

PARENTING

By MICHAEL WINERIP

ON April 24, 2004, when Derek Nelson was 6, he witnessed a horrific accident. His grandfather was backing an S.U.V. out of the Nelsons' driveway and ran over Derek's 16-month-old brother, Alec, crushing the toddler to death.

Derek is, as his mother, Adriann, said, a "deep" child, and even so young, grasped the situation. "He wanted to know if Alec felt anything," recalled Ms. Nelson. She sat him down, along with his sister, Sonia, who was 3. Though Ms. Nelson is a churchgoer, she describes her own faith as shaky and questioning, but she did not let any of that into her answer.

"I said with utter conviction: 'God shows a special grace towards children. The day you're born, God knows your day, it's set in stone. God didn't arbitrarily decide. He'd picked that day and he mourns with us. I didn't want them being afraid of God. I wanted them to be confident of knowing Alec is in a place where he can't feel pain. I said, 'The angels lifted him before the car hit him.'"

That, of course, was only the beginning. Even before the funeral, Ms. Nelson, a flight attendant, and her husband, Bill, a sales engineer, contacted a bereavement therapist at the Hospice Care Network, which is based in Woodbury. Mary Gravina started seeing the children right away. "Mary became our lodestone," Ms. Nelson said. "Our attitude was, 'By God, these other ones will not be ruined by this.'"

From Derek's therapy, the Nelsons got a peek at his darker thoughts. "Derek's always been extremely careful not to burden us with his worrying," Ms. Nelson said. "In counseling, he told Mary that he doesn't want to upset us. That's why he doesn't want to say he's angry at God or angry at my father."

It was Ms. Gravina who told them of their young son's guilt feelings. The day of the accident, while Ms. Nelson was hurrying around the house preparing for their outing, Derek let Alec go outside. Derek told the therapist, "If I left Alec in the house, he'd still be alive. I opened the door."

Therapy gives parents insight into a range of feelings.

Knowing what he was thinking helped the mother. "I saw him do it," she recalled. "I told him, 'I thought you were the best brother.' We had three steps leading down, and he held Alec by both hands. So cautious. I told him, 'Alec was not happy being inside, and you were being so nice to him.' I thought, 'What a great brother.' And I tell him, 'You're a great brother.'"

It's been three years, and the parents and therapist say Derek, now a fifth grader, is doing well. He's a good student, plays soccer and from his mother has learned to speak Italian fluently. "He's a

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Helping Hand for Children Mourning Death of Loved One

wonderful, well-adjusted boy," Ms. Nelson said. "He was just elected captain of the school safety squad." Students were picked based on essays they wrote. "I think he wrote about his brother situation," she said. "He won't tell me." Which is why she keeps a close watch. "When I see he's being different, I'll say, 'Do you want to see Mary?'"

Therapy has taken three forms: one on one; group; and Derek's favorite, a daylong camp program that the hospice runs each fall for children. This year's theme was Dr. Seuss. Ms. Gravina, who is Hospice Care's counseling director, spent a recent Saturday dressed as the Cat in the Hat. There were 52 children, from ages 6 to 12, who had all lost someone: 21 dads; 11 moms; 9 brothers; 4 sisters; 6 grandparents; 1 cousin.

Instead of the Cat in the Hat's cleanup machine, the hospice Cat built a Grief Picker-Upper. ("This grief thing's not good/not one little speck/Just look what it's done/Our world is a wreck.")

There were crafts projects, games and a scavenger hunt through woods and fields, which from a distance looked like an ordinary camp activity, but viewed close up was more. The hunt took them through Confused Court, Lonely Lane and, most dangerous, Keep It to Yourself Boulevard.

Derek spent the day with Daniel Michaels, 8. The boys and their families live near each other and have grown close through the hospice. On July 30, 2004, Daniel, his twin brother, Justin, their sister, Toni Ann, and several other children were waiting for a bus home from a day camp in Dix Hills when, with no warning, a 700-pound cherry tree branch snapped and fell, killing Justin.

"I was sitting next to him," Daniel told Ms. Gravina.

After reading "There's a Wocket in My Pocket," a Dr. Seuss book about made-up words, Ms. Gravina had them create their own word that described how they felt on the day their special



ONLINE: COPING WITH LOSS

An audio slide show about therapy for bereaved children is available at www.nytimes.com/intheregion.

person died. "Sometimes feelings are so large, we don't have a name for it," she said. "I want you to make up a name."

Derek's was "evsema," which, he explained, was a mix of guilt, anger and fear. At home, Derek's mother says, his love toward his grandfather is unchanged, but at the hospice, he was a little more evsema when Ms. Gravina asked. "Well, I was sort of thinking it was his fault," said Derek, "but God had down Alec's death in his book, so it's not really his fault, but I'm still angry at him."

Ms. Gravina pointed out that even best friends get angry at each other.

And God? "I'm thinking that God watches over us, and no one else is going to die, because he wouldn't do that," Derek said.

"Do you worry someone else could die?" Ms. Gravina asked.

"I do," Derek said.

Daniel's word was "zafot,"

GRIEF CAMP

Mary Gravina, of the Hospice Care Network, at a daylong grief camp for children. Among the 52 children who attended was Derek Nelson, left, whose 16-month-old brother died in 2004.

which, he said, meant "a lot of sadness and a lot of madness."

Ms. Gravina asked about the day of the accident. Had he realized that his twin's body had stopped working? "I didn't think he would be alive," Daniel said. "There was blood all over his body."

Daniel's mother, Tina Michaels, says the hospice is the only place he'll talk about it. "He won't talk to me about that day," she said. "As much as we try to let him know it's O.K., he tries to protect us."

Both families have worked in their own ways to heal. The Nelsons have raised money for a playground named after Alec. They successfully lobbied for a county law that mandates the distribution of auto-safety information — including backing-up precautions. Since Alec's death, they have had two more children — Heidi, 2, and Anniika, 4 months.

The Michaelses have created rituals to remember Justin. A month after his death the family was driving home from a cemetery visit. Daniel was 5 and Toni Ann was 8. "Daniel had this brainstorm," Ms. Michaels recalled. "He said: 'I got it! If we crash the van right now, we can all go to heaven to see Justin.' Toni Ann said, 'No, we can't.' Daniel said, 'We can see him, we can be with him.' I said: 'It's not a possible thing. We don't return once we get there.'"

Ever since, the Michaelses buy a dozen balloons on the twins' birthday. "We all write notes on the balloons and send them to heaven," Ms. Michaels said. "We all watch until we can't see them anymore, then we know he has them."