



# Parents: Read This Before Talking With Your Kids About '13 Reasons Why'

By Sarah Schuster

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**Editor's note:** *The following piece contains spoilers about "13 Reasons Why."*

The buzz about the new Netflix series "[13 Reasons Why](#)" is as loud as it is diverse — and if you're a parent, it can be difficult to know what to make of it. Based on the book by Jay Asher, the series follows the aftermath of high school student Hannah Baker's [suicide](#).

Hannah leaves 13 tapes explaining 13 reasons "why" she ended her life. That, right there, is why many [suicide prevention activists](#) find the plot flawed and unhelpful (I'll explain this below). But this criticism hasn't translated to most general audiences, who have [found the series inspiring](#) for its depiction of hard-to-discuss issues like bullying, sexual assault and yes — suicide.

So how do we talk about it? For parents, and for anyone who feels a bit uncomfortable about "13 Reasons Why," it can be intimidating to orchestrate a productive conversation about the topics and themes depicted in the show.

To find out what parents should think about when their child is watching "13 Reasons Why," I spoke to three suicide prevention activists — Dese'Rae L. Stage, founder of [Live Through This](#); Shannon Crossbear, a suicide loss survivor; and Martin Rafferty, Executive Director of [Youth MOVE Oregon](#) — and asked them what advice they would give parents who want to talk to their children about the show.

## Here's what they told me.

### Ask, "What do you think is 'Hollywood' about this show?"

Although viewers of the show will know it's fiction, Rafferty said it's important to weed through exactly what makes the show unrealistic, besides the fact that its characters aren't real.

Here are some good places to star

**Address the show's representation of suicide as a way to send a message:** Most people who die by suicide don't get to leave a clear, definitive message after their death. To show suicide as an effective communication strategy ("everyone will see how wrong they are/learn a lesson about how their behavior affects others") is misleading and perpetuates a "suicide as revenge" narrative — that people only kill themselves to teach others a lesson. While the series doesn't undermine the real pain Hannah was in, it's important to understand the plot itself is unrealistic. Those who are suicidal shouldn't overestimate the clarity of the message they'll be able to send after they die. "She made a huge splash, but most suicides are whispers," Rafferty said.

**Often, suicides are not orchestrated:** Anywhere from [33 percent to 80 percent](#) of all suicide attempts are impulsive. [According to The New England Journal of Medicine](#), 24 percent took less than five minutes between the decision to kill themselves and the actual attempt, and 70 percent took less than one hour. "Parents should know the premise itself is unrealistic, no one, especially teenagers, a suicidal teenager, is going to take the time to make a long suicide manifesto and then remain in crisis," Stage said. "Kids are usually going to act pretty quickly."

**Update April 18:** *To clarify, Stage added, "Most people act quickly in the window after they make the decision. That's not to say that the move is necessarily impulsive. Many people think about it and plan (actively, or even as passively as, 'If I were going to kill myself, I would take pills,' or maybe they'd think about whether they would leave a note over time. It doesn't just arrive as a single thought out of mid-air for the first time and end in an attempt or a death."*

**A suicide doesn't leave behind a list of people/things to "blame":** When someone dies by suicide, there often isn't a neatly, bullet-pointed list of "reasons why," as the title of the show implies. Crossbear suggested asking your children, "Do you think when someone dies by suicide, there needs to be blamed assigned?"

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"While we want people to be aware of how their actions impact other people, we also don't want to put them in the position of feeling when someone dies by suicide, that it's their fault," Crossbear said.

#### **Next, challenge the "bullycide" narrative.**

While we never want to underestimate the mental health effects bullying has on young people and the very real [depression](#), [anxiety](#) and trauma it can spark, there's often more going on when a bullied child takes their own life. "The bullycide narrative is problematic because it simplifies suicide too much," Stage said. Instead, talk to your kids about the whole range of reasons why someone dies by suicide, including [mental](#) health, isolation and lack of support.

**Talk honestly about the “kind of people” who die by suicide. (Hint: The stereotype is wrong.)**

The part that bothered Stage, a suicide attempt survivor herself, was that the show perpetuated the myth that people who kill themselves are manipulative and vengeful. “It’s not fair,” she said. “Parents should know that the premise itself is unrealistic.” While you could argue people who die by suicide share a common pain, they’re diverse in what actually drives them and shouldn’t be simplified to a stereotype.

**Talk about the resources available for someone who’s feeling suicidal.**

Another criticism about the show was that it didn’t show successful help-seeking. Use this as an opportunity to educate your child about what resources *are* available for someone who needs help. Here are some essentials:

**Crisis Text Line:** Text “HOME” to 741-741 to text with a free trained crisis counselor, 24/7.

**Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** If you prefer to talk to someone over the phone, you can call 1-800-273-8255.

**Teen Line:** If your child would rather talk to a peer, they can text “TEEN” to 839863 between 6:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. PST.

**You can create a safe space for talking about suicide.**

If the show sparked the first conversation you had with your family about suicide, don’t let it be your last. Make sure your children feel comfortable talking about suicidal thoughts in a shame-free environment. Tell your teen there’s nothing shameful about having suicidal thoughts and that they can talk to you and get support if they’re ever feeling hopeless.

**Know the that last episode is graphic — and make sure your child knows how to get support if they need it.**

It’s important for viewers to know the last episode shows Hannah dying by suicide — and that if they struggle with suicidal ideation (or not), it might be hard to watch. “I don’t know how one could properly prepare for that,” Stage said. “Not only was the suicide scene really graphic, you can get a sense in that last episode that you were watching a thriller.” Stage suggests to get support if you need it, or, if you’re not ready, skip the episode entirely.

**Lastly, know the “issue” with “13 Reasons Why” is *not* that it talks about suicide.** We *should* be talking about suicide. But as arguably the most popular modern narrative that focuses on a suicide, this show has a lot of power to shape how young people think about those who die by suicide and why people die by suicide — and it’s

unfortunately not enough. Especially if your child is being bullied, struggles with depression or has even survived a suicide attempt — they need to know there's more information about suicide out there and that they're not alone. Because while the fictional Hannah Backer left behind tapes, many, many more suicide attempt survivors and suicide loss survivors have stories to tell — and they also deserve our ears and hearts.

**To connect with other suicide attempt survivors:** [Live Through This](#)

**To connect with other suicide loss survivors:** [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)

**To read the guidelines for reporting on/discussing suicide:** [Reporting on Suicide](#)

*If you or someone you know needs help, visit our [suicide prevention resources](#) page. If you need support right now, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255, the Trevor Project at **1-866-488-7386** or text "START" to 741-741. Lead image via [13 Reasons Why Facebook page](#)*