

# PROFILE

ST. ELIZABETH'S HOSPITAL

## Grief Support Group Helps Children Come to Terms with Death

Just like adults, children who have lost a loved one often need help in working through the grieving process. Unfortunately, few support groups for children exist.

Children in the Belleville, IL, area, however, can now find the help they need to deal with the death of a parent, sibling, or anyone important to them. Kids Time, sponsored by St. Elizabeth's Hospital, is a grief support group for children

6 to 13 years old. The hospital's Pastoral Care Department and counselors from the local public and parochial school systems participate in the program, which St. Elizabeth's offers free.

Kids Time was developed after area school counselors, principals, and educators indicated a need for grief counseling for children. At planning meetings, school counselors, the Belleville Diocesan Office of Education, and St.

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Elizabeth's Pastoral Care Department discussed resources, financing, and publicity.

School counselors and chaplains volunteered to become involved and took a five-week death education course on grieving children in preparation.

Then, in the fall of 1990, Kids Time was launched. To spread the word about the program, St. Elizabeth's distributed bright brochures with children's drawings to local pastors, school counselors and principals, newspapers, funeral homes, and physicians' offices. In addition, local newspapers published articles, and the hospital sent letters to local school districts.

Kids Time is offered twice a year, in Feb-

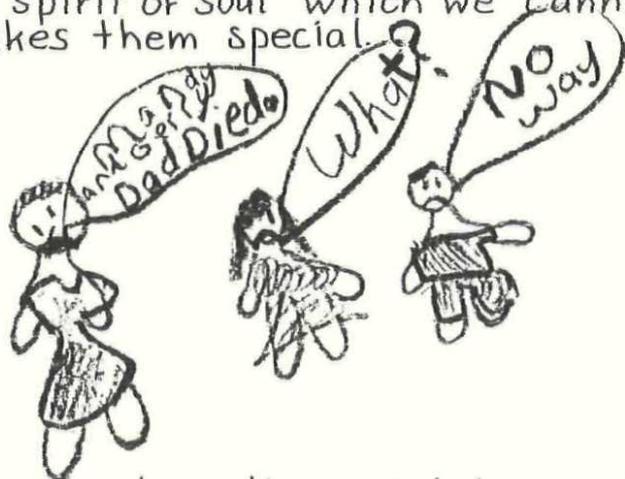
ruary and October. The group meets for 90 minutes once a week for six weeks (see **Box**). Five groups (43 children) have completed the program since it was launched. To facilitate communication among the children, the children recently have been split into groups of 6- to 9-year-olds and 10- to 13-year-olds. The sessions are held at the same time to accommodate families with children in both groups.

Typically, children wait six months after a loved one has died before entering the program. However, "it's not uncommon for children to come years after the death has occurred," says Janet Schloemann, a guidance counselor in a Belleville school district and a Kids Time counselor.

During a typical session the children express their feelings through crayon drawings. The concept is based on material from *When Someone Very Special Dies*, a children's workbook and facilitators' guide by Marge Eaton Heegard

The children describe, through crayon drawings, how they were told about the death.

People have a body we can see... and something called a spirit or soul which we cannot see that makes them special.



When someone dies, the spirit leaves the body, and what is left is placed in a casket to be buried or cremated.

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## My First Kids Time Session

(Woodland Press, Minneapolis, 1988). "Kids can't talk about their feelings very well. But when they draw, they're not even aware of the information they are revealing," says Michael Inyart, a social worker with the Belleville Special Education Office and a Kids Time counselor.

With each session, "the kids become more willing to share" their grief, notes Inyart. As they progress, the children "begin interacting more; they feel freer to talk," he adds. By the end of the six-week program the

children obviously trust one another, explains Schloemann. A reunion is being planned. After such a session, some children may decide to continue getting together, says Dian Korb, director of St. Elizabeth's Pastoral Care Department.

Rev. Dennis Voss, St. Elizabeth's pastoral care chaplain, meets with parents while their children are at Kids Time. "We don't always talk about grief issues. Sometimes they share their struggles. Sometimes we talk about vacations," says

Fr. Voss. He also helps facilitate St. Elizabeth's adult grief support group and, when appropriate, refers parents to the group.

