



13 Reasons Why

Links to important resources and a practical discussion of the implications of this “trending” Netflix series for educators and parents

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As an educator and/or parent, you have probably already heard about the trending Netflix series, *13 Reasons Why*. If you have not, *13 Reasons Why* is a 13 episode Netflix series, in which a 17-year-old girl takes her own life and leaves behind 13 audio tapes telling the story of how various people were part of the reason why she killed herself. The series covers not only the topic of Hannah's suicide, but also tackles many other topics relative to teens, including bullying, substance abuse, misogyny and degradation of women, sexual assault, guns, and drunk driving. You will find links to resources for guidance here from NASP [13 Reasons](#) and at the end of this document. Please download and digest these very important resources for specific guidance regarding concerns and cautions about how the series presents the issues and what educators should know about suicide prevention. The purpose of this present discussion of the series is to provide some practical information that might address some day to day questions and concerns that you are currently facing.

While the series offers an opportunity to discuss and process real life issues that today's teenagers may face, exposure to dramatized self-harm and violence can be harmful to some impressionable, vulnerable youth. It is recommended that vulnerable youth should not watch this series, and although this remains the best course, the reality is that many teens, especially vulnerable ones, have already binged the series, perhaps before you even knew that it existed. There is a public service discussion after the last episode, providing encouragement and resources for teens, but it is hard to tell if teens will continue to watch after the last episode is viewed. It is important to be aware of these vulnerable students who most likely have watched the series, so that educators and parents might keep an active eye to observe for any changes or need for support.

If as a parent or educator, you are concerned that your “vulnerable” child/student has already watched the series and could be negatively impacted, please carefully review the material presented in the NASP document [NASP 13 Reasons Why](#). Suicide is the second leading cause of death among school age youth and all warning signs should be taken seriously. A student may be at risk if they are isolated,



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have shown other self-injurious behavior, a history of mental illness, family history of suicide, family stress, or a situational crisis (e.g., bullying, breakup of a relationship, abuse, etc. as was conveyed in the series). As was seen in the series, there may be several warning signs which could go unnoticed, for example, include direct and indirect statements, online postings that may be getting increasingly "dark", getting things in order, giving things away, changes in appearance, behavior, thoughts and feelings. Change may also present as "doing better", whereas the student has been sad for a while but suddenly appears happy.

We have heard from some of our members, that teachers have asked whether to show the series in their classroom. The series is based on a book that apparently has been making the rounds for a while but the emotional impact of reading a book versus bingeing on a TV series is quite different. We do not recommend a viewing of this series within a school setting because (besides the obvious administrative and parent consent issues), there is no way to assess which students may be vulnerable to the content nor a practical way to adequately provide follow up after the viewing. Rather, educators are advised to watch the series on their own. Binge watch if possible so that you can approximate the same rush of emotions that your students may experience. Recognize that by the "binge watch", emotional reactions are apt to be even more heightened because there is less time in between the drama to decompress or process the content. Yes, there are many parts that may come off to you as an adult as not completely realistic, but this is still TV drama and designed to provoke emotion, and certainly will do so among teens (and pre-teens who should not, but, most likely some will watch). Without viewing it, you are unable to provide a true perspective on it in relation to your own experiences and those of your students. Kids pick up when adults are just "talking the talk." Your students are likely to say or think, "Well, how would you know – you didn't even watch it?" As discussions come up, you should be familiar with the resources available that provide balanced, accurate guidance so you are comfortable and competent providing comments. And of course, if you are unsure how to respond to a student question or comment, much better to say, you are not sure, but that you will check into it and will let them know (and make sure that you do so.)

For parents: Yes, you should watch it as well if you have teens or pre-teens. In a perfect world, you watch with your children, followed by a productive, heartfelt discussion, culminating with hugs for all. However, the reality is that your kids have probably already watched it or if they have not, may be of the age or temperament that sitting down and watching a series with their parents, even when relationships are good, is just a little "weird" for them. If that is the situation, try to be around while they



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are watching, breeze in and out of the room so you are checking in on an occasional basis. Check in with them if you know they are bingeing the series on a computer or TV in their room. Meanwhile, watch the series on your own so a discussion can ensue and even if there is not a real “discussion” about the series, you are aware of what your child is viewing, and in a position to observe if he or she seems to be impacted by something that they have watched during an episode. It may be easier to gauge what might be bothering them if you are watching the same episodes that they are, if possible. It is not just the suicide of the main character that could affect teens but any of the difficult topics addressed, most of which they probably have witnessed at some level at their high school, or middle school, at one time or another. Yes, really. In other words, just because you may think that your child is not at risk for self-harm, there is a myriad of pressures and problems of adolescence that affect a teen's ability to cope and your child may be impacted in other ways that you may not even have considered. And most important, spend more time **listening** to your child then actually “discussing” it with them.

The series certainly did not present the school district and or staff school staff in a positive manner, and in fact, characterizations were generally negative and one-dimensional. Unfortunately, most of the adults portrayed in the series were clueless, uncaring, harmful, thoughtless, or inept. The potentially damaging message that came across in the series was that adults are pretty much useless in helping youth that may be struggling. As school psychologists, it is easy to watch the series and point out everything that was done wrong by the school counselor, teachers, and administrators. However, along with other stakeholders, school psychologists need to continue to be diligent and vocal in getting the message out to students that there are school-employed mental health professionals that are available to help. One positive that may come from the series is that we cannot put our heads in the sand when it comes to student mental health. 20% of students are estimated to experience mental health problems at some point (<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/prevalence/any-disorder-among-children.shtml>) with only approximately 20 – 25% of those in need of mental health services receiving them with the vast majority of those getting help, receiving services in the schools (<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/mental-health/school-psychology-and-mental-health>). Teens are often stuck in the “now” (“this will never get better”), so expedient, equitable access to support for all students is critical in order to avoid tragedy. Fortunately, we believe that most educators and school mental health service providers are more competent than portrayed on screen but often taxed, sometimes undervalued, and frequently, unique competencies are underutilized. Hence, the call for increased



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collaborative, preventive service delivery. The integration of behavioral, social-emotional, mental health and learning supports within schools and between schools and communities remains a priority.

The final take away message for school psychologists and other educators involves the importance of school climate and the critical need for systemic change to ensure that all children feel safe, supported and are “seen” in their school environment. Not only do we need to have a plan in place in case of a crisis or tragedy, but must promote prevention by laying a foundation of positive school climate for **all** students, in **all** schools. Equitable promotion of student and staff wellness, resiliency building, social emotional learning, safety and civility, and trauma informed practice, within a framework of school, family and community inter-connectedness, is essential for successful and sustainable change.

Please continue the discussion on our website Discussion Forum [13 Reasons Why Discussion](#)

We would love to hear your experiences from your own school districts or as a parent as we all work together to support all students.

Additional Resources:

[NASP Guidelines: 13 Reasons Why](#)

[Talking Points: 13 Reasons JEDFoundation](#)

[School Psychologists and Mental Health](#)

Submitted by Terri A. Allen, Ph.D. for NJASP