

ALASKA NATIVE TRIBAL HEALTH CONSORTIUM

Camp Coho: Helping Alaska Native Children Grieve

When cancer strikes a family, it touches everyone. When a family member dies, few resources are available to help children understand and process their feelings of loss and grief. Alaska Native children living in small, remote Alaskan villages reachable only by airplane do not have access to cancer support resources generally available in large urban settings. In addition, few cancer support programs for children incorporate Alaska Native cultural values.

Recognizing this need, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) modeled the format of an existing grief camp for children and made culturally appropriate adaptations to meet the needs of Alaska Native children and families.

The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium Comprehensive Cancer Program developed and implemented Camp Coho, a one-day camp to help Alaska Native children better understand and share their feelings of loss and grief. The Camp provided activities based on nationally accepted standards adapted to honor Alaska Native cultures and values.

Twenty Alaska Native children (ten boys, ten girls) attended the first Camp Coho held in Anchorage on March 31, 2007. More than three-fourths of the children traveled to Anchorage from rural communities, flying several hours to attend the camp. Each child was accompanied by a parent and/or guardian.

Camp activities included:

- Art therapy, the creation of memory boxes using pictures of the loved one brought by the campers and pictures from Alaska-specific magazines.
- Healing circles, using a traditional healing circle structure with a “talking piece” (an eagle feather).
- Play activities to break up the intense sharing of loss and grief by the children.

- Grief support resources: a grief workbook, a list of cancer support resources, and items that provide comfort and encouragement to the campers, such as a fleece blanket, a gold medal, and a stuffed lion to recognize how brave each camper was for attending Camp Coho.

Each child was paired up for the day with a “Big Buddy” who also lost a loved one. The Big Buddy provided one-on-one support to the camper throughout the day’s activities.

Campers completed a post-camp evaluation. In response to one question, “What is the most important thing you learned today?” 75% of the campers indicated that they had learned:

- I am not alone.
- It is okay to cry.
- It is okay to talk about my emotions.

Parents’ feedback also indicated that Camp Coho helped the families heal and continue their grief journey. For example, one family shared that the “Message to a Loved One I Lost” activity helped them “open up and let go” of feelings they were internalizing.

Pairing culture and values, standardized education programs, and innovative partnerships to develop programs like Camp Coho brings programs to children who do not have access to standard cancer support resources.

Since the pilot of Camp Coho, an instructor “how-to” manual has been developed for use in other Alaska Native communities. The manual helps make the camp transportable. Other individuals and organizations can learn how to implement the Camp Coho model.

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