

Program helps kids cope with grieving

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Erin's House program tackles issues en route to a loved one's death.

By Sarah Hayes

of The News-Sentinel

Even before children lose a loved one to terminal illness, they experience many little losses.

A mother with breast cancer may no longer be able to make them the food they love. They may not be able to have friends over to play. A caregiver may disrupt the flow of their household.

"Their world really gets turned around," said Agnes Griffey, executive director of Erin's House for Grieving Children, which serves young people ages 3 to 25. The agency has two locations, 3811 Illinois Road and 2809 Holton Ave.

The need to help children cope with little losses prompted the agency to form its Anticipatory Grief Program two years ago.

The program, designed in collaboration with local hospice groups, began after a family whose father had been diagnosed with a brain tumor called Erin's House for assistance. At the time, Griffey said, the agency offered only programs for people grieving after a death.

Now, she said, "We help families as much as possible to allow children into the dying process."

Families going through the program receive a packet with information for family members, the caregiver and the terminally ill person on how to help children cope with changes that come with terminal illness. They are encouraged to tell the children as much as possible about what is happening, Griffey said.

"We talk a lot in the Anticipatory Grief Program about being honest," Griffey said.

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Youngster may also attend peer support groups that meet twice a month.

When children enter the program, they are given two red glass hearts, which represent their heart and the heart of the person who is dying.

Last year, the program, which is supported by the Parkview Hospital Foundation, served 88 individuals, Griffey said. Most of those later took part in Erin House's bereavement program.

Erin's House is one of 10 such centers in the nation with an anticipatory grief program, she said.

"We're seeing an increase in understanding that families and children need support in the dying process."

Class on dying

For area residents interested in learning more about issues relating to grief, including anticipatory grief, Taylor University Fort Wayne will offer a course on "Understanding Death and Dying" beginning in March.

Despite the course name, the scope of the course also includes suffering and grief affiliated with divorce, physical changes and other major losses in life, said JoAnne Powell, a social worker and gerontology specialist who is teaching the course. It will also explore the psychological, emotional and religious aspects related to suffering and loss.

"It's a more complicated topic than we know," Powell said.

The course runs from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. March 6 and 13, April 3 and May 1. Cost is \$540 for guest or part-time students. To register, call 744-8629 or log onto www.tayloru.edu/fw.