



# REASONS

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*Why We Must  
Engage with Our Teens*



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# 13 REASONS.

## *Why We Must Engage with Our Teens*

As a Dad, one of my deepest commitments and concerns is to raise up my 7 children, 4 girls and 3 boys, to thrive in the world. As an Orthodox therapist, I was asked, recently, to watch and respond to the popular new Netflix series, *13 Reasons Why*, that has caused a stir.

In this Netflix original series, we follow along with Clay Jensen (Dylan Minnette), a high school sophomore, as he listens to 13 cassette recordings made by his friend, Hannah Baker (Katherine Langford), before she killed herself. In each recording, Hannah identifies, or blames, a different person for something that person did, or did not do, that 'led her' to take her life. The show depicts many awful realities that are present in teenage culture. Drugs, alcohol, bullying, sexual harassment, rape, and suicide, are just some of the issues the show sheds light on.

There have been many commentaries written on the series, most of them articulate and observant, shedding light on many truths. And yet, few of them offer a clear guide as to how we should respond and how we can engage our young people in light of these realities.

In this response I will dig into what makes this series so popular, what this series misses, and what we can do as parents, clergy, youth workers, and communities, to engage our teens and lead them on the life-giving path.

It may be our instinct to become frustrated at the popularity of this show and to turn away from it as a means of protecting ourselves from the harsh realities it depicts. I believe however, in many ways this series and its popularity, elicits an opportunity to respond; I see it as an invitation. *13 Reasons Why* is an invitation to pay attention and take action.

### **WHY IS THE SERIES SO SEXY, SO POPULAR, SO ENTICING?**

Well, like one online writer notes, "because it strikes a nerve." (<https://www.quora.com/Why-is-13-Reasons-Why-so-famous>)

The series graphically portrays some of the most painful experiences teens can have: gossip, betrayal, rumors, hazing, misunderstanding between friends, the danger of social media, relationship difficulties, same-sex attraction, loneliness, checked-out parents, family stressors, stalking... The series does not hold back. Suicide, sexual harassment, rape, and bullying are graphically and brutally portrayed in this series making it very disturbing to watch. And yet just like a train wreck, it's near impossible to take your eyes off it; the scenes are heart wrenching but difficult to stop watching. And, Hollywood adds its dramatic and sexy layer, reeling its audience, particularly the teens, in even more.

People are drawn in because these are real events in the lives of our teens. Many high school and college age kids have experienced these things or have friends who have. Many of them are left deeply troubled and disturbed, not only by the events, but by the experiences of the victims in their efforts, and often inability, to find healing.

# A GLIMPSE INTO TEENAGE REALITIES

## **SUICIDE:**

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for those ages 10-24. More teenagers and young adults die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease, combined. Each day there are an average of 5,240 suicide attempts by young people grades 7-12, and 4 out of 5 teens who attempt suicide have given clear warning signs. 90 percent of suicide victims suffer from a mental illness. <http://jasonfoundation.com/prp/facts/youth-suicide-statistics/>

## **SEXUAL HARASSMENT:**

Sexual harassment can involve comments, gestures, actions, or attention that is intended to hurt, offend, or intimidate another person, the focus being on things like a person's appearance, body parts, sexual orientation, or sexual activity. Sexual harassment may be verbal or offenders may use technology, sending inappropriate text messages, pictures, or videos. Sexual harassment can become physical when someone tries to kiss or touch someone that does not want to be touched (Kidshealth.org). 61% of 10th to 11th graders reported they had been physically/sexually harassed at school. Approximately 81% of students experienced some form of sexual harassment during their school years. 59% percent were harassed occasionally, and 27% were targeted often. Additionally, 54% of students reported that they had sexually harassed someone during their school. 43% of girls and 30% of boys experienced unwanted sexual attention, including pressure for dates and sex. ([https://www.wcasa.org/pages/Resources-Info\\_Sheets-Teen-Sexual-Assault-and-Abuse-2008.php](https://www.wcasa.org/pages/Resources-Info_Sheets-Teen-Sexual-Assault-and-Abuse-2008.php))

## **RAPE:**

1 out of 6 women is the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime. (RAINN.org) Females ages

16-19 are 4 times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault (RAINN.org) And 1 out of every 10 rape victims is a male. (RAINN.org) Rape goes largely unreported. According to the US Department of Justice, NSOPW National Sex Offender Public Website only 16% of all rapes were reported to law enforcement

## **BULLYING:**

28% of U.S. students in grades 6-12 experienced bullying. 20% of U.S. students in grades 9-12 experienced bullying. 15 Approximately 30% of young people admit to bullying others in surveys. 3 70.6% of young people say they have seen bullying in their schools. 3 70.4% of school staff have seen bullying. 62% witnessed bullying two or more times in the last month and 41% witness bullying once a week or more. <https://www.stopbullying.gov/prevention/index.html>

## **DEPRESSION:**

Depression is the most common mental health disorder in the United States among teens and adults. Between 10 to 15 percent of teenagers have some symptoms of teen depression at any one time. About 5 percent of teens are suffering from major depression at any one time, 30 percent of teens with depression also develop a substance abuse problem. Teenagers with depression are likely to have a smaller social circle and take advantage of fewer opportunities for education or careers, are more likely to have trouble at school and in jobs, and to struggle with relationships. They are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors, leading to higher rates of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Untreated depression is the number one cause of suicide. Less than 33 percent of teens with depression get help, yet 80 percent of teens with depression can be successfully treated. (teenhelp.com)

The series strikes a nerve because it is depressing. It depicts the lives of too many of our kids. Just talking about these issues can be depressing and, as the series communicated, it can feel hopeless to try and solve all the issues and problems of teen life. It is not the shedding of light on these issues that is dangerous, as these are important realities to be aware of, but what makes this series so dangerous is the darkness and hopelessness that viewers are left with.

