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Camp Healing Hearts Provides Welcoming, Open Environment for Bereavement

By Kelly Tunney

Diana Haid's father died when she was 11 years old.

She said that her family did not discuss his death, so she kept her feelings to herself.

But when the father of her two grandchildren died unexpectedly decades later, she decided silence was not the answer.

"Kids have their own ideas," Haid said. "I thought they should know from the get-go what was going on."

Haid, of Bethel Park, decided to attend Family Hospice and Palliative Care's Camp Healing Hearts.

The camp is a day for children ages 6 to 12 who have experienced the loss of a loved one - whether to death, divorce or incarceration - to share their feelings through activities.

The camp uses music, art and games to create a comfortable environment for talking, said Karen Rose, vice president of operations for Family Hospice.

"Everyone is born with the capacity to grieve and express emotions, so it is a camp to express emotions," Rose said. "But it had to be fun, there is more comfort if it is a day of joy."

The camp isn't designed to shy away from the fact that there is loss. Instead, participants choose to accept the change and deal with the emotions that come with the recognition of loss.

"We acknowledge that life is different now," Rose said. "We focus on how you can make the difference a part of life and go forward."

The camp encourages not only children to open up their feelings but also parents who may have lost a spouse or sibling.

Vicki Mazur of North Versailles brought her daughter, 10, and son, 7, to a Healing Hearts camp held in Monroeville last week.

She said she had been taking care of her children, focusing on them and she had not taken the time to express her own feelings.

During the camp, parents were given time away from their children to talk to each other about their own situations. Mazur was able to open up to the volunteer who led the discussion.

"I had a lot of healing. There was a lot I had never opened up about, and I was able to do that," she said. "There is a community here. There are other families going through the same thing."

David Wierzchowski, spiritual care specialist for Family Hospice and Palliative Care, said the camp reaches out to parents as well and looks at their different needs for coping with loss.

"We discuss how to take care of a child who is grieving; some act out, some withdraw," he said. "The parents bring the situation up in a group format and offer support for each other."

Although the day camp makes progress in dealing with grief, it is not a quick-fix solution to handling loss, Wierzchowski said.

"It's a means of giving tools to a child and parent in how to handle grief," he said.

"It's not going to go away in one eight-hour day, but there are ways of learning to cope."