

Exploring Youth Programs: Program Models and Theory of Change at Fairview Health Services

Camp Erin

Joseph J. Rand

University of Minnesota

Jennifer A. Skuza

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The crowd gathered at the stage was a sea of diverse families. Moms and dads with their kids, single moms with sons and single dads with daughters, grandparents with grandkids, aunts and uncles with nieces and nephews. Everyone varied in age from 5 years old, to 88 years young and included every skin tone and ethnic background you can imagine. All mixed together like one giant family. It was beautiful. Seated on warped and crooked benches made of old two-by-sixes and posts and surrounded by woodchip mulch filled with dandelions that kids were picking handing to loved ones, I started to notice tears on some faces. The uneasiness of the group was palpable. As we stood on the primitive outdoor stage with the giant sign overhead that read Camp Heartland, I too was overcome with emotion. While the group gathered here was a tapestry of history and culture, all had one thing in common. They had lost a loved one. The picture of the crowd then changed as I began to imagine the dad who lost his battle with cancer that a girl longed for as she sat in her mother's lap, or the boy wearing the hat with honor and pride of the brother he'd lost in a drive-by. This is the picture of Camp Erin, a bereavement camp for youth operated by Fairview Health Services Minnesota through the Moyer Foundation. Bereavement refers to the situation of losing someone significant to death (Stroebe et al, 2001) and can often be a process more difficult than adolescence (Walter, 1999). Camp Erin seeks to mitigate the difficulties of childhood bereavement. I will offer my perspective on Camp Erin's impact and effectiveness through a logic model analysis including a brief history, inputs, outputs, short and long-term outcomes, external factors, limitations and my personal observations and analysis.

History of Camp Erin

Camp Erin is named in memory of Erin Metcalf of Woodinville, Washington, a young woman who developed liver cancer at the age of 15 (The Moyer Foundation, 2009). Karen and Jamie Moyer met Erin through Make-A-Wish while Jamie was playing for the Seattle Mariners. They noticed Erin's compassionate heart while hospitalized. Erin often expressed concern for the other children as well as their siblings, who sometimes received little attention (The Moyer Foundation, 2009).

The Moyer Foundation helped fund several children's bereavement camps, including camps for the victims of 9/11, and discovered the positive impacts therein. In 2000, when Erin died at the age of 17, Jamie and Karen Moyer wished to honor Erin's memory and her caring spirit. Acknowledging her love of children and her desire to help others, the Moyers felt that a grief camp for children would be an appropriate tribute. The first Camp Erin was established in Everett, Washington in 2002 helping 42 grieving children (The Moyer Foundation, 2009).

Camp Erin–Twin Cities is an annual, no-cost, three-day bereavement camp for children ages 6-17, who have experienced the death of a family member or friend. Camp Erin is the largest network of bereavement camps in the country and is available through a partnership between Fairview and The Moyer Foundation (Fairview Health Services, 2014).

Inputs

It takes a village...as they say...to get Camp Erin off the ground each year. Fairview employs two full time staff members to coordinate volunteers and plan camp, as well as sift through hundreds of applicants. Over 50 volunteers come together for two training nights leading up to camp to learn about the history of the organization, what the camp experience is like, and how to work with grieving youth and their families. I remember vividly one of the camp directors saying that talking about death has to become part of your vocabulary and

normal. She indicated that if we were uncomfortable with that fact, then this would be at least a growing experience for us and at most, may not be the place for us.

Additionally, prior to camp, families and youth were able to come together and meet staff and counselors at Save-Your-Spot night. Those of us who were cabin big buddies introduced ourselves and got to play games and get-to-know-you activities with kids in order to alleviate some of their apprehension about being away from home. For my group of seven, 7-year-old boys, this was incredibly valuable and important since several of them had never spent a night away from home before. We were able to put the parents at ease as well by helping them and their children create flags commemorating their lost loved one that would be shared at camp.

