

Guidance For Parents

Last spring, 13 Reasons Why was released by Netflix and quickly became one of the most viewed series in the streaming media company's history. Based on the Jay Asher novel of the same name, the series provocatively covered many heavy topics for young people, including suicide, sexual assault, substance abuse, online and in person bullying, and numerous struggles between friends when these issues are present. 13 Reasons Why challenged schools and parents to face these issues with limited resources to assist them in guiding their child through important and meaningful conversations about these issues.

On May 18, Netflix will release Season 2 of 13 Reasons Why, and while the exact content is not being shared by the entertainment company, it will undoubtedly be provocative and graphic and likely cover topics such as suicide, school violence, sexual assault and how one can deal with the aftermath, bullying, and substance abuse. The information below is designed to assist parents and families help their child navigate these incredibly challenging issues.

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General advice for parents with respect to viewing 13 Reasons Why:

- 1** We discourage watching Season 2 among vulnerable and at-risk youth (for example, those living with depression or an anxiety disorder) because of the triggering impact it could have on them. The content could be quite disturbing to them and result in them needing additional care, monitoring, support and/or treatment.
- 2** If you do watch the series, make an effort to watch the second season of 13 Reasons Why with your child. We know that this may not always be possible, but doing so provides the opportunity to monitor the impact of each episode on your child and to evaluate whether any of the themes in the series are too overwhelming at present. It also provides the chance to reflect on and discuss content from the series with one another.
- 3** If you are not able to watch Season 2 with your child, ask them if they have seen it or not. If they have, be curious about their impressions and open to talking with them about their thoughts and feelings about the content. Make sure they know that they can come to you with any questions or worries about themselves or their friends, and that you will be there to listen and help guide them.
- 4** Monitor youth who might be vulnerable to some of the story lines in the series and, if they might be at risk, suggest they do not watch the series until a later date. Make sure to check in with your child more than just one time over a couple of weeks after the show is watched, as sometimes it takes a few days before emotions really impact young people, and as they talk with peers about various reactions to the show.
- 5** Reassure youth that fiction and reality are not the same thing. Help them understand that what they see and hear on television is not their life, but a story crafted by writers aiming to engage an audience. Even though they might believe that what they have seen feels like their reality, it is critical that you help them understand that the outcomes from the series do not have to be their outcomes.
- 6** Identify resources in your local community where you can find help if needed. Whether it be a local public health agency, a mental health professional, the counselors in your child's school, or a crisis phone service in your area, knowing who you can reach out to for support is a good prevention strategy.

General Resources for talking with youth about difficult subjects:

- [Mental Health America](#)
- [Child Mind Institute – Helping Depressed Teens](#)

Guidance for discussing themes and topics in 13 Reasons Why:

Talking With Your Child About Suicide

There are a number of key points to consider and reiterate when talking with children about suicide:

- Start by asking what they already know and what they think. Be curious and ask how they have learned what they have learned. This shows that you are invested in having a conversation and not just interested in talking at them.
- Remind them that suicide is permanent. Unlike the characters in fiction, when someone ends their own life, there is no turning back, no sending out messages to people from beyond the grave, and no chance to see how others may feel once you are gone. Life's struggles may seem overwhelming, but you will work together to help get them some relief if they are ever struggling. Let them know that you love them and are there for them.
- Suicide is not a heroic or romantic act. Despite how it may be portrayed on television, it is always a tragedy.
- Honoring and paying tribute to someone who has died (in any manner) is a healthy and appropriate way to grieve a loss. Memorializing of someone who has died by suicide in a school setting, however, is not a recommended practice. While that person will be sorely missed, decorating lockers or taking selfies in front of such memorials does not honor the person who died and can send mixed messages to others who may be struggling or who are at risk themselves.
- Knowledge of someone else's pain and struggles can provide the incentive to get help. It is critical that when kids become aware that another child may be struggling that they actively seek help for that peer. Encourage them to talk with a trusted adult, even if they are concerned that their peer will be angry with them. Once the struggling peer is feeling better, they may come to realize that the support they received was because someone else cared for them.
- If you are concerned that your child may be thinking about attempting suicide, then ask them directly (as calmly as you can) if they are having such thoughts. See below for "What to do if you are worried that your child may be suicidal."

