

## **Adventure Therapy with grieving children**

Experiences in times of grief \*

„Experiencing nature also means living with dying.“ (Martina Schaab)

### 1 The mourners speak for themselves

There are already educational offers for grieving children and adolescents, but among them there are only very few experiential educational offers and this despite the fact that the children and adolescents clearly wish for this. For example, siblings of children with life-shortening illnesses expressed their wishes at the 2nd Children's Hospice Forum in Cologne. In first place was: experiential education offers,  
*... because they increase our self-confidence and also our sense of belonging...*

Grieving people have been seeking out nature for thousands of years. We want to continue this tradition again, because in nature we are surrounded by life and passing. It also offers endless possibilities for self-awareness and self-awareness, good foundations for strengthening self-confidence. Nature touches all our senses through colors, shapes, structures to see and touch, smells and scents, diverse sounds, cold and warmth, an infinite number of impressions in which everyone can find what is going on in him or her, what moves them. It invites you to explore and discover, to test your own strength. Whoever seeks meaning in life should begin with the senses.

At first glance, grieving children and adolescents are a new target group for many experiential educators. A new target group naturally raises questions about program design: As an organizer, do I have to develop a completely new offering? Will I possibly be required to offer a therapeutic program? But questions about experience and collegial exchange also arise: What offers already exist? What concepts do these colleagues use?

This forum is a first step, an open exchange for experiential educators working in this field and for those interested in finding the courage to take their own first steps. Together we want to compile previous experiences, see what has already been created and what still wants to be created. Possibly a working group will be formed, in which regular meetings and collegial consultations will develop. This article, which outlines current approaches, is intended to form an initial common basis.

### 2 Action and reflection

Experiential education programs in the support of grieving children and adolescents should be as free-flowing and creative as possible. They give impulses that bring us into action, give us the opportunity to express ourselves, to perceive ourselves, to support ourselves and offer space for exchange and conversation.

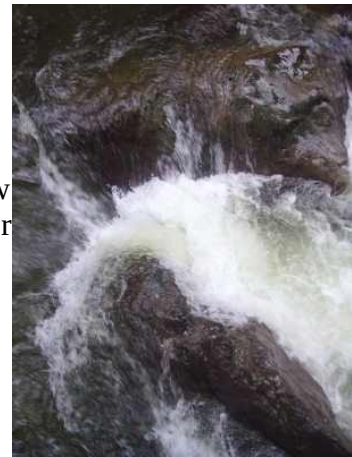
The basis is trust in each individual child, each individual adolescent, in his or her healing powers, in his or her own path of development, in the fact that everyone knows best or at least senses what he or she needs in order to be able to incorporate what he or she has experienced into his or her own life in a meaningful and enriching way.

This requires from us companions a professional pedagogy and our own deep examination of this life theme. We have to find and walk our own path in order to be able to offer grieving young people a free space to come to terms with it.

Our basic attitude is to let ourselves develop. It is not our task to know what is right. We do not want to have a ready-made method, but rather to go with the impulses that the group and each individual brings to the table.

In doing so, we must also sometimes go astray in order not to fall by the wayside. Our task is to create natural spaces and times in which we as a group are in good hands:

As we are and as we are at the moment, with our feelings, thoughts, worries, fears, dreams, hopes and longings.



### o Mourning

First of all, we would like to narrow down the concept of grief. There are many causes of grief, such as heartbreak, which I am sure many of us have experienced. In the following, the term grief refers to the mourning after the death of a close person.

Grief is a natural and healthy reaction to loss and we can also say grief is love. Normally we have enough self-healing powers to deal with our grief. However, sometimes our self-healing powers are not enough and we seek support. Reasons can lie in an aggravated mourning and in childhood and adolescence we count the death of a parent or a sibling among them. Children in bereavement groups mourn 80% of their father or mother. Feelings of guilt, especially after a suicide, are also a great burden for many young people. With offers in the nature we fulfill on the one hand their desires to be outside and can accompany them on the other hand on their life way very well holistically. In addition, it often leads to difficulties in everyday life when socially undesirable feelings arise, such as envy, relief, jealousy or anger. These seem inappropriate in one's own family and need another space where they can be expressed. Because they too are often part of grief.

