

SUCCESS STORIES

CLIMB – Support groups in East Georgia for Parents with Cancer and their Children

SUMMARY

The child and parent support groups provided children and teens who have a parent with cancer with a 6-week long program called CLIMB® (Children's Lives Include Moments of Bravery). The two-hour session each week was taught by social workers trained to help children ages 6-17 years old understand cancer and manage the stresses of having a parent with cancer. Participants were introduced to therapeutic art and play as a way to express their feelings. A concurrent parent support group was offered to teach the parents how to help their children cope when cancer is in the family. It is important to target not only children but their parents too because improving communication within a family takes effort from both sides.

Helping
children
and teens
understand
cancer



CHALLENGE

The Georgia Cancer Survivorship Workgroup Survey Results identified that survivors were seeking access to provider and community resources to support themselves and their families. The CLIMB® program is intended to meet the education and support needs of survivors and their children. According to a 2016 study, the accessibility of interventions is an important factor in reaching families affected by parental cancer.

According to recent studies, psychosocial intervention programs targeting families with cancer face a series of challenges. For many parents, it was difficult to communicate with their children about cancer because of a lack of confidence and skills. Meanwhile, children had a number of misconceptions surrounding cancer. Knowledge of cancer is not the only thing children need to cope with the emotional stress of a parent having cancer. A 2017 study showed that children need an environment where they can share different types of emotions and have their experiences normalized among peers, without feeling uncomfortable.

WHAT DID YOU THINK OF CLIMB PROGRAM?

“Thank you so much for providing the CLIMB® program. The children and I benefitted greatly from the supportive experience in our small groups. The counselors were wonderful and so helpful!”

– Parent

“Everyone was nice and friendly, as well as funny and helpful in any way they could help accommodate these classes. Please continue to have these classes because other families will also benefit from them.”

– Parent

“(The part of the CLIMB® program I liked the best was) talking to other kids and knowing that I'm not the only one with this situation.”

– Child

SOLUTION

The CLIMB® program was provided to the participants in our support group free of charge, adding no financial burden to families with parental cancer. A free meal was served before each session, which worked as an incentive for participants to show up on time for classes. Through therapeutic art like drawing and crafts, children were able to learn basic information about cancer, talk about their emotions among peers with similar experience, and realize that it is okay to feel sad or angry about their situation. By putting parents in a separate group, our trained professionals taught parents how to identify their children's emotional needs and to help them cope with stresses and fears.

RESULTS

The CLIMB® program received positive feedback from both the children and their parents. Throughout the 6-week program the cognitive, social and emotional needs of the children and teens were addressed. They developed the knowledge, vocabulary and different ways to openly express their feelings to peers and to their parents. All of the children participants agreed that the art helped them talk and they felt less alone after hearing others talk about cancer. The parent participants believed that CLIMB helped their children cope better with the parent's illness and also helped themselves worry less about communicating with their children. Feedback showed that the CLIMB® program provided through our child and parent support groups has equipped parents and children with the tools necessary to address the emotional stresses of cancer and that the program provided comfort to both the children and the parents.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This program will continue to be offered in addition to a new program called "Strong Families". "Strong families" will be a 4-week program provided to children who have a parent with late-stage cancer.

Inspired by recommendations from previous participants, we are also exploring the possibility of expanding our services to hold family movie nights for cancer survivors and their children. Families expressed the desire to spend time together having fun and relaxing in an environment with families that faced similar challenges. Movie nights among other survivor families would allow families to relieve stress and improve parent-child relationships while eliminating common barriers to family outings during cancer treatment such as long lines, personal care anxieties and countless other concerns parents in treatment face.

Sustainability for our child and parent support group will be achieved through the maintenance of collaborative relationships utilized in the CLIMB® program and the development of new partnerships in order to implement future classes and activities. We are actively seeking donors to support the costs associated with CLIMB® program, family movie nights and other activities in the future.