

Starting the Conversation with your children:

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT 13 Reasons Why

There has been a national firestorm over the Netflix series 13 Reasons Why (13RW). Parents seem to have mixed reactions while youth, especially those between the ages of 11 and 13, give it high praise. Educators and suicidologists are appropriately worried that its graphic portrayal of suicide might be a catalyst for the suicides of vulnerable youth who watch it. Almost anyone who has even heard about it seems to have an opinion about some aspect of the content. One thing that seems consistent, however, is that almost everyone recommends having a conversation with youth about the themes it addresses.

The only problem is that most adults haven't watched the entire series and are making suggestions based on what they've heard other people say. And while some wise guidance has been developed that warns of the implications of 13RW's graphic images or suggests general discussion points around its themes, it's been hard to find conversation starters that directly address specific themes or content. While this generalist approach probably works in discussions between adults, youth may be more engaged when the conversation pointedly addresses characters or plot.

Although the series is suggested for "mature audiences" (ages 17 and up), many younger adolescents are also viewing the now viral show. *These suggestions do not recommend that* any youth be encouraged to view the series. If youth do watch it, however, *it is* important to know how to direct *the conversation* towards positive help-seeking behaviors while processing the show's graphic content in a supportive manner. Even if you haven't watched the series, these guidelines help identify scene-by-scene discussion points to use for opening up the conversation around suicide (and some of the other graphic themes i.e. sexual assaults, substance use).

How do you do that if you haven't committed the hours it takes to watch the series? Here's a cheat sheet to the themes that can help frame a discussion between generations.

- 1. Life or Death.** It's easy to come to the conclusion that the theme of 13RW is the suicide death of Hannah Baker, the sophomore girl whose suicide note takes the form of 13 cassette tapes she made for the people she feels contributed to her death. A side of each tape is devoted to a specific person and it is as if Hannah speaks from the grave to present a

WHO GOT THE 13 TAPES

1. Justin, Hannah's first kiss who spreads rumors they were intimate
2. Alex, who set Hannah up against her best friend Jessica in a "best ass" contest
3. Jessica who got so angry she hit Hannah
4. Tyler, a peeping tom who took naked photos of Hannah in her bedroom
5. Courtney, a girl with two dads who is struggling with her sexual orientation, who spreads sexual rumors about Hannah's sexual orientation
6. Marcus, matched with Hannah in a Valentine contest, who makes an inappropriate sexual move
7. Zach, who is rebuffed by Hannah and steals her supportive messages in a communications class.
8. Ryan, who shares a personal poem written by Hannah in a school paper
9. Clay, whom Hannah tells had nothing to do with her death
10. Justin (from Tape 1) who allows his friend Bryce to rape an unconscious Jessica
11. Sheri, who drives Hannah home from a party, hits a stop sign down, doesn't report it, then a fatal accident happens at that spot
12. Bryce, who rapes Hannah in a hot tub
13. Mr. Porter, Hannah's school counselor who offers Hannah no help when she tells him she's suicidal

catalogued list of insults and literal assaults as reasons to justify her decision to take her life. The thread that ties these stories together is person number 9 (in the book he is 9 in the movie he is 11), Clay Jensen. Clay is Hannah's shy friend and co-worker, who is in love with Hannah; he ponders the content of each tape before passing them along to the next person on the list. The 13 episodes are based on his listening to the tapes. By doing this, perhaps, the theme of the episodes is more about life than death; after all, Hannah doesn't die until the 13th episode. What the series focuses on is Hannah's life when she was alive and the lives of these 13 characters.

YOU CAN ASK:

- How do you think this series would have been different if we didn't know at the beginning that Hannah took her life?
- Write a different ending and explain what Hannah can do to keep living.
- What is the point the series is trying to make about Hannah's death? Do you think the way her death is portrayed gets in the way of the message?
- At one point Hannah says: "A lot of you cared, just not enough." How do you think people caring might have changed Hannah's mind about suicide? Can you make a list in your mind of the people who care about you? Do they care "enough"? If not, what can you do to fix that?
- Experts say that showing suicide in this way may vulnerable kids who watch the series think about suicide themselves. How do you think that happens? Have you or any of your friends have thoughts of suicide or death since you watched the show? Explain.

