Combining Bereavement and Therapeutic Recreation to Support Families who have Lost a Child to Serious Illness: The Barretstown Bereavement Programme

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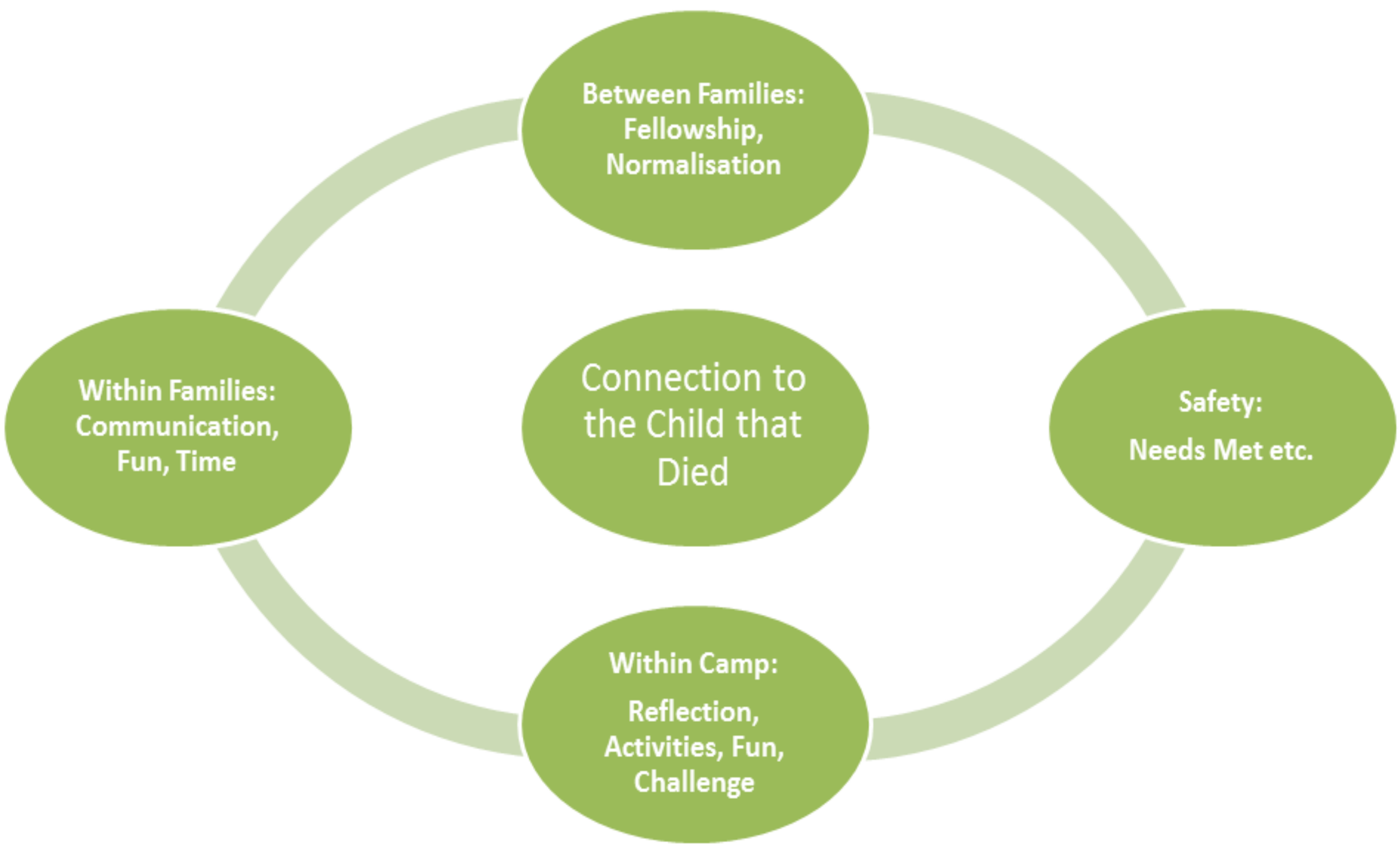
INTRODUCTION

- The aim of this paper is to describe and discuss a supportive intervention for families who have lost a child to serious illness including cancer.
- The intervention combines the principles of therapeutic recreation (TR) and bereavement support (based on Continuing Bonds & the Narrative Approach).
- The programme is delivered by Barretstown in Ireland (see www.Barretstown.org).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

- This action research study included three main components:
  - a documentary analysis (with researcher reflection),
  - a mixed methods exploration of parents' experiences of the programme (n = 19),
  - a qualitative study of staff views of the programme (n = 6).
- Data collection included interviews and observation, with thematic analysis used to identify key themes evident in the data.
- Central to the presentation of the findings was the integration and identification of higher level themes across the elements of the study. The model below represents the higher level themes identified in the analysis.

THE MODEL OF THE PROGRAMME AS EVIDENT IN THE RESEARCH DATA



SAMPLE QUOTES

- *"knowing there are others out there dealing with their own but similar pain [was important]"*
- *"[The programme] provided a time and space where we were able to focus on our daughter completely"*
- *"as a family we were able to get together and it was absolutely invaluable"*
- *" evening [activity] was a good thing after reflections as it helped to relax things"*
- *"[We could] measure the progress and recovery of the family in a completely safe and non judgemental environment"*
- *"I suppose [the programme] gave me the permission to smile and laugh again even through grieving… I have learnt to feel comfortable with myself and say to myself that it is ok also to feel happiness"*

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

•The intervention model creates fellowship and shared experience between families, addressing isolation through normalisation .
•Within family units, the programme provides a place to come together as a family, to communication and to have fun.
•It creates a setting where children can be remembered and celebrated, reaffirming the connection to the child.
•The residential nature appears to create a safe space and allows families to reconnect with their child and each other.

•The study captures parents' and professionals' thoughts on the supports needed by this group.
•This model has potential to support families who have had a child die from serious illness.
•A key challenge is the ability to extend the learning from this research to other applied settings

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