

The Girl from Plainville

Discussion guide for schools



The Girl from Plainville is based on the story of Conrad Roy and his relationship with girlfriend Michelle Carter.

The series follows the events leading up to the suicide death of Conrad Roy, the involvement of Michelle Carter, and her conviction of involuntary manslaughter. The court proceedings in 2017 gained significant media attention and was referred to as the ‘texting suicide case’.

School staff should be aware this series depicts suicidality, conversations that encourage self-harm and suicide, suicide method, court proceedings, and the bereavement of family and friends.

As this series was produced in the United States, headspace was not consulted during production, nor has it viewed the series.

The information below aims to assist school staff to engage in healthy conversations about some of the issues addressed in *The Girl from Plainville* and includes some suggestions for how to respond to distressed young people appropriately in a school setting.





Important points to remember

- The likelihood that content will be distressing for students will depend on their individual life experiences, personality, and current circumstances. No two people will take the same meaning or understanding out of each episode. Some people may be distressed by some themes or content, while others are not. It is important to be respectful of other people's experiences.
- Widespread viewing of a program that includes confronting content can spur conversations about difficult topics. However, accurate information is key to make sure conversations on such topics are productive. It is important that viewers are informed and able to have these conversations appropriately, and know when to refer to professional support.
- Television is dramatised for viewer engagement and designed to entertain.
- Fictional shows do not always specifically portray on screen the depth or complexities of individual experiences – such as individual capacity to cope, access to support, or previous experiences overcoming difficulty. As such, the characters are not a true representation of how someone may experience or respond to difficult situations. Responses will be different for everyone.

Tips for having safe discussions about the show with students:

- Do some research and get informed about the show - try to watch it if you can
- Consider the developmental stage of students you're talking to about the show if they have watched it
- Try to have discussions about the show when all people are feeling calm
- Talk about your reasons for concern
- Understand their desire to watch the series. Understanding their point of view doesn't mean agreeing with them but it may help to keep the conversation going
- Consider sharing simple tips like: Take breaks and do soothing things between episodes; watch the show with a trusted adult and discuss any issues that arise; tell someone if you feel distressed about any aspect of the series; and share where young people can go to get help
- Encourage them to take some time to look after themselves by: prioritising sleep, eating well, staying active, maintaining close relationships with family and friends, learning ways to handle hard times (journaling, listening to music, quiet time out, relaxation), reducing alcohol and other drug use, to keep on doing the things in their life that are both fun and important to them

Questions to help start the conversation:

- Do you think the characters in the show are behaving in ways that are similar to people you know? How so? How are they different?
- What do you think about what happened in this episode?
- What did you learn about [choose a specific character] situation from this episode?
- Does anything you've watched in the series change your perspective on something you've experienced yourself?
- Do you think any of the characters did anything that could have been done better?
- What would you do if you knew a friend was considering harming themselves or others?
- What part of the show do you relate to the most?
- Have you experienced anything like the characters in the show?
- Who would you go to if you were experiencing any of the situations these teens went through?
- How do you know when to offer compassion/support/ empathy and when to set clear boundaries?
- Do you know anyone that might be in trouble or need help?

Where to get help

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SANE Australia: 1800 187 263 sane.org

**Tough but important topics are raised in The Girl from Plainville.
Here are some tips for talking about these issues:**

suicide

- Experiencing suicidal thoughts or being exposed to a suicide can elicit a range of emotional and behavioural responses. These will be unique for each individual and will depend on factors such as past experiences, level of support, and personality. Talking to young people about suicide can feel daunting but doing so in a calm and sensitive way, as well as providing information and support, can help young people to manage their feelings and make sense of what is happening. Talking to young people about suicide can also promote positive coping strategies and help seeking behaviour.
- A close and trusting relationship with adults, such as school staff, increases the chance a young person will seek help during tough times. Strategies to improve the relationship between key adults and young people will help reduce the risk of suicide.
- It may be difficult for young people to share if they are experiencing thoughts about suicide. Things to look out for that indicate you should be more proactive in providing support are: increasing isolation, hopelessness, withdrawal, avoidance. Self harm, increased life stressors (e.g. bullying, relationship breakdown, exam stress, sexual assault, legal problems), or an increase in unpredictable behaviour (e.g. outbursts, increased risky sexual or drug and alcohol behaviour) may also be signs that a young person needs support.
- If you are worried a young person might be at risk of suicide, ask about suicidal thoughts in a calm and non-judgmental manner. It can feel uncomfortable asking directly, but it's necessary to check whether a person is at risk and how imminent that risk is - and it can also be a huge relief for a young person struggling with thoughts of suicide. It gives them permission to speak openly about how they feel and the opportunity to get support.
- For young people who are bereaved by suicide, it is important to give accurate information about why people might suicide. Suicide is a complex issue with many causes. Explaining that suicide is not simple and is often the result of a range of contributing factors can help reduce the chance of blaming or scapegoating.
- Don't focus on the method of the suicide. Avoid talking graphically or in detail about how a person has suicided. Detailed descriptions of the death can be overwhelming and distressing, and may increase the risk of imitation by vulnerable young people. Keep the focus on how to manage the emotions brought up by the suicide and away from details of how someone has suicided.
- If a young person is feeling overwhelmed, unable to cope or developing thoughts of suicide, encourage them to seek help. Let them know what their support options are - such as a parent or trusted adult, a teacher, school counsellor or family doctor.
- If a young person tells you they are having thoughts about suicide or if you believe a young person is at risk of suicide, you should seek professional support from your local mental health service or emergency department and keep the young person safe until help arrives. It is important to work within your school's current policies and procedures for responding to suicide risk. If there is an imminent risk to the young person's safety remove any means of suicide available to them in the immediate vicinity, such as medications or weapons. Stay with the young person (or arrange for supervision from another adult, this may be your school's wellbeing staff) until they can be seen and assessed.
- School staff may also need additional support to talk about how they are supporting young people at risk and it's helpful to be aware of supports available for staff. The school's EAP program or your GP may be good starting point.