2. Guilt and Blame. The catalogue of events in Hannah's life for which she blames others is another one of the threads that connect the tapes together. Apparently, Hannah gives specific details about each event so that the responsible person might alter their behavior in the future. There is also the implication that peer pressure- since 13 people now know about each event- might add pressure for behavior change. Remember the adage: "There's two sides to every story?" With only Hannah's side, there's a much better chance the accusations will stick and create the huge guilt trip and punishment she intended. She, herself, feels guilt over several events: Jessica's rape, which she witnesses but does nothing to stop it, and the death that takes place in the car accident by the toppled stop sign, again which she does not report. She doesn't, however, acknowledge that she had any role in the other events.

YOU CAN ASK:

- Pick a situation from one of the tapes and tell the same story from the other person's point of view. What do you notice when you hear both sides of the story?
- Do you think Hannah bears any responsibility for the things that happened to her? How?
- Hannah seems to be a pretty tough girl and yet the tapes make her out to be a victim. How can you explain both of those qualities in the same person?
- Is being a victim something that someone does to you or it is something that's in your own mind?

- 3. Rumor-Mongering** The feeling of being victimized gets exacerbated by the rumors that circulate about Hannah, especially those that seem to slut-shame her and damage her reputation. Most middle and high school students know this game- they may have even played it themselves so it's a plot theme that they can identify with. There are, again, two sides to this story. Hannah's tapes create rumors and ascribe motivations to people who have no chance to defend themselves. She actually threatens the tape recipients with exposure if they do not follow her directions to forward the tapes to the next person on the list.

YOU CAN ASK:

- At one point Hannah says: "Even though someone appears to shrug off a sideways comment or not to be affected by a rumor, it's impossible to know everything else that's going on in that person's life, and how we might be adding to his or her pain. People do have an impact on the lives of others; that's undeniable." Take one example of a rumor in the story and come up with a way Hannah could have responded to it in a more proactive way.
- Do you believe everything Hannah says about the other kids? Is she a reliable narrator? Explain your point of view.
- Hannah transfers to this school in sophomore year (parents mention - mean girls in her last school). Is it easier to believe rumors about someone you don't know very well? Have you ever seen this happen?
- Do you have to spread rumors to hurt someone or just believe the rumors you hear?
- Why do you think no one spreads rumors about Clay? (Early in the series, it is alluded to the fact that there were rumors about him being gay and that may have been one of the reasons he was in therapy, depressed, and had been taking medications).

- 4. Bullying Behaviors-** Blame and rumors lead into the examples of bullying behavior that color almost every episode. While many of them look like incidents that happen in the halls of high schools every day, their cumulative effect adds to Hannah's belief that everyone is out to get her. We see her vision get myopic as she views almost everything that happens to her through the lens of bullying. And just in case we don't get the message, we see other characters in the series as the targets of bullies as well.

YOU CAN ASK:

- There are a lot of examples of bullying in the series. Describe one that stands out to you and explain why.
- In some bullying situations, other students act as 'upstanders', confronting the bullying behavior. Talk about one of those situations. Why do you think the peers of the person who is being bullied stand up for this person and not for other students who are also bullied?
- Hannah hints that she had problems at her old school and may have been bullied and gossiped about there. Do you think this a pattern or maybe just Hannah's bad luck?

- 5. Betrayal and Loyalty** – Loyalty is a fragile quality in this series and all the meaningful relationships seem to crack under pressure. The strongest relationships, like Justin and Bryce's,

are based on surface and superficial things like partying and Bryce paying for things for Justin. One thing you seem to be able to count on is that you really can't count on anyone- somehow you will be betrayed in the end. Hannah can't even count on her parents or school counselor; even adults will let you down. One good example is Tony always there for Clay. Why is he there and always supporting Clay?

YOU CAN ASK:

- Is the betrayal of Hannah one-sided or does she betray herself as well? Cite some examples.
- How does Hannah feel she betrayed Jessica? Do you think making these tapes add to that betrayal? Explain.
- Do you think the information on the tapes will stay with the people who received them?
- Does Clay betray Hannah by believing the rumors about her?
- When Hannah gets betrayed by an adult, like her school counselor, she seems to totally give up. In that particular situation, what else could she have done that might have been more productive?
- Mr. Porter, the school counselor, is pretty inept. Talk about how he could have responded in a more helpful way.
- Have you ever had an adult let you down? What did you do?