## **WHAT MESSAGES GET MISSED?**

Much of the media stir around the series has focused on the fear that the Directors crossed the line in terms of depicting suicide in a way that endangers kids who are vulnerable, pushing them over the edge and provoking them to copy Hannah's suicide.

The reactions to the suicide can distract us from some of the other dangerous aspects of the series. There are three things that are easy to miss when watching the series:

1. This is an inaccurate portrayal of suicide
2. There are deeper unspoken factors behind this shocking teen culture
3. Hopelessness pervades the entire narrative

And these three things in my opinion are the real danger of the series.

### **1. THIS IS AN INACCURATE PORTRAYAL OF SUICIDE**

Suicide is a real issue for teens, as I've mentioned, but this is a Hollywood story of suicide. Hannah is cool, calm, and collected as she decides to record tapes before taking her life. In real life, people who take their own lives are, typically, in deep distress, usually struggling with mental illness and don't, or can't, take the time to record tapes.

As Dr. John Ackerman writes in a blog post, on the website Nationwide Children, "Just because something is entertaining does not make it accurate. Hannah's experiences of being bullied, assaulted, and shamed are all too common and certainly intensely painful. However, the progression of her suicidal behavior is simply not plausible. It is unrealistic for someone, especially a teenager in the midst of an emotional crisis, to construct an elaborate series of tapes all the while maintaining a sarcastic, witty, and glib tone towards people she blames for her decision to end her life."

[http://700childrens.nationwidechildrens.org/13-reasons-parents-concerned-netflix-series/?utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_campaign=facebook&utm\\_content=post-photolink](http://700childrens.nationwidechildrens.org/13-reasons-parents-concerned-netflix-series/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=facebook&utm_content=post-photolink)

In fact, in real life, if Hannah did record tapes so calmly and clearly, she would have, likely, not felt as distressed and been able to see the many other choices she had. And actually, even in the series, once she finishes the tapes, for a brief moment, she decides to give life one more chance.

In real life, suicide is about mental illness, not just an inability to cope with painful life events. According to an article by the National Association of School Psychologists, while life stressors are "driving factors of teen suicide, often the underlying issue is one of a mental illness." The NASP continues, "suicide is not the simple consequence of stressors or coping challenges, but rather, it is most typically a combined result of treatable mental illnesses and overwhelming or intolerable stressors." (<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/preventing-youth-suicide/13-reasons-why-netflix-series-considerations-for-educators>)

Additionally, in this series, Hannah blames 13 people for her suicide when, really, there is only one person responsible. The title of the series, *13 Reasons Why*, is both disturbing and misleading. The fact is, there were not 13 reasons why Hannah took her life. There was one reason - she chose to. Hannah 'blames' her suicide on everyone who, knowingly or unknowingly, did something that hurt her. Repeatedly, the characters series identify that the suicide was a failure of each of the people in Hannah's life. "We killed Hannah," was a refrain repeated throughout the series. That is a dangerous lie. Hannah took her own life. Terrible things did happen, but Hannah had a lot of other choices. We each have the freedom to choose how to respond when we are hurt by the sins and mistakes of others. While our choices and behaviors do affect others, it is a lie to believe that our decisions are controlled by other people's sins. Dr. John Ackerman states, "portraying suicide as the inevitable outcome of Hannah's victimization was, at best, a missed opportunity and, at worst, dangerous to those vulnerable to suicide."

And finally, this series portrays suicide as the answer to a problem when suicide is never a solution. Imagining that we can teach people, or get back at those who hurt us, by killing ourselves is a dangerous fantasy. We can't make people listen to us after we have died, because we are gone, and even if we could, and if people realized what they had done, we have still solved nothing, because we are dead. We can't speak from beyond the grave and taking ones life solves nothing.

To quote Dr. John Ackerman again, "*13RW* does nothing to counter the misconception that suicide is a selfish act. Hannah's decision to expose and blackmail 13 individuals who are the "reasons" for her death makes her appear manipulative and vengeful. People who take their own lives commonly feel like a burden to others or experience intense emotional pain that overwhelms their capacity to continue with life. Making others feel guilty is the furthest thing from their mind. *13RW* could do a much better job of helping viewers recognize connections between suicidal behavior and mental health issues, especially depression."

Using Hannah's recordings, after she's died, and weaving them together with Clay's experiences after her death makes for great television, but it's not real. On the surface, a realistic portrayal of suicide is missing.

## **2. THERE ARE DEEPER UNSPOKEN FACTORS BEHIND THIS SHOCKING TEEN CULTURE**

The stressors of teen culture are portrayed as the underlying cause of Hannah's suicide. The bullying, sexual harassment, and rape are seemingly the problems the creators of the show want us to attend to, but what they fail to do is reveal the deeper factors that lead these stressors to become realities. When our teens do not have people to whom they can open up to, when they do not have adults who are engaged in their lives in a meaningful way, when they have no space where they can figure out who they are and what is true and right, they make "age-appropriate," but painful, mistakes.

It's easy to watch the series and get overwhelmed by all the bad things that can happen in High School and miss the fact that this is a series about kids who are on their own, alone. On the surface, it's a series on suicide, really, it is about a culture of loneliness and disconnection.

