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Outdoor Education for Bereaved Children?

Bereaved children and young people want to experience outdoor education.

For many outdoor education providers, bereaved children and young people at first appear to be a new target audience. A new target audience naturally raises questions of programme planning and can give the provider a pressurised need to succeed; 'Do I as the organiser have to develop a whole new programme?', 'May I be required to provide some form of therapy?'.

Grief

I would like to first define the notion of grief. There are many causes for grief, for example lovesickness, which many of us will have surely already experienced. We will however be referring to grief in the context of that experienced after the death of a loved one.

Grief is a natural and healthy reaction to such a loss and some people even say that grief is love. We possess sufficient self healing power to be able to get through our grief. Sometimes our self healing power does not suffice and we look for support. Reasons for this can lie in an aggravated bereavement and within this we include for children and young people the death of a parent or sibling. Eighty per cent of children in bereavement support groups are grieving the loss of a mother or father. There is no adequate programme for bereaved children and young people and at present there are very very few outdoor education opportunities for them. This is despite the fact that bereaved children clearly want such opportunities. When siblings of terminally ill children expressed their wishes at the second German children's hospice forum, in first place stood, "Outdoor education experiences, because they can develop our self-confidence and our feeling of group solidarity".

Outdoor Education Methods

In my opinion there are two methods of working with bereaved children and young people in outdoor education.

The first method is to offer the bereaved children a 'standard' outdoor education activity. This doesn't require a particular concept, because the generic aims of outdoor education also suit this target audience. Many parents and self help groups look for a 'very normal' outdoor education activity for their children. They don't expect any special bereavement counselling within this activity, rather they want to enable their children to take part in the same 'normal' experiences that are also accessible to all other children. Naturally it is made clear in this approach that the activity is exclusively for bereaved children, but that there are no further special points in the programme or special approaches.

This first method relieves providers from the requirement of having to afford something special, for example a bereavement support specialist with whom they have no experience. It also fulfils the wishes of many bereaved children and young people, and their parents, to be able to take part in a 'normal' outdoor education activity.

The second method is to plan and implement an activity together with bereavement support specialists. Bereavement support specialists are generally highly engaged, but they do not have outdoor education qualifications. They are often interested in working collaboratively. More time is given in these programmes for conversations. For thousands of years, bereaved people have been going to nature and we should return to this tradition, because in nature we are surrounded by life and death. Exactly this sensual experience in nature offers the belief that he who is searching for sense, should begin with his own senses.

“Experiencing nature also means living with death.”

Martina Schaab

Some regional groups within the organisation 'Kinderkrebshilfe' (Help for Children with Cancer) have already run outdoor education programmes. From this the psychology institute at the Leipzig University Clinic has identified the following results:

- Siblings show a constant improvement in their physical well-being with fewer bodily problems such as sleeplessness, stomach aches and dizziness.
- Fewer depressive moods
- Increased ability to solve problems independently
- Need for contact amongst one another, even after the programme
- Above all, parents experience an improved mental state in their children. They see more joyful children with less fear and less insecurity.

Further Methods

There are also more new target audiences in the sphere of bereaved children and young people:

- The colleagues in hospices and palliative care centres are put together in an interdisciplinary environment. Outdoor team building activities are a very effective tool for helping people from different professional backgrounds to work together. As far as I know, no palliative or hospice team has been offered a team building day of this kind.
- Through working together with professionals from children's hospices, offering outdoor education activities for terminally ill children and young people also becomes possible. Experience of working with multiply disabled children would be helpful here.
- Outdoor education opportunities are extremely rare for young adults (18-30 years old). This target audience would surely be enthusiastic about opportunities to take part in outdoor education.

- Outdoor education sessions for the whole family and in particular for bereaved parents. The divorce rate is extremely high between bereaved parents and joint experiences could counteract this a little and inject some positive impulses.

Contact people for all of these methods can be found in bereavement support groups, outpatient hospice service groups, regional groups of 'Kinderkrebshilfe' (Help for Children with Cancer), self help groups for the terminally ill, children's clinics, hospices, children's hospices and paediatric palliative centres.

Overview

Outdoor education has lots of activities for bereaved children and young people at its disposal and is well prepared for working with bereaved children and young people. A delicate flower is beginning to grow in the outdoor education arena, let's nurture it!

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