6. Violence- Everything in the series has a violent edge, including Hannah's creation of the tapes and the destruction they are designed to cause in the lives of the people who listen. Even Clay, who truly tries to be her friend, is not immune and he slowly starts to crumble under the pressure of what he is hearing. There is also physical violence used as a threat and sexual violence designed to humiliate. But even in the dangerous world of her high school, the worst and ultimate danger is Hannah's violence to herself: her suicide.

YOU CAN ASK:

- Do you think there was too much violence in the series? Explain.
- Do you think Hannah's suicide registered as an act of self-violence or as a response to the cruel world in which she perceived herself living? Explain how you came to that conclusion
- How is emotional violence portrayed in the series? Have you seen examples of that in your life or in your school?

7. Choices and Options – Choice is one of the central developmental themes in adolescence so it's no surprise it surfaces in every episode. From her choices in friendships to decisions about behaviors in relationships, Hannah seems engulfed in the bad outcome of almost every choice she makes. When she tries to expand her support system and makes a good choice by joining a community poetry class (a place she sees as a safe space), another member, who is a student at her school, publishes one of the private poems she shares in this community atmosphere. As the series progresses and Hannah's judgment gets worse, she begins to make what she knows are

bad choices (i.e. going to Jessica's party when she didn't want to). Her thinking seems to be unraveling and there seem to be fewer and fewer options to detour her from death

YOU CAN ASK:

- What is the most important choice-good or bad- that Hannah makes?
- What are some of the bad choices Hannah makes? Do you see any pattern in her behaviors?
- Do you think the series makes it clear that Hannah had a choice about what she did with her life and that she chose to end it, even if she tries to blame her peers and the counselor for her decision?
- Do you think her voice on the tapes and the flashbacks make it seem like Hannah is still alive? Does this give the wrong impression of what happens when you die?
- From the beginning the series is clearly focused on the outcome- Hannah's suicide. Do you think this gives the impression that suicide is an acceptable choice when life goes sideways?
- Most people who die by suicide have some sort of mental illness, like depression. The series makes it clear that Clay has had some kind of emotional problem in the past and has seen a therapist. Hannah's depression doesn't seem as evident? Why do you think that is?
- How do you think the story would have been different if Hannah's depression had been acknowledged and addressed early on? Do you think you would have seen some of her choices in a different way?
- Think about one of Hannah's bad choices and rewrite that scene in a different way.

FINAL NOTES

AS THOSE OF YOU WHO WORK WITH YOUTH KNOW, THERE IS NEVER JUST ONE ANSWER TO ANY QUESTION. EXPECT DISCUSSION AND WHILE ITS IMPORTANT TO VALIDATE STUDENT OPINION, MAKE SURE YOU MAKE THE FOLLOWING ESSENTIAL POINTS:

- DESPITE THE WAY IT MAY SEEM IN THE SERIES, WHEN YOU ARE DEAD YOU ARE GONE AND THE ONLY WAY YOU STAY ALIVE IS IN THE MEMORIES OF THOSE YOU LEAVE BEHIND. KEEP THIS IN MIND WHEN WATCHING SEASON 2 AND HANNAH SHOWS UP AGAIN. SHE REALLY IS DEAD AND CAN NOT COMMUNICATE WITH THE LIVING!
- SUICIDE IS A DECISION MADE BY SOMEONE WHO IS NOT THINKING CLEARLY... IT IS NOT LOGICAL TO THINK YOU CAN FIX PROBLEMS IN LIFE BY KILLING YOURSELF. SURE, THE PROBLEMS ARE GONE BUT SO ARE YOU. FOREVER.
- WHEN LIFE GETS HARD WE ALL NEED HELP. IF THE FIRST PERSON YOU GO TO DOESN'T GIVE YOU WHAT YOU NEED, FIND SOMEONE ELSE!
- MENTAL ILLNESS IS TREATABLE!

References

Shmoop Editorial Team. (2008, November 11). *Thirteen Reasons Why Summary*. Retrieved May 1, 2017, from <https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/thirteen-reasons-why/summary>