The topic of dying and death no longer meets with a lived culture of mourning embedded in everyday life. Just like birth, childhood, old age and illness, it is outsourced and delegated. Many people are overwhelmed, at least unsettled, when confronted with it. They withdraw, hide behind phrases, don't dare ask how the other person is doing. "That's terrible!" "Terrible!" "I'm so sorry!" overlooks the fact that along with all the pain, there can also be very beautiful, precious experiences in it: Closeness, connection, love, infinity, security, moments felt sacred. A lot of joy and gratitude.

### ▪ Nature

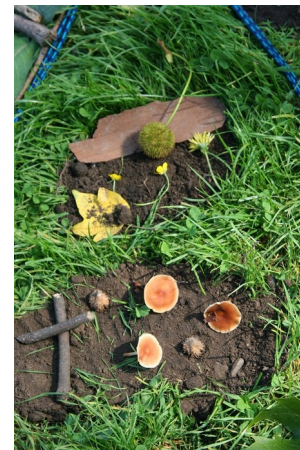
Art and nature have always been possibilities to let us be touched by the spiritual world, to come into contact with it, to communicate with it, to experience elementary wisdoms of life and death and to perceive them as coherent and meaningful. Especially the special beauty that lies in dying and passing away can touch us deeply and directly in nature.

That's why it makes sense to go out into nature with people who are grieving. It offers the experience of freedom and security at the same time. It shows the cycle of becoming and passing away, everywhere and at any time.

Dying and saying goodbye are elementary experiences of life. The elements, earth, water, air and fire, correspond in their essence to qualities of soul experience.

In dealing with them, they offer a wonderful basis for a shared creative and healing process.

Nature offers us images and experiences that can be conveyed without linguistic interpretation. It touches us with all our senses. In this way, it helps each individual to come to terms with his or her needs and questions of life and to communicate with them.



#### ▪ Games

For children, playing is the natural way to engage with the world.

In their own free play, they process their experiences.

They transform their impressions into expression, deal with them, create with their own impulses, test, repeat and create. They experience their own competence, independence, imagination, creativity, confidence in movement, opportunities to communicate and to come into contact and exchange with others. Play is an active approach to the world, other people, material and various topics. It is practicing and trying things out and gaining confidence. Thus, play is the method in grief pedagogy that engages with the children's natural mode of expression. We companions are players in quiet and agitated, in loud and quiet, in very individual play situations in pairs or in the whole group.

#### ▪ Interaction

Grief groups provide a safe place to allow children and young people to express their often suppressed feelings. These are explosive feelings such as anger or rage, but also feelings of loneliness, fear or self-reproach. The children experience that they are not alone with their crazy feelings. Feelings of guilt, in particular, are common among grieving children and adolescents. Feelings of guilt about having done something wrong or having failed to do something, but also feelings of guilt about being able to laugh again, to be happy and to experience other positive feelings soon after the death.

In a protected setting, we and the children accompany each other on their own personal path of grief and life. The atmosphere is characterized by openness, acceptance and understanding of the children's situation. The group offers a place and time for mourning. In the process, they experience that there is no wrong way to grieve and that each of them has the ability to grieve.

Grieving children often want to function well at home, not be yet another burden, and tend to be inconspicuous to the outside world. In turn, they try to support the environment rather than seek help for themselves, even though they may need it for a healthy grieving process. And children's grief is quite different from the often socially adjusted grief of adults. Many young people think they alone have these feelings and problems and this is only because something is wrong with them. It helps children and young people to share and realize that this is something that many people encounter in their grief.

On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that many children and adolescents are very resilient and remain healthy even in their grief - and that this is just as much a proper grieving process. Sometimes it is disregarded that children and adolescents can cope very well with deaths.

### 3 Grief counselling in experiential education

Within experiential education, different ways of working with grieving children and young people are possible and desirable. Common to all paths is that they are paths into nature and that these paths ultimately lead to oneself. Looking for new experiences that stimulate the senses, trying something new, feeling oneself again, coming to oneself, finding peace, consciously going into a different environment, getting out of everyday life and its contexts, ... these are all needs that we know well, for example when we feel ready for a vacation. Experiential education can offer such places of retreat in times of stress.

#### o Experiential education camps

One way is to offer grieving children a usual experiential education leisure time. There is no need for a special concept because the overall pedagogical goals also apply to this target group. Many parents and self-help groups are looking for a normal experiential educational leisure time for their children. They do not expect special grief counseling in this offer, but would like to give their children the same experiences that are available to all other children.

This way relieves providers from having to provide something special, such as grief counseling, with which they have no experience. On the other hand, it fulfills the wishes of many grieving children and adolescents, as well as their parents, to be able to participate in a standard experiential education recreation. Children and adolescents need grief-free zones where they can recover and draw strength.