What's more overwhelming to watch than the suicide in Episode 13, is episode after episode of unattended teens on their own, with no adults who care, or know how to care, old enough to make serious mistakes, seriously hurt each other and get hurt by each other, but not old enough to know how to navigate life on their own.

We witness a world of teens where the adults are not engaged in meaningful ways with the kids. No scenes of adults having coffee with kids, only kids with each other. The adults are orbiting around the kids' world, not in their world or in their hearts, engaged and supportive. No teachers, coaches, counselors, mentors, parents, grandparents, pastors or priests, youth directors...nobody. Nobody to listen to them, take an interest in them, guide them, comfort and console them, celebrate with them, nothing. And any efforts that the adults make to engage, to connect, or to become involved, fail. Rather, the series is filled with kids keeping secrets from parents or trusted adults about things that happen in their lives.

There is no openness, honesty, and deep knowing between kids and parents. Clay lies to his parents about his closeness and connection to Hannah. Hannah keeps her struggles and her experiences from her parents. Tyler has a secret life of stalking that no one is aware of. Jessica cannot let her dad know what's really going on in her life. The list goes on and on, each child keeping deep secrets, painful experiences, personal struggles from parents and trusted adults. Each of the teens is burdened by the emotional stress of those secrets, left alone to navigate, and suffering painfully as a result.

The glimpses we get into the world of the parents are disturbing and depressing ones. We never see the parents of the rich jock-kid, Bryce, who perpetrates the rapes and hosts one of the parties in his parents' nice home with a pool. Another student, Justin, has a mom who is living with her violent boyfriend who threatens Justin. We briefly see Tony's dad, but he seems more interested in his car than in Tony. Zach's mom is clearly focused on her child's achievements rather than on her child. Clay has nice parents who are portrayed as disconnected from each other and from Clay, each focused more on their careers than on Clay. And Hannah's parents are portrayed as kind people but too overwhelmed by their own financial situation trying to save the family business to pay much attention to Hannah. The list of parents orbiting the kids, but not involved or engaged, goes on. Each of the depressing home lives of the students contributes to the overall depressing and hopeless nature of the narrative.

Unattended teens, trying to navigate, feeling the pressures of life, all together, is a recipe for disaster: binge drinking, reckless sexual behaviors, and bad decisions. It's easy to miss the absence of meaningful adults in the lives of teens that serve as the soil from which the weeds of alcohol abuse, bullying, sexual abuse and broken relationships grow.

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The viewer might get motivated to address all the problems identified in the series.

Movements for suicide and bullying awareness have been common reactions, but what is easy to miss is that it is not about the problems, it is about persons – the teens – and the critical relationships missing in their lives.

When adults fail to see kids as persons but get distracted by trying to make sure they behave, do the right thing, and don't get into trouble, kids are left feeling alone, like nobody really cares who they are. When we get distracted by all the problems in life, and lose sight of persons, life can be a dark and lonely experience. And that is the third thing that this series misses: hope.

### **3. HOPELESSNESS PERVADES THE ENTIRE NARRATIVE**

*13 Reasons Why* offers us 13 hours of insight into the problems that our teens are facing. While not perfectly accurate, the show spends a great deal of time portraying the dark realities of teen culture, and yet, what they fail to offer is a real path forward in the face of these real challenges. What's missing in this dark story is light. It offers no hope, no faith, and no meaning in peoples lives.

After watching the series, the most dangerous aspect was the darkness of the narrative, the overwhelming sense that there is nothing we can do to stop bad things from happening and that suicide is the inevitable result. There is no light in this dark story.

To those of us of faith, the glaring hole in this story is the lack of connection to any Church or community of faith. While we don't expect a Netflix original series to include such a reality, it is important to note that this absence of faith plays a big part in the ultimate message of hopelessness.

There is no eternal dimension to the story or in the lives of the kids and their families. In fact, there is a deep sense of meaninglessness in the lives of the teens. The focus of their lives seems to be in getting through school, getting a sports scholarship for college, and surviving life. There is no sense that life is about being fully known and fully loved by others.

Everyone is disconnected and just surviving, not living in real intimate relationships of love with each other and God. While some students realize their mistakes and repent, there is no forgiveness and redemption. Essentially, there is no Christ in this story. Without Christ, it seems, there is only death and no resurrection. The absence of any deeper reality of the Kingdom of God, any eternal reality or eternal implications of daily life, or even helping out others in need, all contribute to a sense of meaninglessness in all the suffering.

It seems as though the Director's intent is to raise awareness by disturbing the viewers so much that they are compelled to do more to stop bad things from happening. The truth is, no amount of community activism can stop bad things from happening or change the fact of sin in the world. With no options presented for moving forward through the challenges, the graphic depictions and dark story serve only to distress the viewer.

Through listening to the tapes, the teenagers and the viewers now see all the problems, sins, and mistakes that Hannah experienced, but, in fact, Hannah is already dead, so there is nothing we can do. We feel Clay's pain and sense of hopelessness as he tries, in vain, to fight the darkness, to get everyone to understand, to take responsibility for their part in Hannah's death. But we know that Hannah dies, so all his efforts are overshadowed by the dark reality that there is nothing he can do to stop the suicide. The viewer is left with a deep sense that we can't stop bad things from happening. And at some level, we all know this to be true, but that does not mean we can't make meaningful choices when we experience bad things.