Campers were made up of kids aged 6-17 who had experienced some sort of loss, whether a close family member or extended. Many of the youth had siblings at the camp as well either currently or in the past. Most of the youth had experienced traumatic losses involving terminal illness, or catastrophic events like shootings, fire or car accidents. Of the 7 boys I worked directly with, 4 had lost their father, and 3 had lost a sibling.

Volunteers were made up of people working in the corporate world, a few of us who worked with youth serving organizations, a couple teachers, a few parole officers, a flight attendant, Jana Shortal of KARE 11 fame, and a college kid who was also a former camper. Volunteers fill many roles including camp directors, cabin big buddies, sharing circle leaders, and support staff helping facilitate a 3 day, 2 night event at Camp Heartland near Hinckley, MN. It is a weekend-long experience filled with traditional, fun, camp activities combined with grief education and emotional support -- facilitated by grief professionals and trained volunteers (The Moyer Foundation, 2009).

Outputs

The outputs of Camp Erin can predominantly be illustrated through the activities youth and adults engaged in during their three days at camp. Over seventy youth had the chance to participate in Camp Erin-Twin Cities in 2014, with more than thirty youth on the waiting list. There are currently 40 camps hosted in over 25 states. All camps incorporate camp activities with grief educational and emotional support (The Moyer Foundation, 2009). While the focus of the camp is support through the grieving process, the intent is to occasionally dip into the grief, but not dwell there, and then to come back out through activities and fun with other campers and volunteers. Thus, campers were always occupied and busy, and had very little time for youth to get homesick, or worry about grieving until they are prompted in their sharing circles or through rituals. Each morning brought some free time before breakfast where basically kids ran around on the playground like crazy animals with no real objective, while we tried to engage them in some sort of organized play, all the while longing for that first cup of coffee and the meal bell to ring. While I'm sure those volunteers with older youth were able to ease into their morning, my cabin buddies and I were met with more energy than imaginable! Both days I was exhausted before breakfast.

Following breakfast, youth engaged in sharing circle time. These co-ed groups of youth in the same age range engaged in activities where they reflected on their lost loved one, sharing feelings, memories, and coping strategies. They met in these groups four times during the course of the weekend, helping to create another network of supportive peers. A 2001 study published in *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research and Practice* suggests that participation in trauma and grief focused therapy is linked to improvements in posttraumatic stress symptoms, complicated grief symptoms and academic achievement (Saltzman et al, 2001). Similarly, in his focus on

LGBT students, Richard Barry suggests that safe spaces are necessary in fostering peer-to-peer relationships and developing coping strategies and community (Barry, 2000).

Saturday, the only full day of camp, before and after lunch brought organized recreational time. While I was in charge of manning the waterfront, other activities included field games, a climbing wall, crafts and yoga. Andrews and Marotta (2005) found that engagement in play, art, and games had a positive impact on the bereavement process by helping children manage their feelings and have some control over their grief (Andrews and Marotta, 2005).

I had a great time teaching kids about canoeing, how to get in and launch the boat, different stroke techniques, and the importance of their life jackets. It was awesome to see kids who had never canoed before, or had never been on a lake or in a boat before, have such a great time on the water. I was often not sure if the volunteers or youth were having more fun. I also had the wonderful task of ripping the lips off countless sunnies who kids had let swallow their hooks. While we were practicing catch and release, I'm fairly certain we put a dent in the population of fish in the lake. Later I heard lots of great stories about youth overcoming their fear of heights on the climbing wall, and was shown a ton of survival bracelets weaved during craft time.

Some competition was also encouraged through cabin vs. cabin games. Each cabin was given the task of coming up with a name and a skit to present to the entire group of campers. Our cabin became the Ninja Raccoons and we put together a gangsta' sort of dance and rap that the boys then sang incessantly the rest of the weekend. Whether it was because of the adorable 7-year-old boys rapping and acting like thugs, or the 3 older chaperones trying to do the same, the crowd cheered. We also had a photo scavenger hunt where we had to take pictures of our whole group doing different things around camp, the funniest of which was trying to get

all seven kids' feet in a sink of water, each of us having to lift up at least two kids in order to reach. It was neck-and-neck over who would win, us, or a group of high school girls. We argued with the judges over a technicality all the while trying to persuade them to choose our own group. In the end, age and cuteness prevailed as the Ninja Raccoons were named the winners.

