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# We must talk to our teenagers

**R**OUR two youngest children are 20 and 21 – just a few months older than the average age of the poor kids who have been killing themselves in the benighted town of Bridgend over the past 13 months.

It is inconceivable to me that either Jack or Chloe would take their own lives, yet just such a surreal nightmare is consuming families in South Wales. It is quite, quite horrible – and my heart bleeds for the stricken parents.

Suicide always leaves a backwash of self-recrimination and guilt among the living, and, with 17 teenagers or twentysomethings dead and gone by their own hands, Bridgend must be an accursed place to live now. Jenna Parry, inset, a sweet-faced 16-year-old, was the latest to be found hanged.

All but one of the other suicides, many of whom knew each other, hanged themselves, too.

The police have tried their best to keep a lid on the swelling panic that is rippling through Bridgend, saying there is nothing to connect the deaths.

In terms of admissible courtroom evidence, they are right – there isn't. But one would have to be a fool not to see a pattern here.

Our friend Professor Raj Persaud, the youngest consultant ever appointed by the internationally regarded Maudsley Hospital in London, is clear about what is going on.

"Suicide, especially among young people, is contagious," he told us the day after Jenna's body was found. "People of this age imitate each other on many levels – fashion, contemporary music, self-harm and, yes, suicide. That's what's behind this cluster of deaths in Bridgend."

He thinks that the modern cult of celebrity is a factor. Kids these days crave fame and will do anything to achieve it – prostrate themselves on TV reality shows,

perform humiliating or dangerous stunts for global websites such as YouTube or sleep with C-list celebrities so they can enjoy 15 minutes of D-list fame.

How seductive must be the prospect of being the subject of anguished headlines and emotive RIPs in cyberspace; to exit in a glorious flame-out of mass grief and belated praise for one's finer points. No matter that you, the recently departed, aren't around to read the glowing tributes. It is enough to know that eulogies will duly follow one's passing.

Some said this week that internet chatrooms and websites where Bridgend's kids meet to discuss the suicides were somehow implicated in

subsequent deaths. This is

like blaming the telephone system in towns where similar tragedies have occurred – notably in America – before the age of the PC and laptop.

Others demanded that the media stop reporting on the Bridgend suicides. This is nonsense – dangerous nonsense, according to Raj Persaud.

"It is vital we discuss

responsibly what is happening there," he said. "If anyone, of any age, is contemplating killing themselves, one of the most effective ways to discourage them is to get them to talk about it."

So if Raj lived in Bridgend and had teenage children, would he sit them down to discuss what was happening there?

"Absolutely, I can't think of a more important conversation to have," he told us.

Anyone who has watched their kids negotiate the turbulent rapids of adolescence knows that there are crucial moments when they need help.

Bridgend is in swirling white water this weekend. Parents should not be afraid to dive in and help their children steer around the jagged rocks that have already taken 17 precious lives.

