

Helping Children Cope With Death and Grief

By SUSAN LEVINE
Courant Staff Writer

Kerri is 11 and Christina 7. They are sisters. Their older sister, Michelle, died of leukemia two years ago. They recall that event with starkly different sentiments.

Kerri believes the doctors killed her sister. In a picture she draws showing herself at the hospital, a doctor tells her, "Your too young to see her (Michelle). She be home in a week. I got to get back to work."

Christina remembers, "I cried all night, but I had to stop once to eat."

Both girls were away from home when Michelle died.

Kerri now fears that, if she leaves again, someone else could die. Christina realizes that, after a while, "You have birthday parties and do funner things" again.

Says Katherine Brown-Saltzman, the nurse who interviewed the children while doing graduate research at Lesley College in Cambridge, Mass., "Two years later, one is coping adequately, and one is tied up in knots."

That the sisters reacted differently to the death is not unusual: Children deal with death individually — just as adults do.

In the past, however, children's reactions and needs have been overlooked, Brown-Saltzman says.

"Kids have been the ignored population, absolutely," she said during the National Hospice Organization symposium in Hartford Tuesday. "In the past, we thought they didn't deal

"Kids have been the ignored population . . . In the past, we thought they didn't deal with death, didn't know about death, didn't have to discuss death."

Katherine Brown-Saltzman
Nurse

with death, didn't know about death, didn't have to discuss death. They didn't go to funerals and didn't need to."

Many participants, who include nurses, social workers, ministers, and some doctors, have pointed to the conference agenda as indication that the situation is changing. Of the 92 conference workshops that nearly 1,000 people are attending this week, 10 seminars concern children — children who are dying, children whose parents or siblings have died.

The workshops explore their perceptions of death, funerals and grief, and how to help them.

"I was shocked by the number of papers being presented on children, because there's been a gap," Brown-Saltzman said. She also was worried that her presentation on sibling bereavement would attract little at-

See Hospice, Page B7

Hospice Workers Say Children Need Help in Coping With Death

Continued from Page B1

tention; instead, all 50 chairs in her room at the Sheraton Hartford Hotel were occupied.

Brown-Saltzman described the great deficit a brother's or sister's death can leave in a child's life, especially when the child is shut out of the dying process. Depression, guilt and anxiety can follow, creating children who are "haunted" or "bound" by the silence or rejection of their grieving parents or are destined by the parents to live out the dead child's life.

The need for child counseling often is great. The Hospice of the Good Shepherd in Newton, Mass., organized a support group four years ago after children at an open house spontaneously began discussing the death of their parents.

"Their losses were so immediate," artist-coordinator Virginia L. Fry said.

The children were worried that they had contributed to the death, were embarrassed that they still were discussing their parents in the present tense and were concerned over whether they ever would remember their parents as they were before the illness.

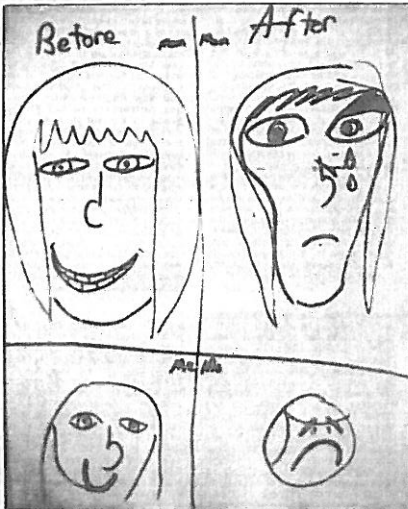
Psychologist Kate Leonard, who works with the Newton hospice, said, "This is an area we have found sorely lacking, not only in the hospice movement, but in any care-giving area."

Hospices offer programs that seek to care for and comfort terminally ill people, but not to cure them.

In the wake of death, children often fear they may catch the disease that killed their family member. They fear they may never be safe again.

Brown-Saltzman described how 6-year-old Elizabeth called a tumor "yellow spots," and said, "You get yellow spots inside your body if you lie."

For Elizabeth, death became a



David, who was involved in the children's support group of the Newtown, Mass., Hospice of the Good Shepherd, drew his mother, and himself, before and during her fatal bout with cancer. Increasing attention should be paid to the fears and needs of children whose parents or siblings die, speakers at the three-day National Hospice Organization conference in Hartford say.

battle between good and evil, with God as judge. "If you do what God says," Elizabeth explained nearly a year after her older sister's death, "you won't die until you get old."

Such fantastic beliefs often originate with adults, and the admonition not to tell children half-truths and fairy tales was a common theme in many of the sessions Tuesday

"Don't tell children Grandma has gone on a long trip," said Karla Dunningan from the Edmarc Hospice in Suffolk, Va., one of a handful of pediatric hospices in the country. "They'll wonder, 'What did I do to make Grandma go away,' or, 'Why doesn't she write?'"

"Honesty is the best policy."