

Children coping with death can visit camp

By Jessica J. Burchard
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Winchester — A one-day camp aims to give youths and their families space to cope with death through art, music, and discussion. Blue Ridge Hospice is scheduled to host its second Camp Hope for children on Aug. 18. The camp, at Winchester Academy, centers on offering a range of activities for youths 6 to 16. “It’s education; it’s support,” said Lynn Gray, director of clinical services. “It’s letting them reminisce about their loss.”

While many programs exist for adults to talk about loss, one for children is relatively new. Last year, 37 youngsters attended; a similar number is expected at the free camp this year. “The entire purpose of the camp is to teach coping skills, while telling [children] they can deal with it,” Gray said. “As they go through different milestones, how do they make it through with that person missing.”

All students and parents will be asked to portray their lost loved one on a tapestry square beginning at 9:15 a.m. Later in the day, the pieces will be sewn together into a full tapestry. Other full group activities include coloring, drawing, and working on puzzles. The remaining exercises are age specific with 6- to 8-, 9- to 12-, and 13- to 16-year-olds in separate groups. Children will work in smaller groups from 9:40 a.m. until about 3 p.m.

For youngest participants, the exercises are more group-centered. Gray cited the share/care/feelings practice as being beneficial to those under 10. Students will stand in a circle passing around a plastic ball with different feeling phrases written on it. “They pick out the phrases they identify with written on the ball,” she said. “And then they pass it onto the next person.” Each child gets a turn to choose and phrase and talk about it if they wish. The middle groups focus on writing — emotion cards, a letter to a loved one and do a remembrance activity. Teenagers are allowed more personal and artistic individuality with a collages, teen journals, and song lyric analysis.

Music therapist Kristen Hawkins will work with teenagers on finding songs that reflect their feelings of loss. “We’ll apply some songs with lyrics about grief and moving on,” said Hawkins, a second-year therapist with hospice. “We’ll probably also do some songwriting activities.” Music therapy is used in all types of hospice care. Hawkins sees many advantages to using it with youths who have suffered losing someone. “With music, they don’t have to talk about it if they don’t want to,” she said. “It’s also very cathartic.”

Camp Hope also gives students the resources to make their own instruments. Some may choose to make a small drum they can keep in their room and beat on when feeling frustrated or alone.

“They just kind of let the kids do what they need to do,” Gray said. “Whether it’s loud angry music or soft music.” The continuation of a children’s bereavement program is

something Gray expects will remain a part of the hospice's offerings. "It's all patient-driven care," she said. "As a hospice, we've always felt we needed a children's bereavement camp."

For more information on how to register, contact Blue Ridge Hospice at 540-536-5210 or online at www.blueridgehospice.org. Registrations can also be done at the door.