

May 9, 2017

Dear Parents/Guardians of the Niagara Catholic District School Board:

Recently, Netflix released *13 Reasons Why*, a series based on a novel by Jay Asher. The series has been promoted by its creators as a tool to help students recognize their impact on others to prevent suicide. We have communicated with Principals, Vice-Principals and staff that the series is a fictional drama that includes many unrealistic elements and is not to be used as a teaching tool. Administrators and staff have received information that includes strategies to answer questions that students may have from watching the show.

We would encourage you to remind your child that you are open to having difficult conversations about mental health issues and that you will take all concerns seriously.

To make the most of this opportunity, it is important that parents/guardians approach conversations in an informed, balanced, and supportive manner. Some suggestions include:

- If your child has not already watched the series but would like to, review it first yourself.
- Discuss with your child the pros and cons of watching it.
- Decide ahead of time if there are certain scenes you will skip.
- Watch it together.
- Avoid “binge-watching” and allow time for your child to think, and talk, about the material between episodes.
- If your child has already watched the show, ask them about it. Use open-ended questions about their impressions. Listen and support, but also use this time to clarify misinformation.
- Be watchful, be there, and listen, in coming days.
- Know where to get help if your child shows signs of emotional difficulty.

If you have concerns about your child, check in with your family doctor, school principal, or another trusted professional. You can also get help through a local crisis line or Mental Health Helpline **1-866-531-2600**, <http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca/>. Call 911 in a mental health emergency.

This Communications Notice has been posted on the Board website www.niagaracatholic.ca.



13 Reasons Why

Frequently Asked Questions

Why are mental health professionals concerned about the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*?

Mental health professionals and organizations involved in suicide prevention are concerned about aspects of the series that increase the risk for suicidal thoughts and behavior amongst those who are vulnerable. These aspects include:

- Graphic portrayal of death by suicide which can be triggering for those at risk
- Lack of attention to the complexity of suicide and mental illness
- Missed opportunity to offer messages of hope for young people struggling with mental illness – most people who actively manage a mental health problem go on to lead healthy fulfilling lives
- Glamourization of suicidal behavior
- Negative portrayals of adults, which may discourage young people from reaching out

Are there also strengths in the series?

Definitely. Most young people will be able to overlook the negative aspects of this series to understand the positive messages intended – that it is important to be kind and thoughtful in our interactions with others, that we need to stand up and not stand by, and that small caring gestures can make a big difference in someone's life. In addition, this series has raised awareness about issues facing young people, and has inspired important conversations that allow for deeper knowledge about mental health, mental illness and suicide. Most critically, parents are talking to their children about this series, and this provides an excellent opportunity for dialogue about stress, help-seeking, and resiliency.

Why are teachers being advised not to use this series as a teaching tool?

SMH ASSIST has recommended that educators avoid using this material as a class-level teaching tool through which there would be an expectation that students watch the series and/or participate in a discussion about it. While most secondary school students can manage this difficult material emotionally, there are some young people who would be put at great risk by viewing the graphic scenes and misleading messages about suicide. It is these students that this recommendation is designed to protect.

What should teachers be doing to support students with this material?

Young people may need help in processing this material, and they may choose an educator to approach about their concerns. Educators are not mental health professionals, but they can:

- Listen
- Help students to reflect on their experience with the series
- Correct misinformation
- Offer ideas about healthy coping
- Know the pathways to support in their school, board, and community
- Support students in need with finding more specialized help
- **Inspire hope**

Through these interactions, educators are demonstrating that they can be a source of information and support to help young people with these difficult topics. If groups of students would like to talk about their experience with this series, mental health leadership teams should consider providing support to these conversations.

Should parents be alerted to the risks of the series?

Yes. Fortunately, the broad media coverage has helped in this regard. Several school boards have also taken the step of communicating with parents directly (e.g., [Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board](#), [Peel District School Board](#)).

What should parents be doing to support their children with this material?

This series presents an important opportunity for parents to talk about issues that are very real for their secondary school aged children. To make the most of this opportunity, it is important that parents/guardians approach conversations in an informed, balanced, and supportive manner. Some suggestions include:

- If your child has not already watched the series but would like to, review it first yourself.
 - Discuss with your child the pros and cons of watching it.
 - Decide ahead of time if there are certain scenes you will skip.
 - Watch it together. Watch your child as s/he watches the show.
 - Avoid “binge-watching” and allow time for your child to think, and talk, about the material between episodes.
 - If your child has already watched the show, ask them about it. Use open-ended questions about their impressions. Listen and support, but also use this time to clarify misinformation.
 - Be watchful, be there, and listen, in coming days.
 - Know where to get help if your child shows signs of emotional difficulty.
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- If you have concerns about your child, check in with your family doctor, school principal, or another trusted professional. You can also get help through a local crisis line or Mental Health Helpline **1-866-531-2600**, <http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca/>). Call 911 in a mental health emergency.

What should young people know about watching *13 Reasons Why*?

There are good things and bad things about this fictional series. It is not for everyone. Some young people will find it helpful and can overlook the difficult material to find value in the messages about compassion and kindness. Others would truly struggle with the content and may find it triggering. Don't feel pressured to watch it because your friends have seen it. Do what is right for you.

If you do decide to watch it, reach out to a parent, relative, or other caring adult to watch the show with you so you can process it together. If the show upsets you, tell an adult. If one of your friends or classmates is upset, encourage them to talk to someone, or even support them to share this with a helping adult. In addition to your parents/family members, there are many caring adults in schools, recreation/cultural centres, places of faith, etc. who are eager to listen and to provide support.

If you need to talk to someone, contact Kids Help Phone (www.kidshelpphone.ca or **1-800-668-6868**) or a local crisis line.

There is always, always hope.