The series also fails to show real alternatives for Hannah, avenues for help and healing that exist in real life. The series depicts a school that was doing too little too late, and throughout the series, every possibility of Hannah talking to an adult failed. Some parents tried to check in, but they failed. Clay tried to reach out to a teacher, but nothing happened. Hannah tried to approach her parents, but this did not help. This reaches a dramatic climax when, in the 12th episode, even the counselor fails to step in properly.

I must say that the portrayal of the counselor is a Hollywood fabrication. While some counselors make mistakes and miss warning signs, even basic counselors know that you do not ‘interview’ a distressed teen but you come out from behind your desk, draw close, ask specifically about thoughts of suicide, attend to her feelings and distress, and do not leave her unattended until she has calmed down and you’ve made a plan for addressing her real concerns.

If Hannah took her life because bad things happened to her and there is nothing we can do to stop these bad things, the viewer is left with both graphic images of bullying, rape, and suicide, and a deep sense that suicide is the inevitable, reasonable response to this hopeless situation.

Essentially, the very message that the series tries to communicate- pay attention, do more to be kind to people, stop the bad things from happening, is destined to fail, because bad things do in fact happen. For those viewers who feel alone, isolated, and overwhelmed by life’s stressors, this series can push them into a dark place, because what is missing is a real path through.

**Elana Premack Sandler, LCSW. MPH. in *Psychology Today*, writes:**

*“This is not a message of hope or empowerment. It’s a message that has quite terrifying implications when presented without guidance for parents, teachers, and other adults involved in the lives of teens.”*

What’s missing is a real path forward when bad things inevitably happen, and that path forward is being connected to Christ in and through the Church. It is being connected as a community in real relationships. What our teens need is not so much a solution to all their problems and the bad things that happen, but a solution to isolation and loneliness. Our teens need to be connected to a community of real relationships. The path forward is for our teens, and for each of us, to be known, loved, and connected in real relationships to each other and to God.

We need to focus on persons, not problems. What our teens need are adults who care more about who the teens are, than how they’re behaving. Our teens need adults who know the path of Christ and His Church and who reach out and will walk with the teens on that path.

And or teens need spaces in our homes, our schools, our Churches, and our communities where they are free be known, free to share, to ask questions and get answers, free to share their struggles, mistakes, and painful experiences, and receive support and guidance.



Too many of our teens specifically lack these places to go and adults to talk to. They don't need to be told what to think, but invited to think and taught how to think. They don't need to be told how to feel, they need their feelings attended to.

They may need to be told how to behave, shown how to behave, but not by people who don't care, first, about who they are and what they are thinking and feeling. They need adults engaged in real relationships with them who can guide and teach them.

Our goal in the home, the School, the Church and the community is not to make sure our kids don't commit suicide, but to help them navigate, grow, thrive and become full adults in community by drawing close, entering their world, walking with them in relationships.

We can have all the suicide awareness, bullying awareness programs and information, but if we're not interested in teens as persons, listening to them, learning who they are, what they're thinking and feeling and what they are struggling with, it seems like we're more interested in making sure nobody dies rather than really being in relationships with our kids.

That will not work. And the series powerfully communicates that. All the efforts of adults to raise awareness are empty, because nobody is touching the lives and hearts of the kids.

Our teens don't need more programs in their lives, they need more people in their lives who are paying attention to who they are. This series, *13 Reasons Why*, is an invitation to all of us to pay attention to the persons of our teens.

The more connected kids are to mature adults, the fewer experiences of disaster occur. Unsupervised, unattended, isolated, and lonely kids are at risk for all sorts of destructive behaviors as they figure out life, particularly when they're feeling a lot of pressure.

Once we stop focusing on solving problems and focus on engaging our teens as persons, we solve, not only many of the problems, but many of the damaging and traumatic effects of these issues. We will find ourselves in a place where we can actually support our teens when they experience painful life events like bullying, rumors, hazing, betrayal, and even the more serious instances of suicidal thoughts, sexual harassment, and rape. There is hope. There is a real path forward.

## **HOW WE CAN RESPOND**

The series highlights a common feeling we all have, helplessness in the face of bullying, sexual harassment, gossip, rumors, and betrayal, enhanced by the powerful effects of social media. It is true, it seems, that there is nothing we can do to eliminate bad things from happening, but there are a lot of things we can do, as families, churches, schools, and as a community, to stay focused on connecting to our teens and offering them the real path forward. It is through real relationships that they will learn to thrive in the face of difficulties.

Whether we are parents, teachers, clergy, or youth workers, the antidote to the harsh realities our teens are experiencing is to:

## **BE INVOLVED / BE CLEAR / BE STRICT:**

*Engaging in deep and meaningful relationships with our teens.*

It can seem hard to know how to build connections with teenagers; it is hard to know how to be involved in their lives and how to guide them on a more life-giving path. When we are engaged in their lives, we form a relationship with them. From that context of relationship, we can clearly communicate what is appropriate and what is destructive. And then we are strict, responding to behavior and incidents appropriately and as needed. This process of being involved, clear, and strict, offers our teens a path, a path of deep and loving relationships that will give them strength and direction in the midst of the crazy. This is the only way we can effectively respond to the darkness in this world and equip our teens to thrive.

It can feel overwhelming, but thankfully we have hope, a clear path, and a real response.

### **BE INVOLVED**

The best response is personal. We must be involved and engaged in the person of our kids. Life is not about solving problems, but about engaging in relationships, in loving, personal relationships.

