

April 27, 2017

Re: Important information about a Netflix Series titled *13 Reasons Why*.

To Parents/Guardians of Red Deer Catholic Regional Schools:

The Netflix series, *13 Reasons Why*, debuted on March 31st, 2017 and is trending nationally as well as in our school community. This 13 hour series depicts strong and graphic themes of suicide, bullying, sexual assault, drug use, and other social issues. The content and images may be triggering for some vulnerable viewers. While we are unaware of any specific incidents related to the series we wanted to provide parents with this information.

While the show has become very popular, it is also generating a tremendous amount of controversy and concern among mental health authorities. Specifically, suicide prevention experts are raising concerns about the potential risks posed by the sensationalization and glamorization of youth suicide. Research on suicide and “copycat suicide”, highlights a clear link between direct and indirect exposure to suicidal behavior and increased suicidal behavior in persons at risk for suicide. This is especially true for adolescents and young people and particularly with sensational portrayals of suicide or inadvertent glorification of the suicide victim. This applies to both non-fictional and fictional suicide reports.

It is important to emphasize that viewing this show will NOT cause suicidality in healthy, mentally stable individuals. However, for vulnerable students who may be experiencing mental health problems, thoughts of suicide, and/or perceived social isolation this can increase their risk.

Although this series has been promoted by the creators as a tool to help young people recognize their impact on others in an attempt to prevent suicide, it creates an overly simplified view of suicide which may lead to misconceptions for impressionable viewers. According to Dawne Adkins, Education Coordinator with Suicide Information and Education Services of Red Deer and Central Alberta, the series is:

“raising the discussion, but I'm not sure if it's raising it in a good way...we have to be mindful of what we put into our bodies. That's not just food. That is what we see and hear. We need to be very mindful of what emotions can be prompted when viewing such material, whether that's because it has been experienced by people, or second-hand or through conversations or other experiences.”

Apart from the dark content and graphic imagery of the show, it has a number of other potentially harmful shortcomings:

- It fails to emphasize the prevalence of treatable mental illness underlying most suicide deaths.
- There is no mention of viable alternatives to suicide including seeking professional help.
- The protagonist demonstrates no help-seeking behavior or critical thinking skills.
- There is absolutely no message of hope or mention of faith.

- It presents a simplified impression that suicide can be prevented by simply being kind to others.
- The central character appears to get resolution from her suicide by exacting revenge on those who harmed her.
- Adult characters are portrayed as unhelpful or insensitive.
- It does not emphasize the finality of death; rather it presents a romanticized view of suicide and its aftermath.

Red Deer Catholic Counsellors would like to offer some guidance for families.

Guidance for Families:

1. Ask your child if they have heard or seen the series *13 Reasons Why*. While we don't recommend that they be encouraged to view the series, do tell them you want to watch it, with them or to catch up, and discuss their thoughts.
2. If they exhibit any of the warning signs below, don't be afraid to ask if they have thought about suicide or if someone is hurting them. **Raising the issue of suicide does not increase the risk or plant the idea. On the contrary, it creates the opportunity to offer help.**
3. Ask your child if they think any of their friends or classmates exhibit warning signs. Talk with them about how to seek help for their friend or classmate. Guide them on how to respond when they see or hear any of the warning signs.
4. Listen to your children's comments without judgment. Doing so requires that you fully concentrate, understand, respond, and then remember what is being said. Put your own agenda aside.
5. Get help from a school-employed or community-based mental health professional if you are concerned for your child's safety or the safety of one of their peers.

Always take suicide risk warning signs seriously, and never promise to keep them secret. Establish a confidential reporting mechanism for students. Common signs include:

- Suicide threats, both direct ("I am going to kill myself." "I need life to stop.") and indirect ("I need it to stop." "I wish I could fall asleep and never wake up."). Threats can be verbal or written, and they are often found in online postings.
- Giving away prized possessions.
- Preoccupation with death in conversation, writing, drawing, and social media.
- Changes in behavior, appearance/hygiene, thoughts, and/or feelings. This can include someone who is typically sad who suddenly becomes extremely happy.
- Emotional distress.

Suicide is never a solution. It is an irreversible choice regarding a temporary problem. There is help. If you are struggling with thoughts of suicide or know someone who is, talk to a trusted adult, call Suicide Information and Education Services in Red Deer at 403-342-4966. Kid's Help Phone is a 24-hour, 7 days a week 1-800-668-6868 website offering crisis counselling via the phone or website.