grief

- People experiencing loss, including those who are impacted by suicide, are likely to experience grief. Grief is a natural reaction and will be different for everyone but some things people commonly experience are:
 - How you feel: shock, disbelief, numbness, loneliness, sadness, anger, resentment, regret, guilt, abandonment, anxiety or worry, or fear.
 - What you think: Thinking about all of the details of the loss, imagining a different future or past, having flashbacks or re-experiencing episodes, thinking that things don't matter anymore, or you don't care, having trouble concentrating or remembering things.
 - What you do: Some people find themselves doing a lot to keep busy, while others stop doing a lot of the things they normally do. Other physical or behavioural responses include tiredness, trouble sleeping, restlessness, crying, avoiding reminders of the loss or treasuring objects associated with the loss.
 - Regularly checking in with students experiencing loss can help to track their progress and determine what they might need to get through this tough time. Supporting them to maintain a regular routine can also be helpful.

- For staff members who support students, it is important to help them manage their grief in the most appropriate ways possible. While some might find it helpful to talk openly about the experience, others might prefer time alone. The intensity and duration of the grieving process can vary. For most people, grief will dominate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviours for a number of weeks or months following the loss.
- While most people will learn to adjust to a loss in their own time, with support from friends and family, others may require support from a treating practitioner to help them adjust and cope with their grief.
- If the impact of grief includes the following, it might be time to reach out:
 - Ongoing major sleep troubles.
 - Ongoing withdrawal from school or study, or major academic troubles.
 - Hopelessness about the future.
 - Relationship troubles or conflict with friends and family.
 - Doing things that are out of character; such as increased or more unpredictable use of alcohol and other drugs, or sexual behaviour.
- After someone dies by suicide, loved ones often want answers about why the suicide has occurred and this can lead to them blaming the death on a particular event or person. Whilst this can feel like a natural response, it is inconsistent with the knowledge that suicide is a complex issue, and there is no one reason for a suicide.
- When supporting a young person who is bereaved it is important to be guided by the young person and their family - and their expectations and needs. Their needs may change over time so it is important for the school to have ongoing contact with the family. It may be helpful to assign a staff member to be the main contact, to build a positive relationship throughout this process.
- At times, supporting young people to manage loss and grief may feel overwhelming for school staff. Providing a normal but flexible routine, combined with a sensitive and informed approach to bereavement, will most often be enough to support the young people while at school. However, some young people may need more structured support, and school staff can help by providing information about where to go for support within the school and external to the school in the broader community.
- Supporting young people in the school may also include:
 - understanding that there may be some regression in behaviours and managing expectations around this.
 - answering questions honestly.
 - supporting the young person to express and cope with their emotions.
 - allowing for choice and participation in decision making wherever possible.
 - providing flexibility around homework and assignments where possible.
 - encouraging the young person to access additional support from friends and family.
- Young people need to feel supported and have an opportunity to learn about what is happening to them when they return to school. Working with the young person, their parents and treating practitioner, if they have one, can help with this.
- School staff may also need additional support when interacting with young people who are grieving. It may be helpful to be aware of opportunities for structured support for staff. The school's EAP program or your family doctor may be good starting point.

bullying

- Bullying is intentional and repeated negative behaviour directed towards another person by one or more people over time with an intention to cause fear, distress or harm and can occur in many different environments such as face-to-face, over the phone, or online (cyberbullying).
- Examples include repeated physical aggression and/or verbal behaviour such as hurting people or their property, insults, teasing, spreading rumours or excluding people.
- Cyberbullying is a form of bullying that uses technology, such as text messages, email and social media and can also be anonymous.
- Cyberbullying increases when students begin to have greater access to online communication and mobile phones potentially affecting young people 24 hours per day. Cyberbullying is most commonly (approximately 80%) an extension of face-to-face bullying via another platform.