Campers also had the opportunity to engage in two of the most memorable activities of the camp. The same ritual activities are done at every Camp Erin across the country. On the first night of camp, youth had the opportunity to introduce their lost loved one to the entire group by announcing their name and relationship to the person, and placing their picture on a board along with all the others being honored. One by one each child took the stage and microphone and emotionally made their introduction while the rest of us sat on the floor. You could have heard a pin drop. Every kid was completely engaged because of his or her own personal story of grief and now had a greater sense of connectedness to their peers. Davies et al. (2007) found that participation in the activities of a bereavement support group helped decrease a child's sense of isolation. For many of the youth this was the first time they realized they were not alone in their grief and loss of a loved one.

During one of the sharing circle times, the kids were given a foam star cut out, about eight inches across, and two inches thick, to decorate with paint, glitter, and all sorts of other paraphernalia. The colorful stars became floating luminaries that were set sail on the lake the second night of camp, while each lost loved one's name was read aloud to the group sitting on the sandy shore. While it had been a bright and sunny day, the clouds had rolled in with storms around us later in the evening, but as soon as the stars started floating on the lake, the clouds parted and the sunset shone through like we were in a movie. It was clear that this was an incredibly moving experience. There were lots of tears as siblings inched closer to one another

and hugged, and younger children moved to sit in the comfort of the lap of a volunteer. Both ritual activities counteract the isolation typical of childhood bereavement as discussed by Davies in the *Journal of Adolescent Research* (Davies, 1991).

As I sat in the canoe in the middle of the lake to help take pictures and observe the ritual away from the group, I was overcome with emotion and gratitude.

Outcomes

There are so many unknown outcomes given the brief yet impactful nature of Camp Erin. Young people leave with better grieving skills, a sense of connectedness, coping strategies, new friendships, and memories for a lifetime. Volunteers not only gain skills for helping youth through grief, but a sense of gratitude for what they have, and their own network of supportive and caring peers.

Kids will remember camp years from now as well as skills learned. In a 2013 study of Camp Erin's effectiveness, Fluegeman et al. found the flexible nature of the camp to be conducive to communication allowing for optimal conditions for relationship development (Fluegeman et al, 2013).

Being a grieving child is a lonely experience. Often he or she is the only one in class who has lost a mom or dad, a brother or sister. At a time in a child's life when it feels very important to fit in, grief can make him or her feel different, isolated. This transition is similar to the acculturation discussed with regard to immigrant youth by Skuza (2005). These youth have to cope with the new culture created by the loss of their loved one. Like immigrant youth, they are forced to adapt to a new world. Camp Erin allows a grieving child to be with other children who share these feelings. It is such a relief for them to know that they are not alone (The Moyer Foundation, 2009).

At Camp Erin youth learn that their feelings are perfectly normal. The feelings that accompany grief can be intense and overwhelming and can make us feel crazy. Camp Erin shows children that what they are experiencing, although painful, is perfectly normal. An article by Ribbens McCarthy (2007) suggests that given the high percentages, as high as 92%, of youth in the UK and USA that have experienced the loss of someone they classified as “close” or “significant,” bereavement is, in fact, a statistically “normal” part of growing up. However, we as western society, fail to make sense of, and therefore privatize death further perpetuating the isolation (Ribbens McCarthy, 2007). For this reason, Camp Erin fills an incredibly important need in the lives of youth.

Grieving children have an opportunity to address their feelings and memorialize their loved ones. Children often do not have an avenue to express their grief or to honor and remember the person they held dear. Through a variety of activities including drama, arts and crafts, creative writing and physical activities, children have the opportunity to “get their feelings out” while memorializing their loved one (The Moyer Foundation, 2009).

