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Camp helps children deal with grieving

By Jill Thurston

Summer isn't fun and games for everyone. Some youngsters have to deal with the loss of a loved one. But they do have friends to lean on in "Camp Healing Hearts."

The camp, offered by Family Hospice and Palliative Care, will be held for grieving children ages 6 through 12 and their parents/guardians from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Aug. 14 in the Center for Compassionate Care, 50 Moffett St., Mt. Lebanon.

"At school, such kids might be the only ones who have lost a parent or a loved one. Here, they are around other kids who are grieving, so they don't feel as alone and they see that they are not the only ones," explained Allison Holst, a bereavement specialist with Family Hospice who is in her third year working with the camp.

Adults attend groups that cover dealing with their own grief and talking with their children about it.

"Children grieve differently than adults. They sometimes get lost in the shuffle. They don't have the verbal capacity to express their feelings and are often silent grievers," said Ms. Holst.

"Camp Healing Heart and other programs that focus on children give them a voice and give them that outlet," she said.

"We view the camp as a day of healing," she said, and it happens through art, music and pet therapy, games and songs.

"Art is a great way for kids to put words to their grief. An art therapist talks with them. Many times they draw pictures of what they did with their loved one," Ms. Holst said.

In past years, the music therapist has helped the youths compose songs. And when therapy dogs are brought in, she said the youngsters attach and relate to them very quickly, opening up communication lines. Adults and children come together to make memory boxes for their loved one.

"It's a jumping off place for them. We encourage them to go home and add things to their boxes, like photos," Ms. Holst said.



Camp
Healing
Hearts

The staff looks for connections between the child and his loved one and tries to provide tangible things for the children to put in their boxes.

"The kids put so much thought into it," Ms. Holst said. The "Survivors Challenge" is a combined activity with stations that illustrate grief -- a puzzle that children put together and the "burden bucket," where youths carry buckets full of potatoes by themselves for a bit and until volunteers comes to help them, illustrating that they don't have to grieve alone.

A "grief chest" pinata with words like "anger" and "fear" written on it lets youngsters work out their grief in a way that doesn't hurt anyone and rewards them with candy. "We definitely say it's OK to hit the pinata. In the same way, campers receive silly putty which they can knead and squeeze and pound on, "because it's OK to do that to something safe -- not your brother or your mom. The activity emphasizes healthy, safe ways to show your feelings," Ms. Holst said.

The day ends with a "bubble release" as everyone holds hands in a circle, releases a bubble and each says the name of his or her loved one.

The camp, which can accept 25 children, is open to any family with a grieving child.

Family Hospice and Palliative Care is a not-for-profit organization now in its 30th year of service to 11 counties in Western Pennsylvania. The mission of Family Hospice and Palliative Care is to provide compassionate, quality comfort care that enhances the lives of people with life-limiting illnesses and their families.

Details: 412-572-8829.