

FAMILY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Social Work Department

NEWSLETTER MARCH 2012



Six parents attended the March Parents' Bereavement Support Group; our second group to be held in the new Royal Children's Hospital. One parent attended the group for the first time. For some others, the evening was their first time coming to the new hospital. This presented some challenges and mixed feelings.

'Healing Past Regrets Through Art'

We were joined by Art Therapist Michelle Dixon. Our theme for the evening was 'Healing past regrets through Art'. Regrets can be particularly difficult for bereaved parents.

Parents began the group by remembering their child and discussing regrets. One couple described thinking about how old their son would be now and considering what he may have looked like. Their son would have been at school now. Parents described wondering '*what if*' frequently about their

child.

One parent said she was missing many milestones that have gone past, for example if





her child were alive she would have learned to walk and talk. One mother wondered if she could have done things differently, wondering if she would have been a different parent if she had known her son's life would be so short.

Another parent described planning birthdays and celebrations for her other children but thinking about her child who would never reach these ages and milestones.

Michelle then introduced the use of art therapy for bereaved parents. She explained that art can be used to express feelings and to help healing. Michelle described various art activities including drawing, painting,

scrap booking or writing to express feelings. Memories can be stored in a visual way or can be written down.

Michelle used the example of creating a box to remember your child. The outside of the box is like a protective layer which reflects positive feelings about and memories of your child. Inside the box can be a letter to your child, pictures that remind you of your child or the box could be used to store mementoes and precious items belonging to your child.

One parent talked about keeping a special bag of their child's school work. Another has used journaling but has felt uninspired of late. Creating a photo book was another way that one mother remembered her child. She described choosing photographs that remembered good things about her child.



Grief can be overwhelming and



art can be used to process these feelings. Michelle explained that the box could also be seen as a book containing a chapter of your life or journey. Making this chapter can sometimes help parents to move forward and write the next chapter in their lives.

Michelle provided various art media to the group including paint, pencils, pastels, oil colours, collage, stickers, buttons and glue. Michelle explained that colours can be linked to particular feelings however there was no right or wrong way to use art. Michelle also clarified that the purpose of art therapy is not to analyse the art work but to provide a space for parents to experience their grief in a different way.

Parents could choose to work in a group or alone. All parents present participated in the art

work. During the evening there was a mixture of sadness, quiet reflection and some laughter as parents remembered and honoured their child.

Some parents painted, sketched and used collage and by the end of the evening each parent had created a special piece of art in memory of their child.

One parent talked about memories of his child scribbling and engaging in art work which sometimes also meant decorating the walls at home!

Parents talked about their choice of colours and pictures



and how these related to the child. One parent remembered the purple ball their child always brought to the hospital. We discussed where parents keep the precious mementos of their child. Some are on display and some away in a special cupboard or box. As parents decorated their boxes or created their art work, some reflected on the spaces in their homes and surrounds where they have items or special memories of their child. Some talked about the child's bedroom. One family have the



child's bedroom as it was when their child was alive but commented that other children have slept in their child's bed. This mother commented that as time passes the room has begun to lose her child's smell. Other parents have created a special place in their garden to remember their child.

Some parents remembered the time when their child passed away. One parent talked about redirecting their energies after their child's death; investing time and love in the family pet. Another parent talked about pouring her love into her other child while another talked about the challenge of having another child living and growing and at times finding herself resenting this. In one mother's words **'you have to have somewhere to put all that love'**. Parents talked about the mixed feelings they had as other children pass the age their child was when they passed away.



After decorating their box, parents were invited to put something inside, for example a letter to their child.

All parents reported to have enjoyed the art experience. One parent said it had been **'therapeutic'**. Another said he would **'never do this at home'** but found it enjoyable. Another parent described that **'lots of things come to mind... not just bad things'** during the art activity. Other comments about the artwork included that it was **'relaxing'** and that parents **'did not have to think about it [the art] too much'**.

We ended the evening talking about the changing nature of grief; grief is not a direct journey but often involves steps

forwards and backwards. Parents were invited to take their art work home as another expression of their grief journey.

