

Guidance For Educators

The second season of Netflix series 13 Reasons Why picks up where the virally popular first season ended. Netflix has provided a general outline of the themes portrayed and safeguards provided in a [new blog](#). As with the first season, the intense, graphic portrayal of difficult issues involving youth present both the risk of triggering harmful behaviors among some vulnerable youth and the opportunity for adults to engage in meaningful and supportive discussions with youth about these issues. These issues again include sexual assault, suicide, alcohol and substance abuse, bullying, and extreme school and physical violence. While television series are not a primary focus for educators, it is important that school leaders and staff are aware of the potential impact and prepared to respond appropriately.

This guidance for educators is part of a toolkit developed by an international coalition of leading experts in mental health, suicide prevention, and education that provides information related to the themes present in season 2 and what adults (educators, school-employed mental health professionals, parents, caregivers, clinicians, and youth leaders) can do to identify and help students who are concerned with or affected by the show.

In general, educators should consider the following guidance:

- 1** We strongly recommend that vulnerable children and youth (such as those struggling with depression, previous suicidal behavior, or trauma) not watch this series, and most certainly not alone. Netflix has created additional safeguards for both seasons (warning cards, [discussion guides](#), and helping resources) **but these are not a substitute for adult support and engagement.**
- 2** **Ensure that parents/caregivers are aware that the second season is available**, that youth may be watching or re-watching season 1 in preparation for season 2, and the general plans the school has to support affected students. This can include steps such as linking to this toolkit on the school website, providing staff with guidance on talking to students about the issues portrayed, doing an assessment of risk factors in the school environment, and proactively encouraging students to share ideas and concerns. Schools can use or adapt this [sample letter](#) that youth can bring home.
- 3** **Encourage parents to watch the series with their child.** The difficult issues portrayed by the series do occur in schools and communities, and it is important for adults to listen, take adolescents' concerns seriously, and be willing to offer support. Caution against binge watching, as doing so with intense content, particularly in isolation, can be associated with increased mental health concerns.
- 4** **Reinforce help-seeking and that adults care and are available for support and guidance.** The adult characters in the series again are portrayed as either incompetent or uncaring. It is vital to counter this false narrative with clear messages regarding school staff connecting with students, creating a trusting school climate, and the accessibility and of and behavioral norms for school mental health professionals.
- 5** **Consider plans to provide support or information over the summer.** The series is being released toward the end of the school year and many students may watch after school is out. Capacity over the summer will vary from school to school and district to district but consider e-communications with parents and students, social media, and the school website to continue to raise awareness about resources and the importance of help-seeking and adult involvement. It might be helpful to ask the district administration to send out a message about what services are available during the summer. Also reach out to local youth organizations and summer programs to share relevant information.

Following is some useful information for educators about specific issues and themes portrayed in the series:

School Violence

Creating safe, orderly, and welcoming learning environments is critical to educating and preparing all children and youth to achieve their highest potential and contribute to society.

Several forms of bullying and harassment are portrayed in the series, including sexual assault, and contribute to the harmful choices some characters make. Schools should have clear policies in place and ensure that all school staff members are appropriately trained to stop harmful behavior immediately, report instances of harassment or assault to the person designated by the school to handle such complaints, and reinforce that respectful and kind behavior is expected. Educators should let students know that they can come to them for help and what they can do when they are witnesses to or are victimized by bullying, harassment, or assault. Teachers can improve their classroom climate by strategizing with students, enlisting the support of parents, and ensuring that all who enter the classroom feel welcome. Additionally strive to ensure that **all** student spaces on campus are monitored. Guidance is available from the National Association of School Psychologists on [creating safe and successful schools](#), as well as [school-wide bullying prevention and intervention](#) strategies.

The threat of a school shooting is also a prominent storyline. Important issues include understanding the risk factors and warning signs that someone may be considering violence and what schools can do to recognize, assess and intervene with at risk students. While depression, trauma, and other mental health problems are factors in some characters' lives, it is important to reinforce that most people with mental illness are not violent and that multiple contributing factors, including access to weapons, can influence the likelihood of an individual acting violently. It may also be helpful to remind people about the importance of measures to ensure that children and youth do not have inappropriate access to weapons. The National Shooting Sports Foundation offers [tips for home firearm safety](#) to share with parents and caregivers.



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Support students exposed to violence. Beyond the sexual violence portrayed, the series depicts serious physical violence and assaults. Exposure to community and interpersonal violence adversely affects many children. After witnessing or experiencing trauma, many children experience symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, behavioral problems, substance abuse, and poor school performance. The NEA has published a [“Best Practices”](#) guide for educating and supporting students who have been traumatized by violence. See the NASP guidance on additional [tips for supporting students exposed to violence and trauma](#).

Sexual Assault

Support victims of sexual harassment and assault. Sexual harassment and assault are major themes in the series. From the spreading of photos and rumors about Hannah to the rape of Hannah and Jessica, the series depicts unfortunate struggles of many adolescent girls. The second season focuses a good deal on the rape trial and Jessica’s continued emotional struggles. It is important for educators to recognize that exposure to events or material portraying sexual assault can “trigger” victims of these assaults to experience significant emotional distress. 81% of women who were sexually victimized experience post-traumatic stress reactions, which are often triggered by re-exposure to similar situations.

Schools have policies for protecting students who are targeted for sexual harassment in school or online. Educators should be familiar with their district’s bullying and harassment policies and procedures. However, students who are sexually assaulted need multiple layers of support. Reaching out to the school nurse and school-based mental health professionals is imperative. If the student is reluctant to speak with someone in school, educators should seek assistance through a local rape crisis hotline or through national resources such as RAINN (<https://www.rainn.org/about-sexual-assault>). These [tips for talking to sexual assault victims](#) are provided by RAINN. See [Guidance on Sexual Assault: Support for Talking with Adolescents Watching 13 Reasons Why](#) for additional information.

