

Safe Harbor

Bereavement Program Accompanies Children Through Grieving



Grieving is hard. If you're a child who's lost someone you love, it's really, really hard. You're lost at sea, thrown into the grown-up world of dealing with death. But you're still just a kid.

Safe Harbor at Abington – Jefferson Health is entirely donor-funded and has helped more than 3,000 kids and their families weather the storms of grief since 2001. With five part-time staff members supported by more than 50 big-hearted, specially trained volunteers, Safe Harbor offers ongoing peer support groups and programs—free of charge—to children, teens, young adults, and their parents or caregivers for as long as they need them. Fun activities like music, art, dance, and drama help kids express and process unimaginable loss, and group sharing and education help parents understand and assist their grieving children.

One out of 20 children experiences the death of a parent before finishing high school, and one out of every five faces the death of someone close. There's no escaping heartbreak and loss when someone dear to you dies. Kids don't "get over it," but there's plenty of care, an abundance of skill, and lots of love at Safe Harbor to accompany them as they go through it—safely.

Camp Charlie 2017

Every summer for 11 years, Safe Harbor has operated a week-long day camp for bereaved children, ages 6–12. Grief and laughter are given free reign, and together kids use art to memorialize, drama to tell their story, and music to say goodbye. The following journal entries are the work of a fictitious camper written by Safe Harbor staff.



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Day 2

Today we're making a "memorial collage" on a big star. I do the whole star with orange tissue paper because that was my dad's favorite color. Jen, the art lady, asks us to think about our special person. What words would we use to describe them? What things did they like? What memories do we have with them? This is easy for me, but some kids are struggling, so the buddies sit with them and help. Next we write words on the star. I write words like "baseball," "telling jokes," "LEGOs," and "beach," since these were things he loved.

Day 3

We sit in a circle and talk about ways we remember the person we had to say goodbye to. This is tough. One of the buddies comes and sits next to me as I decorate a special star in honor of my dad. It helps that I can just listen and I don't have to talk. I love my star and put special beads inside to represent the people who support me. I put one in to represent my buddy. The music facilitator says we're going to write a special goodbye song. It will be so neat to hear my very own words about my dad being sung out loud.

Day 4

Drama day. I'm not too sure about this one. We play warmup games like Alien Greeting. Then we get a little serious. It's time to tell our stories, something I've never done with anyone. I chart my grief story on paper: the who, what, where, when, and how about my dad's death to help come up with ways to show emotions in frozen poses. Even though I'm in a pose, my eyes look around at the other campers. Look at how brave everyone is acting out their toughest feelings! Look at me!

Day 5

All the campers invited friends and family to Family Gathering. I see my mom and little sister in the audience waving to me. All our beautiful stars are hanging around the room. We share our music, art, and drama, and then it's time to read the names of all the people who've died. I feel special as I hear my dad's name. My mom helps me hang a ribbon in his honor. Next, the music lady sings, and many kids cry. My eyes tear up too, but I know this is a safe place to let feelings show. I'm going to be OK.

I'm 8 years old and my dad died a few months ago after being sick with cancer. Right after he died, everyone was there. A few weeks later it seems they're waiting for a sign that I'm "over it." What does that mean? My mom signed me up for Camp Charlie. She says it'll help me feel better. I'm afraid it'll make me feel worse.

Day One

We pull up to a big striped tent. A nice boy in a purple shirt—one of the teen buddies—takes me to get my shirt. Then it's time to do "check-in." Each of us says our name, age, who died, and how they died. I'm told if I don't feel comfortable, I can "pass." One girl says she's 8 also, and her mom died of an overdose. A boy says his brother died by drowning. Then the girl next to me says her dad died from cancer—just like my dad. I decide to go next. I hear myself saying, OUT LOUD, "My dad died." I almost cry. All the campers, buddies, and counselors are listening and nodding. I came feeling kind of alone, but now I'm seeing there are people around who get me and can help.