

By Jen Scully

# Kids & Cancer: *Talking Helps*

*Olivia, age 5, can't sleep at night and worries that her mother will die. Her mom, Susan, has lost all of her hair after three months of chemotherapy and Olivia has a hard time seeing her mother look so different now. None of her friends share her situation and Olivia feels isolated and as if her world has been turned upside down.*

Unfortunately there are many children like Olivia. Currently 12 million people are living with cancer in the United States and nearly 25 percent are parents of children under the age of 18. Cancer has become a part of everyday living for most every adult and child today. In fact, statistics show that three out of every four families are affected by cancer in some way.

## Kid Support

When cancer affects a family, children often go it alone without any support. Their lives have been dramatically changed and they are left with feelings such as guilt, fear, anger and sadness, as well as misinformation and confusion about cancer. These intense and unfamiliar feelings are expressed through equally intense behaviors such as difficulty concentrating in school, angry outbursts and aggression, withdrawal, trouble separating from parents, and even physical symptoms including headaches and stomachaches.

This month, Gilda's Club Westchester will launch Kid Support, a free, curriculum-based, peer-focused support group designed to address the psychological and social needs of children who have a family member or friend with cancer, as well as for children who have cancer themselves. Gilda's Club Westchester is one of many Gilda's Clubs nationwide participating in the Kid Support program, which was first piloted in 2005. It was modified from the original Kid Support program developed by Ann Speltz, educator, breast cancer survivor, parent and author of *The Year My Mother Was Bald* (Magination Press, 2002).

The new Kid Support program is consistent with other Gilda's Club programs and the philosophy that children need

opportunities to make friends and learn skills to help them with their cancer experience. When faced with life changing issues such as cancer, children often become anxious so getting them support is vital. They can also benefit from bereavement support when a parent, grandparent, or sibling dies. Kid Support is designed specifically to help reduce the stress of parental or family cancer and help strengthen the parent-child bond by enhancing family communication.

## Starting Now

Kid Support begins on Jan. 15 with a parent orientation. At that time parents meet with group facilitators to discuss the impact of cancer in the family, receive helpful resources, as well as review in depth the format and themes to be covered with their children in the 10-week support group.

Facilitated by licensed mental health professionals, two age groups (ages 4 to 7 and 8 to 12) will be led through a variety of developmentally appropriate content and activities including artistic expression, poems, stories, cartoons and games. The process is designed to help the children feel safe to ask questions, express difficult feelings and share common experiences. Themes include understanding cancer, learning to relax, problem solving and talking about change.

Throughout the 10 weeks, parents are given resources and handouts detailing how to continue the dis-

ussion of these topics at home; the children are given tools and strategies for doing the same.

For further information contact Gilda's Club Westchester / Kid Support, 80 Maple Ave., White Plains, 644-8844. [www.gildasclubwestchester.org](http://www.gildasclubwestchester.org) or email [jscully@gildasclubwestchester.org](mailto:jscully@gildasclubwestchester.org). ♦

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