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Bill Cirone: Hospice of Santa Barbara a Comfort for Children Coping with Loss

By Bill Cirone | Published on 02.12.2014 6:46 p.m.

It's hard to imagine anything more difficult for a child than dealing with the loss of a parent or loved one. Beyond feeling profound sadness, children must also deal with the terror of thinking that there is no one to take care of them, the anger at being abandoned, and the overwhelming sense of separation and loss. Young children can also be deeply confused and bewildered, knowing the parent is gone but not knowing why, because they don't fully understand what death means.

[Hospice of Santa Barbara](#), the second-oldest hospice in the nation, has been stepping in to help children and families cope with loss for more than 40 years.

Most hospices are medically based, offering nursing care and support services, and are funded by [Medicare](#) and medical insurance policies. To qualify, individuals need a diagnosis of less than six months to live and must agree to forgo most medical treatments.

Hospice of Santa Barbara is not medically based. It focuses on the emotional, personal and spiritual aspects of dying and grieving — and it provides its services to the community free of charge. This way, free from the constraints of government or insurance funding, counselors and social workers can spend much more time with the people who need them. Hospice professionals help prepare the patient and the family members, especially children, up to the time when medical hospice may be appropriate.

Hospice of Santa Barbara provides help with “anticipatory loss or bereavement” for family members who may be struggling with the fear of a terminal diagnosis. They also serve many families who have lost someone suddenly.

Very importantly, Hospice of Santa Barbara has always been interested in helping teens and children. Much of the work takes place in the program's offices, where the number of children and teens served has nearly tripled in the last three years. If there is a death at a school, hospice workers go to campus and meet with teachers, faculty and students. With a tragic increase in suicides, hospice has created a large response

network. After the immediate emergency passes, hospice is there for the long haul, doing grief work with anybody affected by the death.

In fact, hospice has a consistent presence on nearly a dozen high school and middle school campuses in the South County, where hospice staff members provide regularly scheduled individual and group counseling sessions. Their work even extends down to the elementary level, where more than a half-dozen students at one campus alone reported the death of a mom or dad.

“We know that children and teenagers who lose a loved one, and who do not find help, can often experience depression, anger and a decline in academic performance,” former Executive Director Steve Jacobson said. “We also know that we are giving them a different future, a path of strengthened character and hope. The students we are reaching in this way will become part of the local workforce in the future. We are improving their lives in profound ways now, and those positive effects will resonate for years to come.”

We are grateful for the efforts by Hospice of Santa Barbara to serve our community, and its effective work in dealing with this most devastating challenge for young people.

— *Bill Cirone is Santa Barbara County's superintendent of schools. The opinions expressed are his own.*