

OPINION

FAMILY MATTERS / John Armstrong

Helping Grieving Kids

My father died suddenly on an early September afternoon. I was 12. Summer was essentially over, but school had not yet begun. "How shall I occupy his time?" my mother wondered. She found a family friend who invited me to go fishing. It was the season for snappers. So, for two days, we patrolled the bay discussing where to go, what bait to use and how deep to drop our hooks. We spoke little of

my father. Perhaps I heard a "Sorry to hear about your dad" when we motored to shore at nightfall. Nevertheless, this man was with me in my grief. As we cast our lines, he was a presence, a companion, someone to lean on if the tears welled up too strong.

Now, as a volunteer at The Den For Grieving Kids, I have taken on the role of the presence, the companion. For close to 10 years now, every couple of weeks, mostly on Wednesday nights, I have come to The Den to shepherd kids - in my case, kids mostly eight to 12 years old - through their grief. We meet in a group. We open by passing a stuffed bear and telling one another who in our families died. There is nothing awkward about it, because we all share something that bonds us. Sometimes we do "serious" grief work like recounting the details of a funeral, or discussing how to handle an upcoming parents' day at school. Other times, we write a Valentine card to the person who died or tell each other what the person who died was like. And sometimes we just talk or play cards.

My fellow volunteers at the Den come from all walks of life. A few are social workers or mental health professionals, but that's not a requirement, nor is having experienced a loss. We are not offering therapy or counseling; we are accompanying kids and their parents on a journey

toward healing and acceptance of the losses in their lives. This approach to helping the grief-stricken is not frivolous. Indeed, the model was developed at the Dougy Center in Portland, Ore., and has been validated many times over. Grieving over the loss of a loved one is not a disease. Grief is not depression. It's a reaction to loss, a feeling of sadness that the mind and body have to digest. Eventually the worst of it passes, but it also changes a person forever.

Volunteers who work with Den staff are trained in "reflective listening." A reflective listener confirms that he hears what the speaker is saying and feeling by "echoing" the speaker's message. A child who has lost his father, for example, might say "I think something bad is going to happen to my mom." The untrained listener might try to be reassuring: "Oh, I'm sure there is nothing to worry about." The reflective listener would say, "You are worried that your mom might get sick. That's a scary thought." That kind of response tells the child that his thinking is not whacky and that his feelings have value. Moreover, it builds a bond between the child and his listener.

Incidentally, reflective listening is an extremely useful skill with applicability well beyond the boundaries of The Den. The next time someone harangues you in an angry tirade, try acknowledging his or

her anger instead of countering with a bunch of reasons why they are wrong.

At The Den, I'm surrounded by some of the most caring, compassionate people in the world. The majority of these folks are women, who naturally take on nurturing roles at home and in their volunteer work. However, I would like to see more male volunteers at The Den. Because many of the kids have lost their fathers, there is an acute need for male role models to guide and nurture these sons and daughters.

Many dads in the community are drawn to coaching basketball and other sports, or helping out as scout leaders. Nothing wrong with that, of course! For other men, The Den would be a perfect place to offer service. When I describe The Den, frequently people say "Oh, I couldn't bear the tears!" My first response is often to say that The Den is a place of laughter, as well as tears. In reality, we are surrounded by tears everywhere we look, and there are tears deep down inside each of us. At The Den, we get in touch with those tears, we accept them, and learn how to find joy in our lives.

John Armstrong, a Wilton resident, is a volunteer at The Den For Grieving Kids, a program of Family Centers. For more information about The Den contact Deirdre Lewin at 869-4848 or visit www.familycenters.org.

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