At Camp Erin, children are comforted knowing that there are other children who have had similar grief and loss experiences and feelings. Campers have an opportunity to tell their story, express their feelings and memorialize their loved ones. They are provided with the tools and resources needed during and after camp, including memories and friendships that last long after camp is complete.

Further proof that Camp Erin has a lasting impact was the return of a former camper this summer as a cabin big buddy. After just graduating high school, this young man, who had lost his father several years ago, wanted to give back to the camp that had helped him through a dark time.

I just wanted to give back, you know. I remember how hard it was when I lost my dad who was my best friend, and I want to help kids who are dealing with the same stuff I did. I can remember camp like I was here yesterday. It changed my life, and I made friends with people I'm still friends with that I can talk to about my dad (personal communication, July 26, 2014).

Additionally, the percentage of returning volunteers and volunteers who have been a part of Camp Erin Twin Cities since its inception is around 75%. Many of the volunteers talk about how the other Camp Erin volunteers and staff have become like family to them, and that coming back to camp each summer is like a family reunion. I know I'm hooked, and plan to volunteer again next summer.

External Factors

While there are many external factors that affect the impact of Camp Erin on youth who attend, one of the most prevalent is that time spent away from mom and dad or other caregivers can be scary for kids. We encountered one such instance in our cabin of 7-year-old boys. One of the boys did ok the first night, but on the second day of camp became fixated on going home. Further complicating the issue was his mother, who he was allowed to speak to on the phone, who told him that if he was really having a hard time she would come pick him up. This notion got him through the day on Saturday, but come bedtime, he was packing his bag.

This situation also sheds light on a couple other key external factors, parents and bedtime. While the staff at Camp Erin does their best to coach parents on how to leave their kids for a couple nights and the anxiety it brings, they can only do so much. Parents, who have also experienced the same traumatic loss as the children, understandably have a hard time detaching as well. Darkness comes with bedtime for children, and the absence of a loving caregiver

tucking them in often becomes a stark reality. This is further compounded for those children who were previously tucked in by the person who died. On both nights, bedtime drug on for about 2 hours before kids were finally settled down and sleeping, and many of the kids woke up in the middle of the night crying.

Limitations

The most unfortunate limitation of Camp Erin Twin Cities is that they are only able to host around 70 children. In 2014, this meant a waiting list of over 40 children who may not be able to have a camp experience. While plans are underway for a mini-camp this fall, many of these children will have to wait until next summer for camp, or may not be able to attend at all. Additionally, as part of the screening process conducted by bereavement professionals, some children are excluded from camp. Factors such as a loss that is too recent or too traumatic, and health and safety concerns may also exclude a child from attending.

Another negative affect the sheer number of applicants has, is that children are only allowed to attend camp once, with a few exceptions. I am certain that if children were allowed, they would come back every summer. Many of them talked about wishing they could come back, and even my boys talked about their plans for next year. In a study of the long-term effects of family bereavement programs for children and adolescents, Sandler et al. (2010) found that after 6 years of group counseling sessions, youth's responses to grief were reduced. I can only imagine the incredibly positive effect that 6 years of Camp Erin could have on a grieving child and their family.

Fulfilling their Mission

Camp Erin Twin Cities' Mission statement is simply: Making connections, lasting friendships. The mission of The Moyer Foundation is to provide comfort, hope and healing to

children affected by loss and family addiction. The 3-day Camp Erin experience successfully fulfills these missions. Along with campfires, camp songs, cookouts, swimming, games and crafts, education is incorporated about grief and ample time is built in for sharing with each other. During this special camp experience, campers develop genuine connections and lasting friendships.

At Camp Erin, the focus is on the kids! Professionals and highly trained volunteers of Fairview's Youth Grief Services work to combine all the fun and excitement of camp with time to connect with other kids who have experienced loss (Fairview Health Services, 2014).

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