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Spring 2015

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Pediatric Bereavement Programs Meet the Unique Needs of Grieving Children

Imagine the life of a five year old. One afternoon he sees a Disney character—most likely a mean character—die. But the next week, the villain is back. As he grows up, he sees death as something that happens in videos or movies, not in his family.

But one day, it does happen in his family. Adults swoop in to provide comfort, but are worried because he acts sometimes as if nothing is out of the ordinary. “Children go quickly in and out of grief because they don’t have the emotional capacity to stay there, which can be confusing for adults because we tend to stay in those emotions longer,” said Aja Michael, MSW, Stepping Stones Program Coordinator at Yolo Hospice in Davis.

Megan Long, IMF, School Age Programs Coordinator at The Elizabeth Hospice in Escondido, said, “A child’s world isn’t consumed by loss. They don’t have a continual awareness of the event. It’s not that they don’t have an emotional connection, but they can’t developmentally take in that information and understand it.”

Children can, however, explore and act out those emotions through art and play. A child in the Stepping Stones program drew elaborate grave scenes. Aja learned her mother’s grave was hundreds of miles away, so she couldn’t visit it regularly. She said, “You have to observe what they’re doing, look for clues, and hear them out.” Megan said, “Children need someone to listen, answer questions, and provide emotional comfort.”

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If you or anyone you know has a need for Hospice Information and Referral services please call the California Hospice Foundation’s toll free number: 888-252-1010

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Pediatric Bereavement

Be on the look-out for grief triggers.

A child's understanding of death and grief evolves over time. "They revisit and process grief continually even at later ages," said Megan. "Parents are quick to recognize yearly milestones—holidays and birthdays—that can trigger grief, but they forget about other events—getting a driver's license, college acceptance, and graduation—reminders that someone is absent."

Teachers may not know that the teenager who lost his dad when he was five is grieving again. "Triggers always exist. It's important to be sensitive about Mother's or Father's Day projects, or the mock funerals that are part of drunk driving education," said Aja. "The grief may not be as intense or painful, but it's there."

Megan said, "Teachers don't always know about a family member's death, but they can be aware of clues." Social isolation, school phobia, or changes in behavior, attendance, or academic performance could be signs of a grieving child.

Give children control of their healing process.

Thanks to a grant from the Moyer Foundation as well as donations from individuals and businesses in the community, The Elizabeth Hospice's Camp Erin is free for children and teens ages 6 to 17 who have experienced the loss of a loved one. During the weekend, campers participate in recreational activities along with grief support and education.

The children and teens who attend Stepping Stone at Yolo Hospice are divided into four age groups. "Within those groups, we provide age-appropriate education and peer support. A five year old's understanding of death is very different than a ten year old's," said Aja.

"A young child won't entirely understand the concept of death. They hear the words but don't really know what it is," said Megan. "They recognize the absence but not the permanency." A sense of security and physical comfort are essential for a young child, whereas a teenager's needs are more emotional and spiritual in nature.

The Stepping Stones program allows children to manage their own grieving and healing process under the guidance of staff and volunteers. Aja said, "Their world has been turned upside down by death. It must feel very powerless to be a grieving child. Our program gives them back some control." Sessions open and end with structured activities but during the rest of the time participants choose from a wide range of activities.

Get by with a little help from friends.

Bereavement programs provide children the opportunity to



both receive and give support to their peers. "Children who have experienced death feel isolated," said Aja. "You're different. You're the only one without a mom. Stepping Stones brings them together with other kids who've lost a parent or a sibling, kids who understand what they're going through. They no longer feel so different."

One of Megan's campers, a teenager who lost a sibling the year before, struggled with grief activities, finding it difficult to express his feelings in group settings. On the last night of camp, he didn't want to participate in a memory ceremony, instead he sat with a counselor who validated his feelings by letting him vent and express his needs at his pace. Eventually, they began to watch the activities from afar, and saw his cabin acknowledge him during the ceremony.

"When the ceremony was over, his cabin mates came over to embrace him and cry with him. Teenage boys! They opened up their arms for him as did the rest of the camp," said Megan. "He recognized he wasn't alone. That's what camp is all about: they're not alone. They have others to lean on."

"Camp Erin isn't only a bereavement camp," said Megan. "It's designed to teach children that they are still children." Perhaps that's the thing to remember about a grieving child: their identity as someone who has lost a loved one is not their only identity. They're still kids who need to laugh and play.

*Written by Deirdre Reid. Deirdre is a writer, blogger and association consultant at **Reid All About It** in North Carolina.*

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In a world of the internet and technology, we are able to help tens of thousands of patients and their families each year with our tiny staff of three. We are always updating our hospice listing and adding resources and materials to our website so that they can have information at their fingertips in a matter of seconds.

Still, we know the value of a personal connection. Each day, we receive phone calls from people during the most challenging times of their lives. Our staff provides guidance, information and often, we just lend an ear. Most importantly, we connect them to end-of-life care that brings comfort to both the patient and their family.

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When your vehicle is sold, the proceeds will go to the California Hospice Foundation (CHF). You may also be able to deduct the fair market value of your vehicle as a charitable contribution for income tax purposes.

We have partnered with Car Program, which accepts most vehicles, including cars, trucks, trailers, boats and RVs. The donation process is easy by fax or by phone.

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