

Youngsters learn to let go



Photo by Brian Lapeter

Social worker Barbara Rosenblatt hugs Chloe Torok, 6, Saturday at Camp Good Hope after she tossed a carnation into the water in remembrance of a lost loved one. Camp Good Hope/Teen Encounter is designed to help children through the grieving process after they have lost a loved one.

By Chris VanOrmer

Children deal differently with bereavement than do adults. And many youngsters came to terms with their grief recently at Camp Good Hope/Teen Encounter in Floral City.

Any bereaved child may attend this camp, which is offered twice a year. According to Hospice of the Nature Coast grief services manager Jonathan Beard, "Some kids are from the Hospice program. Many have lost a grandparent. But you don't have to be a relative of a patient. Grief support is available to everyone."

The camp session on April 11 and 12 was the 17th camp in 12 years. Since 2004, two camps a year have been scheduled for April and October. More than 700 children have gone through the camp program as part of the ABC (All 'Bout Children) division of Hospice of Citrus County

Beard said that 55 campers turned up, along with 40 volunteers. For Camp Good Hope, the children's age range is 6 years old to fifth grade. The Teen Encounter program is for middle and high school students. This was the second Teen Encounter. The first one was held last October

The camp session lasts 24 hours, from Friday evening to Saturday evening, and the two programs go on simultaneously.

The reason Teen Encounter was started was because camp organizers saw different needs for middle school and high school students, so specifically responded to have more to offer them.

Activities for Teen Encounter include EAP (equine assisted psychotherapy) and interaction among teens.

With EAP, campers learn about themselves and others by participating in activities with the horses, then processing feelings, behaviors and patterns. And they get to enjoy being around horses.

Sarah Morley, MSW, is the Hospice of Citrus County's children's services coordinator.

"This is the second Teen Encounter we've had, and with 20 kids, it's the biggest yet," Morley said.

In the group counseling sessions, where campers bring photographs of the loved one they lost, "We have almost the whole room crying," Morley said, which helps the teens to open up to their emotions.

"We are aiming to get a change of heart, and we see it within about two hours," Morley said.

Morley explained the difference between the two groups.

"The teens are more inclined to talk together," Morley said, "while the younger children like to color, draw and play. We like to get them all into a comfortable spot to where they can open up."

"I see an incredible transformation when the kids get here," Morley said. "All the kids have experienced the loss of someone close to them. They form an immediate bond with each other, and it becomes a dynamic experience."

Families learn about the camp program through Hospice, which serves about 250 patients a day in Citrus County. They also learn through schools and guidance counselors, and the sheriff's office victim's advocate gets the word out, too.

In this way, Hospice offers more than patient care as it provides for the surviving children and families, Beard said.

Hospice evaluates the program by different measures. It follows up with surveys of the campers and follows school performance to look for improvement in behavior, as it is healthy for children to open up and express themselves. They can serve as role models.

"Some current volunteers have experienced Camp Good Hope as kids themselves and have come back to help, which shows a good cycle of giving," Beard said.

Talking sessions are the core of the program, with everyone telling of the loss of a loved one while holding a photo of that person. Then they enjoy having a campfire with smore's.

The children sleep in cabins with counselors and it's like a big sleepover party, Beard said. They have fun activities such as arts and crafts, hiking, canoeing and the sheriff's office brings its posse horses.

"When they lose someone in the family, kids sometimes forget to have fun. We structure it for them and let them know that it's OK to be a kid again and OK to express emotion," Morley aid.

A memorial service allows the children to let go of loved ones. This year, children remembered their loved one with a carnation and let the flower float away on the lake.

Before they went home, the campers enjoyed entertainment with a hoedown theme and had pictures to take home. They also had a pizza party.

"We never turn anyone away. The camp is offered at no cost to families. If there is a need for another camp, we offer one," said Joe Foster, Hospice public relations manager.

Children who attend Camp Good Hope get a backpack, a T-shirt, a hat and an autograph log, a block of wood with a cord through it that allows campers to write each other messages and leave e-mail addresses so that they can stay in touch.

"Some kids have told me how they have really used the logs to stay in touch with new friends," Morley said.

Teen Encounter campers get a tote bag that doubles as a backpack, a T-shirt with the Teen Encounter logo, a visor and a notebook.

Dan and Amy Moore of Lecanto are volunteers with the camp. They became involved when their son attended the camp at the age of 6 after family bereavement.

"After that, he spoke many times about the camp, so we talked to Joe about volunteering and being here more often. Now we do every camp together," Amy Moore said. Both of the Moores are employed by Bay Care Home Care, which is a partner in care with Hospice.

"Every camp gets better and better," Dan Moore said.

The Moores said their son lost both his grandmothers close together six years ago, and cherishes a teddy bear and a memory box that helped him get through his difficult time.

"The kids hold on to the things they do here," Dan More said. "The camping is hard, but rewarding for volunteers. It makes you think and be thankful. It helps the counselors out, too."

Amy Moore works with Teen Encounter. She said she found teens had a harder time with bereavement than do the younger children.

"But they break through more," she said. "And when that happens, that is the most rewarding thing. Aside from working with our own child, we find camp the most rewarding thing."

Morley said the goal of helping bereaved children is to guide them.

"People have the solution within themselves. And we have no magic wand to wave. We try to guide them to allow them to express themselves in a safe way and a comfortable way," she said.