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Plymouth camp welcomes children struggling with grief

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BY ANDREA KECKLEY Republican-American

PLYMOUTH – More than forty children are expected to arrive today at Camp Mattatuck, and though they vary in age and backgrounds, they all have one thing in common – a story of bereavement to share.

"We address the hard topics here," said Heidi Webster, the camp's co-director. "And we want them to know there's always a path that can lead them moving forward."

A heartbreaking consequence of drug overdoses, suicides and other fatalities are the children they often leave behind. A nationwide survey conducted by New York Life Foundation and American Federation of Teachers in 2012 found that seven in 10 teachers have at least one student in their class or classes who has dealt with the death of a parent, guardian, sibling or close friend within the past year.



Seasons Hospice Foundation recognizes how common it is for children to lose loved ones today. That's why it is hosting "Camp Kangaroo" today through Sunday at Camp Mattatuck on Mount Tobe Road.

The bereavement camp has several locations throughout the country, but this weekend will be its first in Connecticut. Camp Kangaroo is free for children ages 5 to 18 who have lost a loved one within the past two years. The camp largely is supported through donations and volunteers.

"It's really incredible when you think about what's going into this," said Theresa Bachhuber, executive director of Middlebury-based Seasons Hospice & Palliative Care, one of the corporate sponsors.

The time children spend at Camp Kangaroo is designed to help guide them through the grief process. This journey is aided by camp counselors, creative arts therapists, volunteers and so-called "roo buddies," who work directly with the campers.

"It's really about providing that sense of trust right from the time they arrive at the camp," Bachhuber said.

As with many summer camps, the weekend will be a time for making friends and enjoying the outdoors. Campers take part in many typical summer camp activities such as crafts, swimming and rock climbing. But it also will be a time for healing. Camp Kangaroo's curriculum

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consists of many counseling activities that are designed to give campers a chance to share and express their grief.

One of the ways campers can do this is through the creative arts. Bachhuber describes music as a hallmark of Camp Kangaroo.

"It's another way to be able to express their grief," she said.

Campers will be making drums to use as a communicative outlet. Today, campers will work together to create a camp song that they will present to their parents and guardians at closing.

"The camp song is really something that brings them all together," Webster said.

That sense of togetherness is a focal point for Camp Kangaroo. While grief often makes children feel alone, Camp Kangaroo strives to give them the opportunity to connect with peers who have been through similar painful experiences.

"By going to camp, they're able to identify with other campers," Bachhuber said. "They're able to realize that this isn't just happening to them."

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