The place to start is in the home, because, I believe, it really does start in the home. Deep and meaningful primary relationships between children and their parents ground a child and sets them up to thrive in this world. And yet, it takes more than just a healthy home life. The best thing for our teens is to have active relationships with many different adult mentors. Teachers, youth workers, clergy, coaches, etc. all need to be involved in our teens' lives. They all play critical roles in raising and grounding our teens.

It is easy to stay on the periphery of the lives of teens as they can be closed, they can feel distant, and their behaviors can be hard to understand. As children get older, they are slowly becoming adults, figuring out who they are, building their own lives, spending more time away from their parents. They need that space, physically and emotionally, but, the fact is, they need adults involved in their lives just as much as ever. Our teens need to figure out life for themselves, but not by themselves.

It is easy for parents and adults to give teens mixed messages. Our instinct of what it means to "be involved" might be to control them and tell them what to do, like we do for little kids, and then we expect them to make mature decisions like adults, and we wonder why they can't.

It is easy to focus on correcting our teens' behaviors, telling them what to do, what to think, or even how to feel, rather than connecting with them as persons.

It is easy to get distracted and frustrated by our teens' actions and behaviors. It is also easy for adults to check out or get distracted by our own lives. It can feel like a lot of work to stay present and connected with our teens, and we don't always know how to be involved in an effective way

As a parent, I am a major factor in shaping my kids' identities, but I am limited because my teens, increasingly, spend more time at school and with peers than with me. As they go through the healthy process of separating, or individuating, from their parents, teens have a tendency to listen more to the other influences in their lives. This means I need help from others who are engaging with my teen as a person, from the school, the Church, and the community. I need the other adults involved in my teens' lives.

It is important that our schools are engaged in the person of our kids. It's easy for teachers to lose sight of the person of the student. Schools can respond by getting to know teens personally in and outside the classroom. Naturally, schools are focused on educating, but that comes best when teachers have relationships with kids.

When teachers, staff, and administrators get to know, not just students' names, but their interests, personality, character, challenges, struggles, and growth areas, they communicate that they care not just about what students are or are not learning, but who they are.

Offering positive reinforcement, being consistent, smiling, and listening to their concerns all help to gain students' trust and friendship. It is important for teachers to building real relationships with their students, communicating care and delighting in them, liking them even when they are difficult. I hope that my child's teachers will respect my child whether they think my child deserves it or not. I hope that my children's teachers will notice my children when they are doing what they should be doing, not just when they misbehave. And, for teachers as well, noticing misbehavior is an invitation to check in. When we see misbehaviors, warning signs, or students acting out, our response should be to check in. We should be quick to check in and slow to give consequences. Everything changes when a child has a sense that the teacher actually likes him or her.

And then of course we have our third arena, the Church. Does my teen feel a part of a church community? Too often, teens can be a separate demographic, a separate world within the church community. Yet, as a parent, I need my teen to feel like he or she is a real part of the church community.

*We need churches that are focused on loving persons and growing in love with our teens more than just controlling behaviors.*

It's easy to spend more time preaching about how we should behave or teaching how we should think and believe, rather than engaging kids, inquiring about who they are, what they're thinking and what they believe. It is important that we are helping them in the context of meaningful relationships to learn what the message of our faith is.

It's easy for kids to feel like Church is just more of the same, adults who are not checked in with me but are forcing me to think, feel, act, and believe a certain way. I want my teens to feel welcome in my church. What kids need from their place of worship is a safe place to be.

A space where they can feel free from the many pressures they face in their schools, homes, and in their world. They should feel comfortable to share their struggles, their pains, their questions, their doubts, their world, and their lives with trusted clergy, leaders, and peers.

Our teens need a safe place where they can ask questions, real questions, and work through their struggles and doubts. As leaders tasked with aiding in the spiritual lives of others, it can be instinctual to react against behaviors or thinking that contradicts with our faith. Beware of this instinct and instead of reacting, pursue, engage, and get to know them, and then teach.

I want my teens to be able to go to Church and share what their reactions were if they watched *13 Reasons Why*. I want them to share what scared or alarmed them, to share if they feel like they might be to blame for someone's suicide, or even to share their sense of hopelessness and be heard.

I need my church to invite my children in, allowing them to be free. I need my church to provide loving adults who will walk alongside them. Our kids need to experience a different type of community in Church, a community where the worldly 'boundaries' between adults and teens is not so relevant. Where adults engage teens with respect, as persons.

When we encounter teens in public, in the broader community, we have to embrace them. It is easy to consider teens a nuisance or stereotype them as troublesome when, instead, we can provide resources for them, offer them gathering spaces and activities, get to know their names, even as simple as smile and extend kindness to the teens you encounter in your day to day life. Avoid demonizing and reacting against them. Many troubled teens come from troubled homes. Often the "troublemakers" you encounter are good kids in tough situations. Everyone deserves to be heard. You might be the only adult that has treated a child with respect that day. Don't miss that chance.

When kids feel connected to parents, teachers, youth workers, and clergy, they live rich lives of intimacy and connection as they grow and learn. And when kids know we are interested in who they are, that sets the stage for sharing what we think, what we believe, and how we see things. These relationships are the context in which we can then be clear and be strict.

So, how do we stay engaged in our teens' lives in a way that draws them in instead of pushing them away?

## **BE PHYSICALLY PRESENT**

What do I mean: Make sure your paths cross. Whether you are a parent or adult in a teen's life, pay attention to seeing them and being seen by them. Your physical presence, as parents specifically, but also as adults in general, makes a difference in the life of your child.

Parents, it is important to show up in the evenings and be physically close even when they are working away on their homework or watching something online. We can't always expect a warm greeting, or welcome, from our teens and we can't react to that. They may ignore you, but they know you're there.

