

Retreat brings joy to cancer patients' kids

■ **BY YEO SAM JO**

TO HELP children cope with a parent's illness, a group of students from Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School and NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine organised Camp Simba, a two-day retreat specifically for children of cancer patients.

Young children may have problems dealing with the idea of death and could also feel neglected.

Without an outlet, they could become attention-seeking or increasingly withdrawn, which could in turn lead to strained relationships and a loss of focus at school.

Last weekend's inaugural event at Sentosa's Costa Sands Resort encouraged its 25 participants – aged seven to 15 – to have fun and interact with their peers who shared similar experiences.

Several had already lost their parents to cancer, said Ms Sally Ong, 24, co-chairman of the organising committee, and could do with a support network. "It was important for them to know that they are not alone," she added.

This approach is crucial, especially with the focus being usually on patients, said Ms Ong, a first-year student at Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School. "Many don't realise that those around them are also affected, and it is just as important to reach out to them."

The project was inspired by two others, namely HCA Hospice Care's annual Camp Encourage for children of terminally ill patients, and Camp Kesem, a similar one in the United States.

Planning for Camp Simba began last October.

For a \$10 registration fee, children got to experience a holiday-style programme which included beach games and picnics, as well as Sentosa's attractions, such as the Luge and Songs Of The Sea.

Ms Niki Goh, head of psychosocial services at HCA, said such activities were significant.

"This is a good opportunity for them to just be kids. You can see the glow on their faces," she said. "It has really helped them to come out of their shells."

The organisers are planning a second gathering later this month. Depending on feedback, Camp Simba might return next year.

Ms Ong said: "Many of the children asked us if we were going to take them out again...we certainly hope so."