What to do if you're worried your child may be suicidal:

- Ask your child if they are okay. Know that starting the conversation and showing your genuine concern is often the hardest part. As parents, we want to believe that our children are okay, resilient when faced with life challenges, and capable of solving difficult situations. We need to believe that our parenting has resulted in competent and effective decision makers, and it can be overwhelming and shame producing to consider that our children are not well. As much as teenagers have a tendency to push parents out of their lives, when they are struggling, kids need their parents more than ever.
- Let them know why you are concerned. Assume that they will tell you they are fine, but remember that your initial instinct suggested a need to be concerned. Your child may try to keep their life private from you as a way to assert their independence, but do not hesitate to let them know that you've been paying attention and care enough to follow up. For example, "I know you are saying that you are fine, but I've been worried. You are spending less time with your friends, didn't try out for your favorite sports team, and haven't been turning in your school work. You haven't seemed like yourself lately, so I just wanted to check in. How are you doing?"
- Directly ask them about suicidal thoughts and behaviors. While many people express fears about asking this question, research has consistently found that asking someone if they are thinking about suicide does not increase their risk. In fact, acknowledging and talking about suicide may reduce, rather than increase, suicidal thoughts. "Many people who are depressed or struggling with a lot of things consider taking their own lives, is this something that you are thinking about?"
- Listen attentively and non-judgmentally. A parent's instinct is to solve a child's problem when they are hurting, and often times those solutions involve giving advice and telling our children what to do. Remember that sometimes our children need us to just listen and not solve everything in that moment. Avoid telling your child that "everything will be okay." As much as we want to believe it to be true, in the moment of crisis, many teens cannot see that their problems will work out. It's more important to be inquisitive and thoughtful in our listening. "Could you tell me some more about that?"
- Reflect what they are sharing and let them know they have been heard. Solving a child's problems with our own suggestions fails to validate the child's experience, and they don't feel like they were heard. Instead, reflect back to them what you are hearing them say, and then check in to make sure you have heard it the way they intended it to be heard. When our children know that we are not only listening, but also hearing and understanding the message, they are more likely to share more. Remember, avoid the temptation to solve the problem right now.
- Let them know they are not alone. Thoughts of suicide can produce many negative feelings, such as shame and fear. These feelings, among others, lead to feelings of isolation, which may further lead to keeping these feelings secret from others. Helping children realize that they no longer own these feelings all to themselves may make them feel very vulnerable; however, sharing can often lead to a great sense of relief when the listener remains attentive. Remind your child that you are available for them and will do everything you can to help them find relief.
- Let them know that effective treatments are available. Suicidal individuals often spend countless hours trying to solve whatever challenge is facing them. Because they are not feeling better, they may begin to feel hopeless that nothing can help. Know that many years of research and development have led to a number of different treatment approaches that have been shown to help people who are suicidal. Get to know mental health professionals in your community or talk to someone at school. Don't be afraid to ask potential treatment providers about their experience working with suicidal youth and their use of best practices in the field. You want to make sure that your child gets the best care possible. And remember, school counselors are far more helpful and effective than the school counselor depicted in Season 1 of 13 Reasons Why.
- Get them to professional help. Resist the temptation to just solve this at home. Remember that when our children are struggling, they may need support beyond what we can offer. It's okay to need help from time to time. This does not make you a bad parent. This makes you a parent who loves your child. And if you are concerned that they may be at imminent risk, do not leave them alone and call a local crisis emergency line.

Resources for talking with youth about suicide:

- www.youthsuicidewarningsigns.org
- [American Association of Suicidology](http://AmericanAssociationofSuicidology.org)
- [National Association of School Psychologists](http://NationalAssociationofSchoolPsychologists.org)
- [Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide](http://SocietyforthePreventionofTeenSuicide.org)
- [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](http://SuicidePreventionResourceCenter.org)

Talking With Your Child About School Shootings and Violence

- Schools are meant to be safe places. It's important to be attentive to children's concerns about the risk of violence in schools, but it is also important to put some of these concerns into perspective. Although there are no guarantees that nothing bad will ever happen in their school, there is a huge difference between the possibility and probability that something will happen at their school.
- Kids should feel comfortable sharing concerns with adults about anything that makes them feel unsafe in school. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines (e.g., not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, reporting threats to the school safety made by students or community members, etc.), communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs.
- Senseless violence is difficult for anyone to understand. Providing an opportunity at home for children to discuss what they have seen on television, and what they think and feel about it, is important. Help teenagers talk about why they think the violence occurs, as they will often have ideas and even come up with solutions to prevent violence within their own school.
- Guns are a leading method of deadly violence and suicide. Restricting access to guns is vitally important in preventing harm to self and others.

Resources for talking with youth about school shooting and violence:

- [American Psychological Association](http://AmericanPsychologicalAssociation.org)
- [National Association of School Psychologists](http://NationalAssociationofSchoolPsychologists.org)

Talking With Your Child About Substance Abuse

- Approach the conversation with openness and active listening (i.e., making eye contact, acknowledging the points made and concerns shared, etc.). Remember that kids often report that their parents are the most important influence in their lives.
- Using alcohol and drugs does not solve problems. In fact, they can often make things worse. Ask them to imagine what might happen if they use alcohol or drugs.
- Take advantage of teachable moments and remember that the way in which substance abuse is shown in fiction is often not the way it is in reality. The negative consequences are often much greater in real life.

- Offer empathy, compassion, and support for decision making. Making decisions about substance use can be very challenging for teens, who may feel that their friendships are dependent on their choices. Remind them that you are there to listen and support them, not to judge.