We would like to thank Michelle for leading this group and for her insight and wisdom.

Grief – but what about the children

Next month's group will focus on the experiences of siblings, cousins and friends of your child. How do you keep the memory of your child alive in the lives of siblings who perhaps never met their brother or sister or who were very young and may have few if any memories of their own? What about extended family or close friends of your child? How do you help the other children with their grief over the loss of their sibling or friend in the midst of your own grief. Also, what do you feel and how do you cope with your feelings about other children, whether they are your own or complete strangers?

A social worker from Very Special Kids will join us to lead the discussion in this April group.

Straight from the Heart



We received this item from Karen Canavan, mother of Hannah (26.1.97 – 30.10.02)

Karen found this short article helpful and wanted to share it with other bereaved parents. She writes: **“It explains so well my experience of grief, and no doubt that of others, using a good analogy.”** It is an article by Steven Kalas who is a behavioural health consultant and counsellor. We cannot reprint the whole article in this newsletter but here are a few quotes and the web address where you can find the full version.

*“My address is tilted “The Myth of Getting Over It.”.....
You don’t get over it. Getting over it is an inappropriate goal.
An unreasonable hope. The loss of a child changes you. It
changes your marriage. It changes the way the birds sing. It
changes the way the sun rises and sets. You are forever
different.*

The goal is not to get over it. The goal is to get on with it.”

Steven goes on to talk about the analogy of grief being “like a stage play” when a grand piano is pushed into the middle of the set. He uses this analogy to beautifully talk about grief and life and getting on with it.

Thank you Karen for bringing this article to our attention. I highly recommend readers to look up the website and read the full article.

http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj_home/2006/Feb-26-Sun-2006/living/5987837.html

Straight from the Heart



Donald Jayasinghe also draws our attention to a book he has found helpful. The book is "Growing Into Wisdom" by Juliet Batten (Tandem, 2000).

Donald wished to share some quotes which he has found particularly resonate with him.

"Most of us live our lives as if change were an interloper, something that goes against the way things are supposed to be. We expect life to remain static, stable and predictable. Many of us live as if we will never have to let go of anything."

"Whether it's physical, emotional, whatever kind of pain, don't storm against it. Don't resist it with questions like, Why me? Why this? Instead say to yourself, This is what the situation is. This is what I am and this is what is happening right now. What can I make of this? How can I deal with it? How must I change? How can I change the situation? You really have to make it on, without deluding yourself, without denying how hard it is; that's what I've learned about pain."

"I finally understood what life is about; it is about losing everything. Losing the baby who becomes a child, the child who becomes an adult, like the trees lose their leaves. So every morning we must celebrate what we have."

*I said to my soul, be still,
and wait without hope,
for hope would be hope of the wrong thing
and wait without love, for love would be
love of the wrong thing
there is faith, but the faith and the hope
and the love are all in the waiting*

Our letter box is waiting!



Contributions such as responses and reflections on the groups' themes, poems, letters, songs, quotations from parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters and friends are most welcome in the Newsletters. Share your thoughts, Experiences and questions with others who are bereaved. Please forward them to:

Family Bereavement Support Programme
Social Work Department
Royal Children's Hospital
Flemington Road
PARKVILLE VIC 3052

***We welcome your feedback on the new format of this newsletter.**

***Is there anything you would like to see changed or added?**

Phone: 03 9345 6111

Or email:

bereavement.services@rch.org.au

The next meeting of the
Family Bereavement Support Evening Group will be held on:

**Thursday 19th April
7:30 pm – 9:00 pm
Ella Latham Meeting Room 2
Ground Floor, West Building
(Main Street)**

In this group we will be joined by
A Social Worker from Very Special Kids who will talk about
"Grief - But what about the children"

Please join us.

The newsletter is always a team effort. Thank you Michelle Dixon for leading the group discussion and to Helen Stewart and Sarah Connolly for their assistance with the group and scribing parents' statements. Also to the administration team Carly Blanche and Allison Hunt for ensuring the Newsletter is formatted and distributed to interested people.

Social Work Department, RCH