Psychologists may recommend one-on-one time, and it's great to think that we can have special one-on-one time each week with our teens, and yet, I asked my sophomore daughter to go have coffee with me, and she looked at me like I was from mars! "What? Awkward!! 'Eye roll,' what would we talk about?"

But I am still present and she still knows it. Maybe once she's in college we can talk as adults. In the meantime, finding things you can do together, biking, watching a movie/TV series, trips, hobbies, is invaluable. Be present in their schools, with their friends, and in their activities. Be engaged in their interests. They don't need us around all the time, but they need us to be involved in their lives.

When you are physically present, listen more than speak. Our teens need homes and other places where they are free to speak, free to feel, and free to think. Resist the temptations to talk, give an opinion, or tell them what to do. You don't have to say anything. I've found it's usually best when I don't. But, I can be there as a loving presence. Focus more on being present, listening, and silence, rather than on speaking.

Teens do best when they feel like the adults in their lives are present and supportive. That is what listening communicates. Our teens feel our involvement when we are present and they feel our support when we listen.

In fact, our words are not the most important tool we have to teach our teens. Being an example and showing respect are the most powerful tools we have. How we relate to others, how we spend our time, what we value, how we handle conflict, or stress, these shape the youth entrusted to our care, far more profoundly than our words.

And as parents, when we feel a sense of hopelessness, we need to remember that we are the image of adulthood for our kids. Be the type of person you want your child to become.

## **BE INFORMED**

Teens need adults who are informed and aware of what is going on in their lives. What are the teens in your life doing, seeing, and involved with? What are they experiencing? What are they listening to and learning? What are their interests, ideas, and concerns? Parents don't need to make every soccer game, but you need to know your kids play soccer. Youth workers and clergy, inquire about their lives outside of church. Teachers, inquire about your students' lives outside of school.

Parents, get to know the names of your kids' friends. Get to know their friends. Stay involved, even as you are giving up control. Where are they going, with whom, for how long, doing what? Those questions are important. Asking them is important. And if you see some troubled kids, or some kids who might be bad influences on your child, be against behaviors, not against kids.

The closer we are to our kids or the teens in our lives, the more they know that they are a priority to us, and the more we can walk along side them as they learn.

Watch what they watch, listen to what they are listening to, take advantage of opportunities as they arise, like with this series, to ask them what they see, what they think, how they feel, how they are making sense of things. If they are interested in watching it, watch with them, and talk about it with them.

Pay attention and stay checked in. There is, too often, little reward and often times the feedback is negative. It is easy to feel pushed out by teens. But they notice our presence and will feel our support as we do more listening than talking and stay informed about their lives.

And finally, we are effectively involved when we pursue them

When they are little, children come to us; as teens, we need to go to them. We give them space emotionally, letting them have their thoughts and feelings, but we pursue them by making every effort to stay involved.

I remember one time when I was asking my 17 year-old daughter about her evening plans. She was on the phone with her friend, making plans and I asked her where she was planning to go, who would she be going with, and when she would be coming back. She was trying her hardest to ignore me and keep talking on the phone. Her friend, on the other end of the phone, stopped her and said, "I wish I had a dad who asked me those questions." We don't pursue them to control their behaviors, we pursue them to communicate love and care.

Some kids struggle because parents are absent. Others struggle with dangerous and destructive, acting out behaviors because they are still learning what they value and believe, and still others are stressed and overwhelmed and act out as coping strategies. The more our kids struggle, the more we need to pursue them.

## **BE CLEAR**

Being close to our teens is not the end of the process; really, it is only the heart of the matter. Having close relationships sets the stage as we help them learn and grow.

It is important is that we are clear about what we think, feel, and believe as adults and communicate that clearly to our kids.

It's important to communicate to our children things like: we treat people with respect. We don't gossip, judge, stereotype, bully, or use people. Alcohol abuse destroys lives. Sexual harassment is wrong. What we see on TV is not necessarily real. All people post only a version of themselves on social media. Technology is a tool but it can become addicting and is distracting.

Communicate expectations clearly, in the home, at school, at Church, and in the community. This works best only after they know we care, after we are involved, after we listen, and after we take an interest in them. In this context, communicating expectations is powerful.

Be clear about the behavior you expect in your home: I expect you to be home at the agreed upon time. Everyone in the home has chores. If you want to use the car, here's what's required.

Set ground rules with your kids about what time they get up, go to bed, weekday and weekend curfews at the beginning of the school year. Set expectations about school attendance and homework, studying, church participation, peer relationships, dating relationships,

As teachers and church leaders, it is important to be clear about the behavior you expect in the school, the Church, and community. Again, this communication is best received in the context of a relationship.

*13 Reasons Why* informs us that our teens are facing a lot of dark and scary issues. We need to be clear about what our teens are experiencing and what these experiences are teaching them. With regards to suicide, we need to be clear about awareness, risks, and how to respond. We need to be clear about the danger of bullying, or racism, or any hate speech or hate behavior. We need to be informed about hazing, sexual harassment, dating violence, alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, and racism. We need to be clear, as parents, schools, churches, and community about what is ok, and what is not ok. And we need to teach our kids about these issues and how to respond when they witness or experience them.

But as I mentioned before, the focus is on the persons, not on the problems. Only after we have entered into active, engaged, listening, loving relationships with our teens, can we address the issues. And only in the context of relationships will any response to these issues be effective.