- The environment (for example, school or community organisation etc.) can have a big influence on the likelihood someone may use bullying behaviour. Environments that foster positive relationships, connectedness, emotional supports, consistent education and awareness about bullying, clear behavioural expectations, as well as opportunities for intervention and recourse are those that are least likely for bullying to occur.
- Someone who uses bullying behaviour may not have the skills, experience, support or capacity to manage relationships or conflict in a more productive manner.
- Bullying is highly contextual and dynamic. The same person can be a bully, bystander or victim. Each of these different roles has a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing, and can increase the risk of experiencing mental health problems.
- Those who use bullying behaviour need supports to change their behaviour. A bully can be a person who does not value or feel good within themselves. They may have been a victim of bullying themselves. Bullying is often a way of making themselves feel more powerful or to “look cool” in front of others. Bullies may also be motivated by jealousy, lack of knowledge, fear or misunderstanding, or alternatively as a strategy for social inclusion, acceptance and safety.
- Bullying can have serious immediate and long-term effects on physical and mental health, as well as on work or school performance. Experiencing bullying can also increase the risk of developing depression and anxiety in the future.
- People who have been bullied may feel alone, unsafe, afraid, stressed, ashamed and rejected. Often they will feel there is no escape and may take measures to ‘fit in’ by changing their appearance, acting differently, and may even hurt themselves or others.
- Although not all people who experience bullying develop thoughts or feelings about suicide, people involved in bullying, including the victim and perpetrator, are at a greater risk of self-harm and suicide. This does not mean bullying causes suicide on its own, instead, it suggests that bullying may be one of a number of major life challenges that contributes to distress, and may be a precipitating factor in some circumstances when accompanied by a number of other risk factors.
- Bullying needs a whole of community approach and there is a lot that families, schools and communities can do to tackle bullying.
- Children and young people often do not tell adults about bullying. Young people may not think to ask for adult help, or may not think anyone will believe them or be able to help. Young people may also be afraid of what might happen if the person doing the bullying finds out they told someone. Therefore, friends, teachers and families play a critical role in supporting and protecting young people who experience bullying.

bullying

- Although responding to bullying behaviour is not solely the responsibility of either parents or schools, research indicates that bullying is most likely to happen during school years. Therefore, interventions that position parents and schools as partners in responding to this issue are most likely to be effective.
- Positive relationships can help reduce the likelihood that someone will use bullying behaviour, and can protect young people from the negative consequences associated with bullying. Families, school staff and friends can also support young people by looking out for signs of victimisation, such as cuts and bruises, becoming withdrawn, losing or having damaged possessions, or not wanting to go to school.
- Effective school responses to bullying incidents are:
 - solution-focused
 - relationship-based
 - at the school level, the class level, the student level, and based on strong links between parents and schools.
- Staff and other students need to be taught what to do if they witness bullying happening and well being school staff supporting young people involved in bullying may also need to address the underlying causes for the bullying. More than one method of addressing bullying may be needed as no single approach is appropriate or effective in all circumstances or for all people. Effective approaches to student bullying include restorative practices, conflict management, equalising power imbalances amongst students, and social skills development.
- Dealing with bullying can be complex and challenging. Both short and long-term approaches need to be adopted, including regular reviews of policy and procedures and monitoring of progress using the school's data. These reviews confirm the following features are likely to be the most effective in preventing and reducing bullying:
 - A universal, whole-school approach, taking a multi-faceted approach rather than focusing on one single component.
 - An increased awareness of bullying in the school community through assemblies, focus days and student-owned plans and activities.
 - A whole-school proactive policy addressing overt, covert and online bullying.
 - Processes to increase teacher understanding and competencies in effective classroom management and classroom rules and effective behaviour-management methods consistently applied, non-hostile and non-punitive.
 - A positive school environment that provides safety, security and support for students and promotes positive relationships and wellbeing.
 - School-family-community partnerships.



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headspace would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First People and Traditional Custodians. We value their cultures, identities, and continuing connection to country, waters, kin and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and are committed to making a positive contribution to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, by providing services that are welcoming, safe, culturally appropriate and inclusive.



headspace is committed to embracing diversity and eliminating all forms of discrimination in the provision of health services. headspace welcomes all people irrespective of ethnicity, lifestyle choice, faith, sexual orientation and gender identity.



headspace centres and services operate across Australia, in metro, regional and rural areas, supporting young Australians and their families to be mentally healthy and engaged in their communities.