

## **Talking about Mental Illness with Your Child**

Having difficult conversations with your children and teenagers can be challenging for the best of us. Yet we know how important it is, and how hard it can be, to keep the channels of communication open.

Recently in the news and social media there has been discussion about a controversial new TV series available on Netflix, *13 Reasons Why*. Many of our students are talking about this show. Clearly they are watching it and perhaps you are unaware of its content.

In brief it follows the story of a 17-year-old high school student who takes her own life and leaves a series of cassette tapes for 13 of her friends documenting her reasons, and the role each has played in her final, catastrophic decision.

At a casual glance, the show may present as a typical American high school drama, but the content is serious, dark and disturbing. It touches on a number of difficult topics including drug use, bullying, cyber-bullying, 'slut shaming', suicide and rape, and includes a graphic depiction of both the suicide and the rape (please note that this series is rated MA 15+ and for good reason). It looks at the consequences for teenagers of not just experiencing these events, but also witnessing them as bystanders and failing to speak up and/or take action.

In a recent article making reference to this TV series, the National Association of School Psychologists in their section on Preventing Youth Suicide, reminds us that we all – schools and families, have a role to play in preventing youth suicide. The NASP raises serious concerns about the series which, they say, 'poses significant risk to vulnerable and impressionable youth, especially those who have any form of suicidal ideation'.

The show is powerful and unapologetic in its presentation, yet research shows that graphic and sensationalised accounts of death can be a powerful trigger or risk factor for youth struggling with mental health conditions.

Please talk to your children about what they are watching on Netflix. Ask them if they have heard of this series and if they are watching it. If they are (and we are not suggesting that you should encourage them to do so), watch it with them and talk to them about what they are seeing. Point out to them that suicide is not a simple, nor is it the only option, for people struggling to cope with challenges in their life (as depicted by the program), but rather a combined result of treatable mental illnesses and overwhelming stressors. Please know that raising the issue of suicide with our children does not increase the risk or plant the idea. It does, however, create the opportunity for them to talk about their thoughts, fears and feelings and for you to offer help.

We all worry about our children. Are they safe? Are they making the best choices? Are they making good decisions? Are their friends right for them? Are they working hard enough at school? The best way to discover the answers to these questions and to protect

your daughter from potentially harmful and destructive external influences is to be part of her life. Know her. Be interested in her friends. Know who they are. Expect to meet them. Monitor her social media use and who she is talking to on social media. Know what she is watching on the TV/computer.

Importantly, provide her with opportunities to talk to you. This means precious one on one time. Yes, we know this can be really hard to manage in our very busy lives, but it is so important. Have a coffee date, go for an evening walk. Watch TV together. Keep the conversations light and non-threatening; you don't need to have deep and meaningful chats to keep the channels of conversation open, but open they will be when she wants/needs to

tell you something important. Spend some time with her in her room, in her space, on her terms. Avoid conversation blockers like, 'When I was your age ...', 'My parent would never have allowed ...' and 'If I'd ever done that ...' Stories about how things were for you are interesting, and your children like to know this stuff, but in an anecdotal context, not as a threat or a judgement. We must remember that our children are growing up in a different age, at a different pace and with different pressures and we really DON'T know what it's like for them. We need them to tell us, and they need us to hear them.

Listen respectfully to what they have to say, and withhold judgement. Ask some open-ended questions to show you are interested in what they have to say. For example, 'Tell me more about that'; 'What happened then?', 'What was that like for you?', 'What do you think about what happened?', 'Do you think that's ok?', 'What do you think you would do in this situation?' Let her know you are interested in her opinion and her take on things. You may just find she will ask you the very same questions, and be interested in and open to, what you have to say. Try not to react in a way that will prevent your child from wanting to talk to you in the future about the things that are uncomfortable or worrying to them.

Child psychologist Steve Biddulph, author of many good parenting books including two we recommend you read – Raising Girls and 10 Things Girls Most Need, tells us that adolescence can provide us with a second chance to bond with our children; that between the ages of 12 and 24 is a time of profound brain changes when adolescents can feel isolated, lonely, confused and vulnerable. They may indeed seem to be pushing you away, but their need for you is great.

The greatest happiness we can know is founded in strong, loving relationships. It is in these that your children will find strength, self-worth, courage and resilience. Believe it or not your teenage children DO want a close relationship with you. But they don't want you to be their friend. They need parents who have the strength to say no when they do not and who know what is best for them and what will keep them safe, when they do not. They need you to love them enough to let them hate you (it won't be for long).

We know that you love your children, but strong, secure relationships cost time, our most precious commodity. Your time is the greatest gift you can give them.

As always, we invite you to contact us at school if you have any concerns regarding your child's wellbeing.

The following article was used in the preparation of this article and provides useful for further reading:

<http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/preventing-youth-suicide/13-reasons-why-netflix-series-considerations-for-educators>

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