We must not forget that children and adolescents who are grieving are first and foremost children and adolescents with very normal and diverse wishes, interests, dislikes and needs. They have the right to be seen as a whole person.

They need grief-free areas of their lives. Grief is only one characteristic of these children, not the only one. Current research from work with grieving adults shows that only people with complicated grief reactions need support and organized grief counseling. Unfortunately, no reliable results are yet available for children and adolescents.

Some regional groups within the Kinderkrebshilfe have already conducted and evaluated experiential education programs. The psychological institute of the Leipzig University Clinic has found the following:

*"Siblings showed sustained improvement in physical well-being, less frequent physical complaints such as sleep disturbances, abdominal pain, or dizziness;  
Less depressive moods; Higher ability to solve problems independently;  
Need for contact with each other, even after the measure.  
Above all, the parents noted improved mental well-being in their child.  
Experienced their child more joyful, less anxious and less insecure".*



o           Experiential grief counselling

There are already some grief counselors who use nature experiences, and also specifically experiential education offers.

Hikes, trips (e.g. to the desert), sailing trips, skiing trips, husky tours, City Bound actions and mountain tours are offered. You can get a detailed list if you send us an e-mail to: momani@posteo.de.

At this point we would like to introduce four different offers in a little more detail. First, a weekly program of three hours each (Lichtblicke), a monthly day program (Lacrima), weekly and vacation programs for siblings of children with cancer (Waldpiratencamp) and a mountain tour for young people with cancer (A chaun son Everest).

o           *Lichtblicke (Rays of hope)*

The meetings always start and end with the same ritual to give the children security. Our meetings are characterized by an open togetherness. A togetherness in attentiveness, a togetherness that allows time and that opens spaces. We use nature experiences, land art, games, conversations, creative and experiential educational offers.

*"Children and young people, girls and boys between the ages of three and thirteen, a woman and a man on the road in a Cologne park. That's us. We met in our room in the parish hall, around a common center with our names, candles and a cuddly troll who always has something sweet for us.*

*In the welcoming round we told each other about the last week that has passed since the last meeting. We passed stone and feather to each other and told each other about heavy and light things that made us happy, angry or sad.*

*We lit candles for those we carry with us in our hearts and also in our grief. After this ritual that begins our meeting, we go out into the sun, wind and late summer. Together we lay a sun with ropes and everyone creates a sunbeam for themselves with found objects they have collected themselves. A laughing face as a greeting to the deceased father, a garden, a grave, the own name, artistic patterns and mandalas emerge. We look at each other's works and get into conversation.*

*At the end we look at how we have been together, whether there are wishes for the next time or worries or even fear. In the following week, we look to see what is left of our sun, and this time we create pictures with clay and natural materials to take home.*

*The children's wishes are: to bring their own dog, to make a fire, to climb a tree, to build a tree house. So now the dog visit is on the agenda, tree climbing, treasure hunt and hut building..."*





o *Lacrima*

*"A foreign environment, unfamiliar situations and new demands. These things can cause anxiety. That's why it's important to learn how to deal with them. You can do this in our outdoor group. The group is our offer for young people who have lost someone through death. Together with an experienced experiential educator, we go out into the Munich countryside once a month. We want to experience nature, its possibilities, but also its limits and get to know ourselves better".*

o *Waldpiratencamp*

The Waldpiratencamp (forest pirate camp) of the Kinderkrebshilfe (children's cancer aid) is located on a 14,000 square meter property in the Heidelberg city forest. Camps are offered there for children suffering from cancer and their siblings. The topic of mourning, especially the preceding mourning, is of course omnipresent. In addition to activities in the surrounding forest or on a branch of the Rhine, there is a ropes course on the camp's own grounds. The credo is: *"We lead and accompany the children and young people through the camp days with lightness and joie de vivre. With joy and fun at work, we let cheerfulness and liveliness spill over, because we know: Courage does good!"*

o *A chaun son Everest*

The French physician and mountain guide Dr. Christine Janin enables children and young people suffering from cancer to climb their own Mount Everest. She climbs Mont Blanc with the children and young people, a goal and sense of achievement that they would no longer have believed possible.

o *Other accompaniments*

There are other target groups for experiential education programs in the environment of children and adolescents in mourning:

- Experiential education offers for families and especially for grieving parents. The divorce rate is extremely high among grieving parents and joint experiences can counteract this and set positive impulses.
- Accompanied and unaccompanied refugee children have often experienced strong grief. Since they are usually not yet able to express themselves in German, linguistic low-threshold offers, such as those possible within experiential education, are a good approach.
- The staff in hospices and palliative care units are interdisciplinary. For people from different professional cultures to work together, outdoor training is a very effective way to get along better as a team.
- In cooperation with professionals from children's hospice work, offers for children and adolescents with life-shortening illnesses are possible. Here, experience in working with children with multiple disabilities is helpful.

