

Peer-support groups for grieving children ready to launch

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Most people avoided the subject of death when 9-year-old Eve-Lynn Civerolo lost her father 60 years ago. She could hear her mother crying, feel her brother's guilt, see her sister's search for a father figure, but teachers and family didn't talk about it. Nobody wanted to exacerbate the pain by bringing it up.

"That's the worst thing you can do, is not bring it up," said Civerolo, who now works with Hospice Maui. "You have these fears and thoughts and things you think about that make no sense, but there's no one to help you through that."

It's families like the Civerolos, and children like Eve-Lynn, that a new nonprofit on Maui hopes to reach. Na Keiki O Emalia is geared toward helping families, and keiki in particular, process grief in their own ways. It's not counseling or therapy, said Brooke Brown, the nonprofit's executive director, it's just a place for kids to come and share space with others who have experienced losses of their own.



Emalia Guard is pictured with her son, Kahalakea, in a photo from 2012. After Guard die in 2014, her mother, Brooke Brown, decided to start a nonprofit to help children like her grandson deal with loss and grief. Na Keiki O Emalia is prepared to launch its first groups but is looking for families to participate.

Photo courtesy of Brooke Brown

"The hugest thing for kids is they can feel alone in their grief," Brown said. "They feel like nobody understands them. And for kids in most situations it's true. If their friends haven't lost a parent or a sibling, there's no way they could understand the depths of what this child is going through."

Brown's daughter, Emalia Guard, died two years ago, leaving behind a husband and 3-year-old son. Brown started the nonprofit with the hopes of providing support for her grandson and other children on Maui, all at no cost.

Na Keiki O Emalia is now on the cusp of opening its first peer-support groups - it just needs more children in order to do so, Brown said. Since the organization gained nonprofit status in August, Brown has been working with local social services agencies, gathering volunteers and organizing training with help from The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families, a nonprofit in Oregon that Na Keiki O Emalia is modeled after.

On Maui, there are a number of organizations that help families, but none are geared toward helping all kids through their grief. The Queen Lili'uokalani Children's Center has bereavement programs, though participants must be Native Hawaiian. Hospice Maui offers adult groups. Child and Family Service encounters grief and loss "on a daily basis," but can only get involved in cases of child abuse and neglect, sexual assault and domestic violence, Clinical Director Dani Riggs said.

Riggs sees Na Keiki O Emalia as "a sister agency" that can "fill a puka that we sometimes can't." He added that it's not a question of if children will find a way of engaging their grief, but when. The problem is that many families don't know what to do when it comes up.

"Children live in the imaginary world," Riggs said. "They may not talk about it. But they'll play about it. They'll do art about it. . . . When you engage their imagination, you begin to engage the pathway to their healing."

Na Keiki O Emalia plans to create spaces like that. In groups led by trained facilitators, children will get the chance to talk, cry, laugh or say nothing at all. Depending on age level, there might be crafts to make, toys to play with or drums to bang out grief on. Even older kids could simply doodle while talking, Brown said.

Participants won't be allowed to comment on others' experiences, only their own, which encourages a nonjudgmental atmosphere, Brown said. Groups meet twice a month and the program is free, with the only requirement that children maintain regular attendance and come with an adult, who will also get a chance to be part of a peer-support group.

Civerolo, who helped run a children's grief camp in Keanae for a couple of years, said it's important for families to approach grief together so they can move on at the same pace.

"When the children came out of (camp) and got back into the car with their parents, they were open and honest about death," Civerolo said. "And parents had a really difficult time dealing with it."

The idea of addressing children's grief was relatively new when The Dougy Center was founded more than 30 years ago, said Donna Schuurman, the nonprofit's executive director emeritus. Dougy Turno, the center's namesake, was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor at 8 years old. He wondered why no one would discuss the topic of death with him and would ask other kids in the hospital the questions they all thought: "Isn't it unfair we'll never graduate from high school? Have you ever kissed a girl? How come we have to have diseases?"

"Many of the adults - parents, medical personnel, etc. - really didn't want to hear a child talk like that, and he was encouraged to stay positive, to think good thoughts," Schuurman said. "People thought kids would be 'fine' since they're resilient, so we had to do a fair amount of educating folk around the long-term needs of grieving children."

Some tips The Dougy Center recommends are speaking openly and honestly with children about death, being open to different ways of grieving, talking about the person who died, providing outlets for self-expression and creating consistency and routine.

Schuurman, who's worked with families in the wake of national tragedies, including 9/11 and the Sandy Hook school shooting, said that, in the midst of loss, families might look for changes in children that could include anything from striking out at others to self-harm. Sometimes, however, kids may hide it, and families may think they don't need help.

"Children . . . pick everything up," Brown said. "They see what a hard time their parent is having. They keep all their grief inside and do their best to look like a happy camper because they don't want to add to their parent's burden."

Brown said that some families are reluctant to participate in the groups because of the common desire to keep personal matters within their own homes. But, QLCC Maui Unit Manager Iris Mountcastle said programs like these help create the type of community support system that Hawaiian culture draws upon.

"Ohana come to us in times of grief, loss and hardship," Mountcastle said. "In helping children by bringing them together in groups to address common needs, QLCC embraces the value of family, community service, and strengthening personal identity by utilizing our Hawaiian culture as a foundation."

Brown said Na Keiki O Emalia almost has enough children to start a group for ages 3 to 5. She encouraged families to keep applying so that when interest is high enough, more age groups can start. So far, the organization has trained 16 facilitators and plans to train more in September.

While Na Keiki O Emalia does not yet have its own place, QLCC and Hospice Maui have offered space for families to meet. Once groups start, younger children would meet in early afternoons for just over an hour, while older kids would meet in early evenings for 90 minutes.

For more information or to apply, visit nkoemaui.org or call 214-9832.

Grief resources for families can also be found at dougy.org/grief-resources/tip-sheets.

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