

By Jen Scully

Kids & Cancer:

Mythbusters and Support

“Is cancer contagious?” ...

“Can cancer make your hair fall out?” ...

“If my Mom or Dad has cancer, will I get it too?”

A game of “Mythbusters” unveiled a host of questions like these from the kids attending Kid Support™, a new Gilda’s Club Westchester 10-week support program for school-age children who have a family member with cancer or have cancer themselves. Busting myths is just a part of what happens at Kid Support, through various expressive activities children learned new ways to “live” with their cancer experience.

Support

Some parents wonder if a support group is a good idea for their children. Not knowing what takes place there can make some parents hesitant. Since knowledge is power, this is what a Kid Support program is like. The group began in January with kids getting to know each other and Gilda’s Club Westchester staff and facility. Through art projects, icebreakers and play the group began to build the trust and confidence

needed to successfully embark on the next nine weeks.

One of the first themes was to explore and understand what cancer is. Through questions and a game, the children investigated some of the common myths and facts surrounding cancer while gaining new insight into common words they have heard relating to cancer (ie. chemotherapy, remission, radiation). During this time, misconceptions were addressed and the children began to learn new ways to talk about cancer.

Feelings

As the group progressed and developed a stronger understanding of what cancer is, they began to focus on the impact of cancer. The children recognized feelings about cancer and the changes in their lives that have taken place as a result of cancer. Group members spoke about the feelings they commonly share with family or friends, as well as other feelings they tend to keep to themselves. The kids were able to “illustrate” these feelings by creating masks depicting their “public” feelings on the outside, and their “private” feelings on the inside.

After sharing this vast range of feelings, the group explored the connection between the mind and the body. Kids spoke about how their body felt when they were experiencing different feelings. For example, how when one felt nervous, their heart beat faster and their face became flushed. Through guided imagery and art activities, the group discovered ways to change how their body reacted and as a result how their mind felt.

Loss

A very significant element of Kid Support is the acknowledgement of loss and death. While cancer still tends to be a taboo topic for many families, death and loss is even more so. Exploring this topic helps children to know that it is OK and in fact, helpful to talk about and express their fears and worries. The group had the opportunity to ask



Gilda’s Club Westchester offers vital peer support to children who have a family member with cancer or have cancer themselves.

questions and share feelings about death and loss through a special art project: a “fear box” that allowed them to share worries and fears. After decorating the box, kids wrote down or drew pictures of their worries. This exercise paved the way for greater dialogue about the many uncertainties and stresses that arise when someone has cancer.

As the group came to a close, themes of *appreciating ourselves, problem solving* and *putting it all together* were covered. So often, when cancer is in the family -- parents and children can lose sight of their strengths and uniqueness. These themes gave group members the opportunity to recognize personal strengths and abilities along with the strengths of their families. The group was also able to review and reflect on various subjects that were covered over the previous weeks and discuss how they could continue to practice skills like relaxation and expression once the group was over.

Celebration

The 10-week group concluded by providing the children with an opportunity to celebrate their experiences in Kid Support and say good-bye to their peers. Each Kid Support member received a certificate celebrating their participation and some mementos to remember the group by. Although the 10 weeks of Kid Support are complete, the group members will continue to be impacted by the important tools they learned to help them live with their cancer experience and the lasting relationships they created with their peers.

Kid Support™ is just one example of Gilda’s Club Westchester’s strong commitment to children, teens and families impacted by cancer. Gilda’s Club Westchester also offers a bereavement group for children, social events for teens and families, as well as lectures and networking groups for parents. When cancer happens, it happens to the whole family – including children.

Too often, when faced with this life-altering experience, families do not know where to turn. Founded in memory of comedienne Gilda Radner, Gilda’s Club Westchester offers a program like no other. It is one of the only places where an entire family touched by cancer can come together to experience a community of support. Gilda’s Club offers *cancer support for the whole family, the whole time.*

For further information contact Gilda’s Club Westchester, 80 Maple Ave., White Plains. 644-8844. www.gildasclubwestchester.org. ♦

Jen Scully is the Children and Families Coordinator at Gilda’s Club Westchester.

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