CAMPS AND BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT: HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE MOVE FORWARD AFTER THE UNTHINKABLE

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Facing Mortality

- Every child diagnosed with cancer faces the reality of their own mortality
- Every family with a child with cancer faces the threat of loss
Facing Mortality

- Most camps provide a ceremonial or memorial program that allows campers to deal with the reality of that threat, and to recognize the campers who have died for their contributions to the camp community.
Camp and grief support

- Camp is uniquely positioned to offer support to surviving family members after the “unthinkable” happens.
- When a child dies, families are faced with a double loss: their child, and the close relationship with a supportive treatment team.
Camp and grief support

- Camp is all about community building, and when a family can face their grief in the context of a community that they already perceive as supportive, caring and understanding of their situation, it is much less frightening.
The Nature of Grief

You are familiar with the concept of the “stages” of grief:

- Elisabeth Kübler-Ross “stages” - Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance
- NCI “phases” - Shock and Numbness, Yearning and Searching, Disorganization and Despair, Reorganization
- Hospicenet “reactions” – Shock, Denial, Anger, Guilt, Depression, Acceptance, Growth
The Nature of Grief

- Grief, however, is not a linear process, is different in every individual, and does not stick to a time schedule.
- The “acceptance” can be very fragile. After many years, even decades, certain triggers can precipitate a profound sadness which can be overwhelming.
The Nature of Grief

- Children express grief in different ways than do adults.
- It is less linear, less predictable, less recognizable and often prolonged.
- With the attainment of new stages of development, children often reprocess the loss and revisit their grief.
The Nature of Grief

- Rabbi Earl Grollman (editor of Bereaved Children and Teens) calls children “the forgotten mourners.”

- Adults in their lives often are too caught up in their own grief, don’t recognize the child’s grief, or don’t understand the child’s grieving process and assume they’re OK.
The Nature of Grief

- Children who have had a brother or sister die from cancer are often not supported after the loss, and are left to deal with their grief more or less alone.
- Other adults see them in “normal” activities and assume they are fine.
- Parents are often too fragile themselves to be emotionally available to the surviving siblings, or don’t fully understand their children’s grief.
The Nature of Grief

- Kids who have lost a brother or sister to cancer feel different from others, and isolated from their peers.
- They often have no one they feel comfortable talking with about the life or death of their brother or sister.
- They are expected to “be strong” and “take care” of other family members.
The Nature of Grief

- Teens are particularly vulnerable in this situation because of the intense peer pressure to "fit in."
- Even casual "get to know you" conversations with potential new friends (starting middle school or high school) can be a problem: "Do you have brothers and sisters?" How should that question be answered?
The theoretical underpinning to all Okizu programs is that peer support - that community of understanding and compassion made up of people who share experiences - is uniquely effective in restoring the ability to cope and begin to move forward for our children and their families.
• **Okizu’s Bereavement Support:**
  It grew in response to the need

• **SIBS Camp Support Groups:**
  For many years at our summer siblings’ sessions we have had a peer support discussion for the bereaved sibs. For most of them, this discussion is the only time they feel free to talk about their feelings and experience.
• **Okizu’s Bereavement Support:** It grew in response to the need

• **Bereaved Family Weekends:** When a “critical mass” of families expressed the desire to return to Family Camp after their child died, an additional weekend was added to meet the needs of these families.
• **Okizu’s Bereavement Support:** It grew in response to the need.

• **Bereaved Teen Weekends:** This program was “demanded” by the teenagers who participated in the bereavement support discussion at SIBS Camp, and who needed this support more often than once per year.
• **Okizu’s Bereavement Support:**

• Camp is a stable support network that pre-dates the death (although new members are welcomed with open arms).

• It is “camp;” campers come to have fun.

• It is designed as an ongoing peer support network, with no end date.