The Benefits of Grief Support Groups in Schools

By Dominique Butler, MSSA, LISW, School Liaison

After the death of a loved one we experience a wide variety of common grief reactions. Children and adolescents tend to have a difficult time both expressing and receiving grief support. Due to time restraints and prior commitments many parents and guardians are unable to take their child to individual or group counseling outside of their scheduled work hours. Therefore, enrolling their child in a grief support group during the school day is one option.

Facilitating a grief support group in a school setting provides the student with a safe and familiar environment to express their feelings of grief. Students are given an opportunity to begin their healing process by sharing their stories with each other and receiving peer and emotional support. Students develop new coping skills by participating and interacting with their peers throughout the course of the group. Death tends to make children and adolescents feel different and joining a grief support group alleviates feelings of isolation and fear. Eliminating their feelings of being ostracized amongst their peers promotes healing and growth. Children and adolescents are not taught to forget their loved one but rather to celebrate, share and create new memories. If you have four or more students who have experienced a death and it’s affecting their academic, social and emotional growth consider partnering with the bereavement center to co-facilitate a grief support group in your school. Our mission is to assist the bereaved as they move through their grief process. It is our goal to provide children and adolescents with a platform to share their stories.

I liked making masks and memory boxes.
– 8-year-old, third-grade boy

IT WAS BENEFICIAL TO HAVE STUDENTS VERBALIZE THEIR GRIEF IN A SAFE ENVIRONMENT.
– School counselor

I learned that it’s good to express your feelings.
– 17-year-old male junior

There is always someone who is going through the same thing as me and wants help.
– 17-year-old female senior
**SCHOOL RESOURCES**

**Grief Support in Schools** For students and staff before or after the death of a student, staff or community member. This may include administrative consultation, staff support and facilitation of 8–10 week support groups (S.T.A.R.S.) for students in grades 1–12. S.T.A.R.S. groups can be tailored to specific school needs.

**Classroom Presentations** Interactive classroom presentations, often integrated into a health class curriculum, can be provided to all grade levels with age-appropriate information focusing on natural life spans of all living things, end of life, anticipating a death, common grief reactions, coping, traumatic death and supporting a grieving friend.

**Crisis Response** Our trained crisis response team provides immediate on-site crisis response services to schools and organizations that serve children and adolescents when a death occurs. This service is available to the general school community and provides licensed grief counselors to support school administration, staff, parents and students. This includes strategic planning, large and small group interventions, education and follow-up support.

**Staff Training** Professional development opportunities can be tailored to a school’s specific needs. Topics include an overview of grief and loss, anticipatory grief, children and teen grief, traumatic grief, supporting students through loss, grief activities for the classroom and school crisis response.

**EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES**

**Grief Series 2015**

*Beginning January 6, 2015 through June 2, 2015*

Monthly 3-hour continued education sessions are designed to educate and train professionals and paraprofessionals to work with those who are grieving. The focus is on grief that accompanies a death; however, the physical, psychosocial, spiritual and emotional responses are often the same for any loss experience.

**TEEN RETREAT**

**Bridges of Courage**

*A retreat for teens ages 14–17 that have experienced the death of a loved one.*

**Saturday, April 18, 2015**

Thousand Trails Campground

2021 Mill Creek Rd., Jefferson, OH

**Bridges of Hope Support Camp**

*A camp for children 8–12 years old provides a safe place for children to talk about their questions and feelings.*

**Friday, May 15, 9:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.**

Thousand Trails Campground

2021 Mill Creek Rd., Jefferson, OH

**Riding Through Grief Camp**

*Two Opportunities*

**Week 1: June 22–June 26th**

**Week 2: July 13th –July 17th**

This camp is offered in collaboration with Fieldstone Farm Therapeutic Riding Center and is for children ages 8–12 who have experienced the death of a loved one. Through riding and working with horses, campers explore grief issues supported by trained counselors.

**Together We Can Camp**

*August 4 – August 6*

Together We Can is a 3-day bereavement day camp for children ages 6–14 who have experienced a death. Camp is expressive in nature and led by experienced facilitators in art, music, play and nature activities.

Please contact the bereavement center for more information at 216.486.6838.

**KIDZ ART: Healing Art Workshops**

These quarterly programs provide an opportunity for kids (ages 6 and up) and their families to creatively honor and memorialize their loved one.

Refreshments provided. Contact Mollie Postotnik at 216.486.6544 or email her at mpostotnik@hospicewr.org for dates and times.

For more information on any of the programs listed, please contact Dominique Butler at dbutler@hospicewr.org or 216.486.6287.