Parents and families have indicated they appreciate what Kids Time has done for their children, especially since the program is free. "Many cannot afford private counselors, nor do some surrounding school districts have staff counselors or social workers," explains Korb.

The initial cost of Kids Time was \$150 for brochures and facilitators' manuals. Crayons and paper were donated. Each additional session has cost about \$85. St. Elizabeth's pays for the program. In addition to the volunteer counselors, Korb and her secretary organize the sessions, field telephone calls, and handle correspondence.

Kids Time will continue to be offered two times a year because St. Elizabeth's has a limited number of volunteers and limited space for the sessions. St. Elizabeth's plans to offer a grief support program for teenagers. This program is in the "need" stage right now. A lack of counselors and space is the biggest barrier to offering such a program.

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**B**efore counseling at my first Kids Time session, I felt apprehensive, wondering what the children would be like, what experiences they would bring, what emotions they would share. My cofacilitator Margaret felt the same.

But once the room was filled with children and parents, I began to relax. As their parents left, Margaret gathered the children around the table to "scribble in"—a warm-up exercise to help break away from typical confining art projects in school. Counselors stress that the children can color outside the lines and experiment.

Then they began to make name cards, decorating them with items that told a story about themselves. Andrew said to Robert, "This is a ball glove; baseball is my favorite sport." "How would you draw Six Flags [amusement park]?" Joan asked Rachel.

After we all introduced ourselves, we began a lesson on change. Margaret and I explained that change is natural—we see it in nature. The children then colored in how trees change during the seasons.

Next we talked about people changing. The children drew themselves as babies, today, and in old age. It was interesting to see how they depicted change. Trudi drew a baby with a bottle. Margaret and I used this to focus on how we feel when we lose something, such as a bottle or baby teeth. "That makes me happy because I'm growing up," said Jeff. Rachel responded seriously, "It's harder to talk about big losses, like when my mommy died. I get scared because things aren't the same."

The other children then began to tell about their loved one who died, how the death occurred, whether they were present when the person died, and how they felt. Some children shed tears, others put on their serious faces. I was deeply touched by their ability to discuss such personal experiences.

Then we talked about feelings. Andrew said, "I feel sad a lot because I miss my sister." "I cry when I see other kids being carried by their daddies," added Laura. Rebecca blushed and stated, "I'm angry because someone took my brother away from me. Maybe it was God." Margaret and I neither justified nor negated any feelings.

Soon it was time to "scribble out," an exercise to help the children wind down (similar to scribble in). After the children went home, I felt exhausted. I knew we did not affect each child in the same way or complete the grief process with anyone, but we were present, we listened, and we showed them that we cared.

By the close of the six-week session the children did not want the program to end. They felt a bond with one another and realized it was fine to express and talk about their feelings. The children learned they are not alone in their sorrow.

—Michael Inyart, Kids Time Counselor

### Kids Time Sessions

**O**ver a six-week period, Kids Time counselors cover different issues children face when a loved one dies.

**Change and Loss** During the first session the children learn that change is natural and that loss is a part of change. The counselors emphasize that when we lose someone precious in our lives, we grieve.

**Funerals** The children describe the funeral of their loved one and discuss whether they were present when the person died or how they were told about the death.

**Feelings** The children draw themselves, using colors that show how they feel (e.g., blue to show sadness and red to show anger). The counselors explain to the children that there are no right or wrong feelings.

**Fear** The counselors ask the children whether they feel different because they lost someone special and whether they worry about their own deaths, others dying, and being left behind.

**Memories** The children bring in a photograph of the person who died. To help them learn whether the children are experiencing unhealthy feelings or thoughts, the counselors ask the children to complete the sentence, "If only . . ." The children tell something they wish they had or had not done for the person who died.

**Special People in Our Lives** In this final session, the children finish the sentence, "I am special to . . ." Family members join the group to discuss "important" people.