Talk about these issues with the teens entrusted to your care; talk about them deliberately, and in teachable moments. These things are constantly coming up in the media, in the news, with events that occur in schools, churches, or in families and communities. Attend to them as they come up, have conversations with your teens about their thoughts and feelings on them, and clearly communicate what is and isn't ok.

We need to be teaching how to respect others, use social media appropriately, have healthy relationships, and maintain proper boundaries in our relationships. We want our kids to know the right way to engage with peers, how to handle dating relationships, how to keep themselves safe, how to respect others and demand respect themselves and what to do when these things don't happen.

Teens don't care what we know unless they know that we care. And when we're focused on the person of the teen, we can speak, clearly and effectively, as parents, schools, churches, and communities. It is relationships first. And being clear about values and expectations comes from that.

Sometimes the adults who feel most comfortable giving opinions to teens are not the most engaged and connected with teens, and the ones who are most connected, are slow to share what they see, think, and believe. We need both. High engagement and clear expectations.

We can be clear: we are anti: bullying, violence, sexual harassment, hazing, gossiping, alcohol or drug abuse. We are clear on what behaviors are destructive. We teach respect, healthy relationships and boundaries. We model healthy communication and dialogue. Our kids might not be seeing this in the broader world, but we use these situations as more opportunities to discuss.

Teens receive plenty of messages about what to believe, how to think, and how to behave from friends, the media, and social media but not everyone has their best interests in mind. Teens experience many conflicting voices and values, and we have competing values in our schools, churches, and communities. We recognize that this is part of what makes us a great society and we need to teach our kids how to engage with competing views and values. We teach our kids how to respect the different beliefs of others, how to work together with those with different values, how to respect others who disagree, and how not to resort to violence. It is important that our teens learn how to thrive in a pluralistic society, not to reject, ignore, or hide from it.

It is critical for our kids to know where we stand, but it is never enough just to speak. Our teens need to see us acting according to our values and following up clearly and effectively when bad things happen.

## **BE STRICT**

When incidents do occur, when kids make mistakes, when teens are distressed, we can move in and act. And when we do move in and act, it is critical that we are present, really present. We focus on the teens who are struggling. Misbehaviors are an invitation to draw close and to check in. When we see misbehaviors, warning signs, or acting out, we shouldn't react or panic but check-in and reach-out. And then after checking in, we issue the necessary consequences clearly and consistently. Breaking the rules is an invitation for engagement and curiosity, not just consequences.

We can expect to have teens who are struggling, being bullied, being harassed, and contemplating suicide, as well as bullying, harassing, and gossiping. We need to be prepared, as parents, schools, churches, and a community, to act. When we're engaged in real relationships with teens, and we are clear about expectations, we can be strict about consequences. That's the only way to communicate both respect and clarity about who we are and what we value.

The goal of being strict, as a community, is not necessarily to eradicate bad things from happening, but living and thriving as a community. Together we navigate, we learn, we grow, we respond. We know that one day the person being bullied can become the bully and so we work together and we support one another. We are clear, engaged, and strict, but all of these actions are not the solution to the problem, but the path to becoming the human beings God created us to be.

When kids are hearing clear messages at home, in church, and at school, engaged in meaningful ways with parents, clergy, youth directors, and teachers, it keeps our kids connected as they learn to navigate the world, and provides real alternatives to handle the normal stressors in life, and the extreme experiences. We walk with them and teach them the path of real relationships, real forgiveness, and real intimacy.



# ***PRACTICAL TIPS***

*What to do when you encounter unsafe behavior: (stopbullying.gov)*

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- Intervene immediately. It is ok to get another adult to help.
  - Separate the kids involved.
  - Make sure everyone is safe.
  - Meet any immediate medical or mental health needs.
  - Stay calm. Reassure the kids involved, including bystanders.
  - Model respectful behavior when you intervene.
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## ***AVOID THESE COMMON MISTAKES:***

- Don't ignore it. Don't think kids can work it out without adult help.
  - Don't immediately try to sort out the facts.
  - Don't force other kids to say publicly what they saw.
  - Don't question the children involved in front of other kids.
  - Don't talk to the kids involved together, only separately.
  - Don't make the kids involved apologize or patch up relations on the spot.
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## ***GET POLICE HELP OR MEDICAL ATTENTION IMMEDIATELY IF:***

- A weapon is involved.
- There are threats of serious physical injury.
- There are threats of hate-motivated violence, such as racism or homophobia.
- There is serious bodily harm.
- There is sexual abuse.
- Anyone is accused of an illegal act, such as robbery or extortion—using force to get money, property, or services.

## WE CAN'T GO IT ALONE

*13 Reasons Why* brought to the forefront many very challenging issues. As a parent, it can feel overwhelming and lonely to try to keep our children safe. However, when the home, the school, and the Church are connected, working together, we don't solve the problem of bad things happening, but we provide a path forward for our kids.

We read in Ecclesiastes, "and though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not quickly broken." It is clear that the strongest support we can offer our children is a collaborative one. In many ways, this is the toughest part, and the biggest crisis we have as a community, keeping the home, the churches, and the schools connected, particularly as our kids enter high school.

There are many ways to keep together. We as parents can take the lead by being involved in our children's school lives. It is easier when our kids are in elementary school to be a homeroom parent, or to lead a field trip, than when they are in high school and many of these natural points of contact between the home and the school drop off. Research shows that adolescents do better in school when their parents are involved in their lives and that education works best when teachers and parents work closely with one another. "Secondary education students believe that they can do better at school if they know that their families are interested in their schoolwork and expect them to succeed, thus challenging the prevalent view that adolescents do not want their parents involved at all" (<http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/adolescence-are-parents-relevant-to-students-high-school-achievement-and-post-secondary-attainment>).

