



CANCER AT CAMP

Campers attend Camp in varying stages of their cancer experience, ranging from those who are newly diagnosed to those who completed therapy years prior.

Working with Children at Camp – talking about challenging topics

It is important to be aware of the stage that the children you are working with are in, if they bring up challenging topics. The following example discusses death and dying, but can be transferred to many situations. Please keep in mind that children have come to Camp to have fun. As such, it is NOT appropriate for you to initiate a discussion with the children regarding their illness, or to bring up the issue of death. If a child brings up the issue, a response is needed on your part. It is very important to remember that you do not want to impose your views, values, or beliefs on the children.

Your job is to be a listener. How Do You Respond?

(1) e.g. child asks “Do you think when I die, I will go to heaven?”

Do not answer the question with your own views. You do not know what the child’s parents have told them about death or dying, nor do you know the cultural beliefs of this child. It is fine for children to share with you their thoughts about death, and you can facilitate that by answering the question with another question.

RESPONSE

“That is a very interesting question. I don’t know what happens when a person dies. What do you think happens when people die?”

(2) e.g. child asks “Am I going to die?”

Children under age 7 who still have magical thinking and are still dealing with the issue of time and death may be asking if they are going to die now.

RESPONSE

“You are not going to die now, but everyone dies some day.”

(3) e.g. child asks “My friend died of leukemia a couple of months ago. I’m scared that I’m going to die since I have the same thing.”

It is important not to try to appease the kids by saying “It’ll be all right, you’ll be fine.”

It is important to acknowledge what the child says. Even young children have very real and normal feelings.

RESPONSE (A)

“You know it’s all right to be scared. It sounds like you’re dealing with some difficult feelings. It’s important to focus on your own illness because even though you have the same diagnosis, each kid is in a different situation. It’s important to focus on the things that you have control over; you’ve gone back to school and you’re here at Camp now”. It is also important to know that you do not have to come up with a quick answer. If your gut is telling you that you don’t know what to say and you feel that you want to discuss this with someone else, that is perfectly fine.

RESPONSE (B)



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“That’s a really good question and I’d really like some time to talk to you about that. Why don’t we talk about it when swimming is finished.”

OR

“Why don’t we meet later to discuss that when we can have some quiet time to talk.”

You can then go to find someone to help you with the situation, like Camp Management or a member of the Med Shed Team.