Suicide

Suicide is a major theme in the series. Hannah’s suicide in season 1 is very relevant to the story in season 2. Her death likely was a difficult moment for many viewers and raised concerns among experts about potential suicide contagion. Hannah and other characters experienced [risk factors](#) that can contribute to thoughts of suicide, such as substance use, bullying or cyberbullying, and sexual assault. Educators should check-in with students who may identify with Hannah’s character or who have experienced similar risk factors to ensure that they are feeling safe. Teachers and administrators should involve school psychologists, social workers, and school counselors to conduct violence risk assessments for any students suspected of experiencing thoughts of harming themselves or others. Warning signs of suicidal behavior can include verbal or written expressions about wanting to die, feeling trapped or hopeless, and noticeable changes in demeanor and behavior. We encourage educators to learn more about the [risk factors and warning signs](#) of suicide and to learn about what they can do when they identify a youth who may be at risk for attempting suicide. **Always take warning signs seriously, and never promise to keep them secret.** A 2017 survey with persons that have been suicidal asked them about what were the most important actions people could take to help them when they were in crisis. Among the most important advice they gave was that they wanted their feelings to be taken seriously. [Read the report here](#).

Reinforce that suicide deaths are permanent. The continued presence of Hannah in season 2 (even in flashback mode) continues to give the impression that somehow she is “present/able to participate in” the experiences of the other characters after her death. It is important to reinforce to students that suicide is never a solution. It is an irreversible choice regarding a temporary problem. There is help. If students are struggling with thoughts of suicide or know someone who is, help them talk to a trusted adult.

Use the [Model School Suicide Prevention Policy](#) as a guide. See [Save a Friend: Tips for Teens to Prevent Suicide](#), [Communicating With Potentially Suicidal Students](#), and the [Safe Messaging for Students](#) document for additional information. See [bethel1to.com](#) for five steps you can take to help someone in your life who might be in crisis. To learn more about the topic of suicide visit www.save.org.

Substance Use

A number of key characters abuse drugs and alcohol. Keep an eye out for behaviors suggestive of substance use in your students. Beware the assumption that your students or your community is immune to drug use. Some of the signs of substance use can include decreased motivation, sudden mood changes, physical signs (e.g., bloodshot eyes, unexplained weight changes, etc.), marked decline in academic performance, appearing depressed, and frequent absences.

Help-Seeking

Based on the outcomes of the first season, viewers may be left with the impression that seeking help from counselors or other adults is ineffective for significant concerns like suicide risk, whether this risk is personal or about a peer. However, it is important for schools to promote “help-seeking behavior” in students, as well as implement effective strategies to respond to student concerns. This can be accomplished by reinforcing that school-employed mental health professionals are available to help. Emphasize that the behavior of the second counselor in the series is recognized by all school-employed mental health professionals as inappropriate. Help students identify pathways to connect with appropriate professionals in school. Also, be an advocate to ensure that your school has a functioning crisis team or school-employed mental health professionals trained in suicide risk assessment.

All adults in the school setting should reflect on how they are contributing to the general school climate and if their actions send a message to students that they are cared for, even during the most difficult moments and interactions. Sending a message that students are valued for who they are communicates an openness to helping during difficult times. Part of this can be accomplished by listening to adolescents discuss controversial material from the show, taking their concerns seriously, and being willing to offer help in accordance with the policies and procedures of your school. [Use this lesson plan \(BEING DEVELOPED\) to help guide discussions with students.](#)

Resilience and Coping

Reinforce resiliency for all students. Resiliency gives students the ability to deal with challenges and adapt to new or difficult circumstances in a positive, productive manner. The writers and actors from the show have argued that an important aspect of this show is to encourage viewers to show more compassion to others and seek help for a peer or friend who is in trouble. We encourage teachers to leverage this aim by reinforcing resiliency factors that can lessen the potential for suicide- or homicide-related thoughts and behaviors. Once a child or adolescent is considered at risk, schools, families, and friends should work to build these factors in and around the youth.

- Family support and cohesion, including good communication.
- Peer support and close social networks.
- School and community connectedness.
- Cultural or religious beliefs that discourage suicide and promote healthy living.
- Adaptive coping and problem-solving skills, including conflict resolution.
- General life satisfaction, good self-esteem, and a sense of purpose.
- Easy access to effective medical and mental health resources.

For more guidance on promoting resiliency and coping in youth, see [Resiliency Building in Youth](#).

Get Help

- National Suicide Prevention Hotline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or chat at suicidepreventionlifeline.org (USA)
- [Crisis Text Line](#): text "START" to 741741 (USA)
- [SAMHSA Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator](#)
- [SAMHSA Prevention Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools](#)
- [Suicide Prevention Resource Center, After a Suicide: Toolkit for Schools](#)
- [School Violence Prevention](#)
- ["13 Reasons Why" Netflix Series \(Season 1\): Considerations for Educators and Families](#)
- bethe1to.com for five steps you can take to help someone in your life that might be in crisis
- www.jedfoundation.org/help
- [The Samaritans \(UK and Ireland\)](#) 116 123

Additional Resources

- <https://parents.au.reachout.com/>
- National Association of School Psychologists, www.nasponline.org
- Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, www.save.org
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, suicidepreventionlifeline.org
- American Association of Suicidology, www.suicidology.org
- Stopbullying.gov
- Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, www.rainn.org
- Take 5 to Save Lives, www.take5tosavelives.org
- 13reasonswhy.info/
- [The Trevor Project](http://TheTrevorProject.org)
- www.yourmentalhealth.ie
- [Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide](http://SocietyforthePreventionofTeenSuicide.org)