One family I know started a tradition in elementary school of hosting a private dinner in their home for their child's teacher. They chose to continue this tradition as their kids entered high school. One high school teacher, who attended the dinner, identified this as the only time she had been invited into the home of a student. When we intentionally intersect the school life with the home life we nurture this collaborative effort and support our teens.

The bottom line is that teens whose parents stay connected to their education are more likely to do better academically, behaviorally, and emotionally.

And most importantly, we must be sure that the life of the church is woven into the fabric of our family life. The more connected families are to the Church, the less alone parents feel and the more connections our children have with both like-minded peers and supportive adults. Our churches should not be a place we go on Sundays only. Not only should the faith be deeply present in our homes, but also we must make church services and activities priorities for our families. We want our children to feel as comfortable in the Church as they do in their homes.

Clergy and youth workers: invest in your teen's lives. Make it a priority to build meaningful relationships with them and to get involved in their lives.

When we work together, in concert, focusing on the person of our kids, our kids benefit by being supported and connected, and more deeply, by internalizing what is good, true, and right in terms of how to live and thrive in life.

When parents, schools, and churches that are interconnected, all focusing on staying engaged, staying clear, and staying strict, we do more than just keep our kids alive or control their behaviors, we provide for our teens a community in which they can be teens and become thriving adults.

# TIPS FOR TALKING TO OUR TEENS

Responding to our teens means drawing close to them, checking in with how they have been affected by the series, taking their thoughts, feelings, concerns, seriously, offering them information and guidance on how to make sense of the issues raised in the series, and helping them respond to any ongoing issues in their lives.

## TALKING POINTS:

These talking points address both specifically the series *13 Reasons Why* as well as general teen culture

### Check in/Ask:

- What was your experience watching the series?
- What hit home? What was the most disturbing aspect of the series?
- Do any images or events from the series linger on your heart or in your mind?
- What is your experience in High School?
- Do you feel lonely?
- Have you been bullied, or have you witnessed bullying?
- How do kids treat each other?
- How do teens use alcohol or drugs?
- Do boys rate girls?
- Do people gossip or spread rumors about you or others?
- How do kids use social media?
- What are the good and bad ways that social media is used?
- Have you ever been let down by a friend, or a parent, or a teacher? What was that like?
- What role does God play in your life?

Are we Christians just on Sundays or do we bring Christ in our hearts in our school life?

## **SHARE:**

1. The way suicide was depicted in the series was fake. It's not uncommon to think about ending your life when you're under a lot of pressure or feel alone, but typically someone in distress is not so calm and organized that they can make recordings. Usually people who take their lives are struggling with mental illness and there is real treatment for that.
2. You can't get back at people, or control people, through suicide. It is always a bad choice.
3. The series was all about other people being responsible for Hannah's decision. Actually, that would make us all victims of sin and evil. We are not. In Christ, we have a choice on how to respond, how to seek help, how to forgive, how to stay connected to Christ and His Church and walk in the truth no matter what others believe and do. It is overwhelming when peers and parents are not connected to what is true.
4. When you or someone you know is thinking about killing him/herself, go tell a teacher, a counselor, a youth director, your priest, or your parents. Don't keep it a secret.
5. The way the adults, teachers, and counselor were portrayed is inaccurate. There are many responsible adults who care and who can help. Reach out to them.
6. You may identify with some of the people in the series, or have experienced some of the issues in the series, but there are real and effective ways to respond to all the issues raised in the series. Reach out until you find someone to talk to. Don't keep it a secret. When we can talk about, or share, what happens to us, it helps us cope and learn how to respond effectively.
7. Bad things happen. We should raise awareness, but we can't stop bad things from happening and neither does that mean we have to end our lives. It means we have to stay connected to peers and adults who do what is right, treat people with respect, and act responsibly. Even people who don't go to Church know how to do what's right. Stay connected with those people.
8. The series does not mention God. There is no one who believes in Christ or is connected to His Church. When that happens, we see that many people live their lives without any real meaning. As Christians, we believe that to thrive as humans is to live close to Christ and His Church and grow in God's love. That's why we stay connected to Christ and His Church, on Sundays and throughout the week at home and at school. This allows us to grow and thrive even when bad things happen.
9. Social media can be used for good or bad. Learn to use social media responsibly.
10. Sending, sharing, or looking at inappropriate images of teens and people is destructive and hurtful.
11. Spreading rumors about people is hurtful and disrespectful, in person or online.
12. Sending inappropriate images of your self to anyone is a mistake, because once you send it, or post it, you have no control who is going to see it.

## OTHER HELPFUL RESOURCES:

[https://save.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/13RW-Talking-Points-Final\\_v5.pdf](https://save.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/13RW-Talking-Points-Final_v5.pdf)

### BULLYING:

[www.stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov)

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### HARASSMENT:

<http://kidshealth.org/en/teens/harassment.html>

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### PROPER USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA:

<https://students.shu.ac.uk/lits/it/documents/pdf/How%20to%20use%20social%20media%20responsibly.pdf>

## SUICIDE AWARENESS:

### FOR TEENS:

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/preventing-youth-suicide/save-a-friend-tips-for-teens-to-prevent-suicide>

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### FOR PARENTS AND YOUTH DIRECTORS:

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/preventing-youth-suicide/preventing-youth-suicide-tips-for-parents-and-educators>

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