Resources for talking with youth about substance abuse:

- [Caron Treatment Centers](#)
- [National Institute of Drug Abuse](#)
- [Addiction.com](#)
- [The Center on Addiction at Columbia: Family Day Parent Toolkit](#)

Talking With Your Child About Sexual Violence

- Use the content of the series to help frame a discussion about sexual assault. Asking their opinion shows them that you value their point of view and opens up the door for more conversation.
- Recognize that youth who have experienced sexual assault may exhibit many emotions, including shame, guilt, depression, and anxiety. Many individuals who have been assaulted have some level of guilt and feel some level of responsibility for the action. Remind them that this was not their fault and their own sense of guilt is often just their way of feeling in control of something that was actually out of their control.
- In addition to feelings of shame and guilt, some teens may feel “damaged” or “broken” after experiencing an assault. These may be accompanied by feelings of depression and suicide, as well as behaviors such as substance abuse and self-harm. It is critically important to help your child seek professional support from someone who is skilled in working with these important issues. As awful as they may feel in the aftermath of a sexual assault, skilled professionals can help them to understand and make sense of their experience and restore some sense of normalcy to their lives. Suicide is **never** the solution.
- As a parent, you may have negative feelings about your child’s experience, such as anger, anxiety, fear, sadness, and shock. It is important to remember that there is no “right” way to feel or react. Remember that in order to help your child feel safe, it is important that you take care of yourself as well. Reaching out to a professional counselor to help you discuss these feelings may be very helpful.
- Know how your child can be supportive of a peer who has experienced a sexual assault. Talking about how to be a good friend can be a powerful way of expressing to your teen that you trust them to do the right thing without sounding like you’re targeting their personal behavior. It also gives you the chance to communicate safety practices they may not otherwise be receptive to.
- Teach them about consent. Remind them that every act of sex involves both asking for and receiving consent. It is their responsibility to ask for someone’s consent, and it is their responsibility to choose to offer or not offer consent. Let them know that they should never feel compelled to engage in sexual behavior if they do not want to give their consent. And it is equally important to remind people that it is **not** acceptable to pursue sexual behavior when no consent has been given.

Resources for talking with youth about sexual violence:

- [Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network – Talking with Kids about Sexual Assault](#)
- [Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network – How to Respond if Someone is Pressuring You](#)
- [Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network – What is Consent?](#)
- [Cleveland Rape Crisis Center – Preventing Sexual Violence](#)

Talking With Your Child About Bullying

- Be curious about your child’s own experience with witnessing bullying. Don’t just probe for names of children who are involved, but rather focus on what your child has seen or heard. If the behaviors are very concerning to you, talk with your child about the importance of helping to keep everyone safe and reporting kids who are involved, whether they are the bullies or the victims of bullying.
- Digital communication is integral to young people’s lives, and expert opinion suggests that restricting access transforms smartphones and social media into “forbidden fruit.” Thus, while it is important to monitor social media and text messages, developing open and caring lines of communication can often lead to similar results. Encouraging children to use social media responsibly and safely may result in the necessary preventative outcomes.
- Get to know the warning signs of bullying, such as: unexplained injuries, damaged property, frequent health complaints, problems with eating or sleeping, declining grades, social avoidance or changes in peer groups, feelings of helpless, or self-destructive behaviors.
- Look for signs of cyberbullying, such as: unexpected stopping of using a device; nervousness around using the device; uneasy being away from the device; anger, depression or frustration after using the device; abnormal withdrawal; and an unwillingness to discuss online activities when previously open.
- Encourage children to talk with you or other respected adults about concerns they may have about social media posts or texts.

Resources for talking with youth about bullying:

- [StopBullying.gov](#)
- [Orygen: The National Centre for Excellence in Youth Mental Health – Safely Navigating Social Media](#)

Get Help

- National Suicide Prevention Hotline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or chat at [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](#) (USA)
- [Crisis Text Line](#): text “START” to 741741 (USA)
- [SAMHSA Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator](#)
- [SAMHSA Prevention Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools](#)
- [Suicide Prevention Resource Center, After a Suicide: Toolkit for Schools](#)
- [School Violence Prevention](#)
- [“13 Reasons Why” Netflix Series\(Season 1\): Considerations for Educators and Families](#)
- [bethe1to.com](#) for five steps you can take to help someone in your life that might be in crisis
- [www.jedfoundation.org/help](#)

Additional Resources

- <https://parents.au.reachout.com/>
- National Association of School Psychologists, [www.nasponline.org](#)
- Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, [www.save.org](#)
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](#)
- American Association of Suicidology, [www.suicidology.org](#)
- [Stopbullying.gov](#)
- Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, [www.rainn.org](#)
- Take 5 to Save Lives, [www.take5tosavelives.org](#)

- 13reasonswhy.info/
- [The Trevor Project](http://TheTrevorProject.org)

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