

CAMP JESSIE'S KIDS

Helping Children Cope with Loss

Grief touches each person differently. Some people withdraw, while others lash out in anger. Coping with grief is also not the same for a child as it is may be for an adult. Children can have a more difficult time expressing their feelings.



Understanding the needs of a child suffering a loss are unique, Jessie Tanner with McLeod Hospice set out more than 20 years ago to help children learn to grieve together.

The result of her efforts is Camp Jessie's Kids, an annual day camp funded by the McLeod Health Foundation for children coping with the loss or life-threatening illness of a special family member, relative or friend. The grief camp is open to any child in the region who is coping with the loss of a loved one -- not just families touched by McLeod Hospice.

A Chaplain and Bereavement Coordinator for McLeod Hospice, Jessie believes that children can learn how to express their feelings while having fun.

Each Spring, children ages four and older gather on a Saturday to understand and express their grief feelings, to learn ways to cope; to talk with other children who are going through similar experiences; and to meet new friends and enjoy a day of fun activities.

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- Jessie Tanner

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Parents or guardians who stay during the camp also benefit as they learn and process their own grief by participating in some of the activities and listening to the campers. "Nothing speaks deeply to our hearts quite like the honest and tender responses of children," added Jessie.

The camp is staffed by professionals and trained volunteers who understand the importance of a child's feelings and the grief experience. Staff work with

the children in age-appropriate groups and help them learn to grieve for their loved one through activities such as creation of memory boxes, a balloon release, games and songs as well as the lighting of candles during a special memorial service.

Many of the children who have attended the camp return the following year to be a "camp buddy" for those who are attending the camp for the first time.

Camp Jessie's Kids is free thanks to generous gifts to the McLeod Health Foundation and donations from Hospice volunteers, local businesses, churches and individuals in the community.

A Light for Someone You Love 2014

During the 2014 McLeod Hospice Tree Lighting Ceremony at McLeod Regional Medical Center, children from Camp Jessie's Kids had the special honor of lighting the trees.

