and feelings of those utilizing social media as they cope with loss, specifically the loss of a friend. The idea of virtual mourning is significant to explore as social media is ubiquitous for most older children and adolescents.

INTRODUCTION

The Loss of Kate

It was July 26, 2015, and it was a beautiful, sunny day in southern Indiana. It wasn't a day a kid should die. It was a day to play. And that's what Kate Bruggenschidmt was doing. It was a day of playing softball and playing at a friend's home. Unbeknownst to her parents, Kate drove a large all-terrain vehicle (ATV) for the first time. She wasn't wearing a helmet. Kate lost control, and the ATV overturned and rolled on top of her. Kate was 11 years old.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the leading cause of death for children is unintentional injuries sustained from car accidents, drownings, guns and other sources. On average, over 12,000 children 0-19 years of age die each year in the United States from an unintentional injury (CDC, 2017).

The fight between Kate and the ATV was a mismatch from the beginning. The ATV, weighing in at 750 pounds, was a far heftier load than her 73-pound frame which went unprotected.

Figure 1. Kate Renea Bruggenschmidt. March 30, 2004 – July 26, 2015. (Used with permission by parents Eric and Ashlee Bruggenschmidt)

"When you get the news someone you are close with has passed away, it's not easy," said Layla, a 13-year-old who was 11 at the time her friend Kate died. "This was the same friend I'd danced in my living room with, made science experiments with in the kitchen and sold art projects with on the sidewalk. This was the same friend that I had been making plans to play sports with and have classes with in college. While that might be a tad unrealistic, at the time we just thought our fun never had to end" (Personal communication, July 15, 2017).

Layla said while the news would be horrible no matter how she heard about it, she's at least glad she got the news from her mother in person about Kate's death. Kate was a kind, well-loved little girl, and news of her passing spread like wildfire on social media. Many of her friends found out about her death by seeing postings on Instagram and Facebook. Layla worries about this modern-day reality of news dissemination, as she doesn't feel it's personal enough to present such tragic information. She thinks about how the family or close friends who found out through this medium must have felt, and she wonders if people should wait longer to post tragic news for the sake of feelings and accuracy.

She does believe it was helpful, though, for many people to post messages and photographs as they were mourning during the days, weeks and months following Kate's death. After Kate was gone, her Instagram account was inundated with messages. "Lots of humanity finds comfort in posting pictures in tribute to a lost one. In a way, it's like you are writing *to* them. If it helps a person out to post these, then it's good because there's really no other way to talk to them," said Layla (Personal communication, July 15, 2017).

Research findings support this observation. A number of scholars have noted that social media commenters rarely interact with each other on a deceased's profile page and instead prefer the feeling of speaking directly to the deceased (DeGroot 2008; Dobler 2009). Moreover, other areas of Layla's reflection help to elucidate key components of the process of grief studied and analyzed in this chapter:

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