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# As children grieve, an agency helps ease their pain

I CANT get the image out of my mind.

It is the artwork on the front of Kara's summer 2000 newsletter done by a youngster in the agency's Youth and Family Program after the death of his mother.

It is a smiley face, but the smile is disintegrating on one side -- drifting away, perhaps. Or being taken away. Or ripped away. It is shredding in the multiple agonized streaks of the child's colored pencils.

And like the tragedy of Humpty-Dumpty, it does not appear that it can be put together again. Enter Kara -- a non-profit, grief support organization located for years on Kingsley Avenue in Palo Alto. It started in 1976 to help bereaved adults, and for the past seven years has also offered a children's program.

Over the years, I have seen other Kara youngsters' drawings, met children, volunteers, founders and benefactors, and written other columns. But there is something about a child in pain that can never be old news or a tale too often told.

Kara -- taken from the Gothic root of the word "care"-- serves from 90 to 100 children and teenagers each month. The children's program includes ages 5 to 12 and the teen program serves ages 13 to 17. For parents of children 1 to 5, Kara provides consultation.

There was a time when people believed that children didn't grieve, but they have found out how wrong that is, says Michael Lydon, a licensed clinical social worker who is Kara's executive director. Children simply grieve differently.

He knows about grief first-hand. Lydon, of San Carlos, and his children first came to Kara in 1996 as clients. His wife, Dr. Susan Leslie Lydon, had just died of breast cancer.

Lydon and Kara Youth Program co-director and intake counselor Adrienne Ammen recently showed off the sunny children's therapy rooms. The growing agency must rent rooms at the First Baptist Church on California Avenue in Palo Alto.

One room has a multi-layered circle of soft pillows on the floor. Another has soft easy chairs. Vibrant signs on the wall bear the children's names and help make it their place.

There is a “steam room” where children bounce against padded floors and carpeted walls and have pillow fights to release energy and emotion.

In one room, they can take a “talking stick” adorned with eagle feathers and bare their hurt or their healing.

As always, there is more moving artwork.

Ammen points to the “Body Map of Feelings” that allows a child to color in personal feelings on the empty outline of a person. They refer to a color guide that indicates that red is happy, brown is sad and green is frightened, for example.

“She is afraid in her tummy,” Ammen says of a girl’s green abdomen, “and her heart feels sadness and love.”

Activity is critical with children, Lydon explained, because sometimes it just doesn’t work to say, “Tell me how you are feeling about your mother’s death.”

Several rooms, including Youth and Family Services co-director Nicholas Ross’ office, had stuffed animals. In fact, Kara needs people to donate more.

When you are trying to tell about a shocking, awful hurt and are feeling raw, sometimes a soft furry friend is good to cling to or hide behind.

Each of us can recall a schoolmate whose parent or sibling died. That is how we defined them in our whispers.

Grieving children’s trials are daily and often invisible.

“They go to school and the teacher says, ‘Give this to your parents,’ ‘Make this for Father’s Day.’,” said Ross, explaining the critical need to meet children who have had similar loss.

“In a group of their peers, it is healing beyond what you can imagine,” he said. “They feel seen. They know they are not crazy.”

Kara needs more volunteers and will hold an information night and training sessions in the fall. Call Kara at (650) 321-5272 or review its Web site at [www.kara-grief.org](http://www.kara-grief.org).

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