



May 11, 2017

Dear Parents,

Our staff is on high alert after a teen committed suicide last week in the Maple Ridge & Pitt Meadows school district. We ask that all parents be on high alert.

Youth are susceptible to the contagion effect, in which exposure to other suicides (fictional and real), can lead a student to having his or her own thoughts of suicide.

Along with the suicide of a teen in our community, we want to advise you of a Netflix series that is impacting students. *13 Reasons Why* tells the story of a teen, Hannah Baker, who kills herself and leaves behind 13 audio recordings that explain her reasons for committing suicide. The show is graphic, containing scenes of rape, assault, bullying, substance abuse and culminates with Hannah killing herself.

Suicide is not a topic to be discussed lightly or glamorized. We are concerned about the social, emotional and spiritual impact of this series on our students.

- **Please pray for your children and the youth of our city.** Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." (John 14:6). Pray for the life of Jesus and the truth of His love to fill hearts and minds.
- **Keep the relationship with your children open.** Create a safe environment where your children can disclose what they have seen or heard and to ask questions.
- **Seek support early.** If you have concerns regarding your child's emotional well-being, seek support. MRCS can provide you with a list of recommended counsellors in our community to support your family.

What Is "13 Reasons Why"?

13 Reasons Why premiered on Netflix on March 31, 2017. The series is based on a book of the same title and has been popularized by actress Selena Gomez, who co-produced the series.

The series tells the story of a teen, Hannah Baker, who kills herself and leaves behind 13 audio recordings to expose the dark secrets she carried. Each recording is addressed to a person she names as the reason why she killed herself.

The show is graphic, containing harsh language, scenes of rape, teen partying, assault, substance abuse and culminates with Hannah killing herself in a suicide scene in the final episode. Here is a synopsis of themes in each episode:

1. Hannah's first kiss is ruined by an unfortunate photo and rumor that gives her the label of "slut" which becomes "impossible to escape."
2. Hannah deals with the loss of a best friend and the end of other relationships. Themes of abandonment and accusatory insinuations that people in her life did not do what they could have.
3. As she progresses through normal hormone and emotional changes, Hannah feels objectified as a toy.
4. Hannah is "slut-shamed" based on lies. She sets a trap for the stalker but is distracted by playing a game of dare. A scandalous photo is circulated. The episode probes same sex attraction.
5. Hannah feels alone and against the whole world.
6. This episode portrays parents as unwilling to listen or invest time when help is requested.
7. Class "compliment notes" to Hannah are stolen by another student. She is alone in her despair.
8. Hannah thinks she has found "a safe place" in a poetry group, but someone shares anonymous copies of her poem and Hannah is laughed at by her peers.
9. A girl gets drunk, passes out at a party and is raped while Hannah witnesses in hiding, frozen in fear.
10. A young driver speeds off after knocking down a stop sign. Later, someone is killed due to the missing sign. A code of secrecy ensues.
11. Characters self-medicate through bullying, substance abuse, fights and suicide. The girl who has been raped in episode 9 becomes an alcoholic. A boy, whose mother is drug-addicted, becomes homeless when his mother stays in a relationship with a physically abusive boyfriend.
12. Friends feel the guilt of Hannah's death and one boy shoots himself. The recordings Hannah made are turned over to her parents to use in a lawsuit against her school.
13. Adults overlook cyber-bullying. The theme of cutting/self-harm comes up before Hannah kills herself. Source: Catholic Link <http://catholic-link.org/2017/04/09/13-reasons-conversations-compassion-teens/>

Why Is This Concerning?

This series touches on serious and difficult issues. Teens are especially at risk for suicide. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for Canadians between the ages of 10 and 24, accounting for 24% percent of all deaths among 15-24 year olds. Source: Canadian Mental Health Association http://toronto.cmha.ca/mental_health/youth-and-suicide/

We encourage parents to be aware of this series and the discussions around it. Here are our concerns:

- **Graphic and traumatic material.** The impact of the visuals and audio recordings may upset students as sexual harassment and assault, shaming, rape, bullying and suicide are vividly portrayed. The series comes with a TV-MA rating that “may be unsuitable for children under 17.” Source: Plugged In <http://www.pluggedin.ca/tv-reviews/13-reasons-why>
- **Suicide is presented as a viable “way out” that garners attention and sympathy.** The series lacks hope and fails to present alternatives to addressing problems that can be or seem cataclysmic. In truth, the love of God reaches out to all. Many have overcome painful situations without using suicide as a solution.
- **Lack of positive influencers.** Adults are not portrayed as resources or sources for help. Students who struggle with suicidal ideation need the support of adults in their lives and professional intervention.
- **The oversimplification of a complex issue.** Peer kindness is emphasized but it appears overstated as a cure-all. When suicide is blamed on unkindness, it fails to acknowledge the complications of mental illness and depression. It can also cause unwarranted guilt for those who have been around someone who has taken his/her life.
- **Impact on the most vulnerable.** For students who are at risk, struggling with suicidal thoughts or with mental health issues, the show can trigger strong emotions and irrational behaviour. Teens can identify with fictional characters and Hannah is not a healthy role model. Already, we have seen some students try to emulate Hannah’s notes and interactions.
- **Students exposed to a classmate’s suicide are five times as likely to have suicidal thoughts or attempt suicide.** There is growing concern that even a fictitious character can provide the exposure that leads to a student having his/her own thoughts of suicide. This is called “suicide contagion”. The risk of contagion is present when students view this series. Source: Canadian Medical Association Journal <http://www.cmaj.ca/content/185/10/870>

What Can Parents Do?

- **Be aware of this series.** Google it and read about it. Talk to your son/daughter about what they have seen and are hearing at school.

- **Review your Netflix account.** There will be a red indicator if any of the 13 episodes have been viewed on your account. It has come to our attention that some students have watched the episodes secretly at home.
- **Disallow devices in student bedrooms.** Charge them in parent bedrooms or common places in the home. We have seen student messaging on phones and submitting assignments at 2 AM.
- **Preview and debrief.** If you believe your child can handle the disturbing content and that this is an opportunity to discuss issues, we highly recommend previewing each episode before watching it together. The content is best debriefed with an adult who has the goal of de-romanticizing suicide and processing the complex issues.
- **Watch for changes in your child's behaviour.** Changes in behaviour may reveal that your child has been exposed to disturbing images. This may include withdrawal, experimenting with self-harm/cutting, note-writing, talking about death or suicide, or becoming secretive with their device.
- **Strive to keep the dialogue open.** Create the environment where it is safe for your children to disclose what they have seen or heard and to ask questions. Work to encourage teens to keep talking and have positive adults influencing them.
- **Seek support early.** If you have concerns about your child's emotional well-being, seek support early. Don't wait. MRCS can provide you with a list of recommended counsellors in our community to support your family.

Again, we ask that you continue to pray for your children and for the youth of our city. If you have any questions or need to talk, my door is always open.

In His Service,



Valarie Sawka
Principal

Thank you to the following organizations who helped us compile this information:

- Association of Christian Schools International
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- Safer Schools Together
- Society of Christian Schools
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