Contact persons for all presented paths can be found in bereavement groups, outpatient hospice services, regional groups of children's cancer support, self-help groups for life-shortening diseases, children's hospitals, hospices, children's hospices and (pediatric) palliative care units.

#### 4 The Way is the Goal

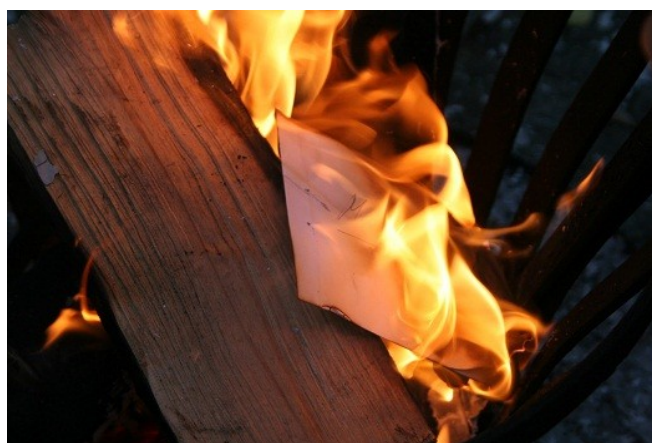
The developments of experiential education and grief education show similarities. Both developed first in Europe and were then further developed in the United States of America. History shows that offers that are carried out in the USA are also implemented in Europe with a time lag. Take, for example, the first camp for children with cancer, opened in 1988 by actor Paul Newman. In 2003, such a camp, the Waldpiratencamp of the Kinderkrebshilfe, was opened in Germany.

In 2002, the first camp for grieving children and teens was founded by baseball star Jamie Moyer and his wife Karen, Camp Erin in Everett, Washington. In the meantime, there is a camp for grieving children in almost every state in the USA, which is based on nature-based educational approaches. It is our goal to establish a similar camp for grieving children and adolescents in Germany.

We have to be very careful when we go down these paths, because there is a danger that mourning will be shunted off to institutions and professionals, who will gladly take it over. It should not be made out of business sense or a helper syndrome area-wide offers, which are so not necessary. It would also be dangerous to label children and adolescents who do not accept any organized offer and to imply that they are only repressing their grief. In the past, this label has been given lightly to some people, often to men, who process their grief silently and do not feel the need to talk about it. Current research on mourning shows that a successful mourning process can happen very differently and on its own.

In addition, we observe the discourse in trauma research, in which it is discussed whether the repetition of a stressful event in the therapies, is rather contraindicated for many people.

Grief is not a disease and we are also endowed by nature with the ability to grieve. We usually have enough resilience to integrate our grief in a healthy way. Grief paths should only be undertaken with children and adolescents who, perhaps due to a difficult grief, temporarily do not have sufficient self-healing powers.



## 5 Sources

\* This article appeared under the title "Erlebnisse in Zeiten der Trauer" (Experiences in times of grief) in the book:

**„Einsam und gemeinsam ... sich und Menschen begegnen“**

Alex Ferstl, Martin Scholz and Christiane Thiesen (Publisher), Congress Documentation, 9. International Congress „erleben und lernen“, 28.-29. September 2012 in Augsburg  
ZIEL Verlag, ISBN 978-3-940562-84-5

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[www.waldpiraten.de](http://www.waldpiraten.de)

„Summiters - Moving mountains with grieving boys“:  
<https://eric.ed.gov/?q=Hans-Georg+Renner&id=ED521230>

„Experiential Education in Children's Hospice Work“  
<https://eric.ed.gov/?q=Hans-Georg+Renner&id=ED521231>

## 6 Contact

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In Cologne (Germany) and the surrounding area, we accompany grieving children and young people in nature and lead advanced training courses in grief education. We combine many years of experience in various fields of experiential education, in children's hospice work and our own life experiences with the topic of death and dying.

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