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Helping Children When Someone They Know Has Cancer

When children learn that someone they know has cancer, it can be upsetting and confusing for them. Here we will try to help you understand what children might be thinking and feeling, how to talk to them, and share some ideas on how you may be able to help them through this time.

- [Explaining Cancer to Children of Different Ages](#)
- [Telling a Child Someone They Love Has Cancer](#)
- [Helping a Child Cope When Someone They Know Has Cancer](#)

Explaining Cancer to Children of Different Ages

Children of different ages will understand a cancer diagnosis differently. Here are a few things to help you explain what is happening and comfort them.

[Talking to children up to age 3](#)

[Talking to children ages 4 to 6](#)

[Talking to children ages 7 to 12](#)

[Talking to teens](#)

Talking to children up to age 3

These children have a hard time understanding what they can't see or touch. They also have a hard time understanding what causes the illness and what to expect right away and in the future. Here are some things you can do that might be helpful in comforting them and keeping their lives as normal as possible.

Children of this age are most afraid of separation and feeling abandoned, especially if it's a parent who has cancer. If there is a change to their routine, babies and toddlers might get easily confused, become more clingy, and might have changes to their usual sleeping, eating, or other daily habits.

- Keep the baby or child near the parents or a trusted adult who is a regular part of the child's life, if possible.
- If a parent must be in the hospital, caregivers can use video, phone, and other means so the child can see and hear their parent in real time.
- Ensure that anyone caring for the child tries as much as possible to keep the child's routine.
- Explain things in the simplest way possible. Focus more on what is happening at the time, for example, today, rather than what will happen in the future.
- Offer frequent reassurance to toddlers if a parent is away for short times that Mommy or Daddy will soon be back.
- Cuddle and hug them often.
- If you are a parent with cancer, talk with the team social worker or nurse about your own emotions in dealing with your child's distress.

Talking to children ages 4 to 6

Children in this age group might struggle to understand the complexity of a cancer diagnosis. They might think of being sick as having a cough or cold and might be confused and think that they can also "catch" cancer .

If it's the parent who has been diagnosed with cancer, a child this age will likely show more fear and anxiety when away from them .

In times of distress, children at this age might regress (go back to behaviors they have already outgrown, like being toilet-trained). They might also have changes in sleeping patterns and have temper tantrums.

- Keep communication about the loved one's cancer simple and clear.
- Try to stick to the child's usual routine as much as possible.
- Reassure the child that they will always be cared for, especially if it is the parent that has been diagnosed with cancer.
- Reassure the child that cancer is not contagious.
- Check on the child's understanding of what's happening. Remember that the child may be able to say back to you what they heard the first time or so, but this doesn't mean they understand it.
- Arrange for reliable daily care if it is a parent with the cancer diagnosis.
- Have a parent or trusted adult who is a regular part of the child's life spend time with the child daily, if possible.
- Reassure children that the loved one's distress and sadness is because of the cancer, not anything they've done; and that the family will get through this difficult time.
- Use play and artwork to explain what is happening, if you can and encourage the child to play out what's going on. That way, you can see what the child understands..
- Set up a consistent time each day, like bedtime, when the child can ask questions and share feelings.
- Do not try to convince your child using reason or logic.
- Offer choices when possible (for example in clothes, food, or activities).
- Do not tolerate biting, hitting, kicking, or other aggressive behavior. Teach your child how to express feelings in healthy ways (that don't hurt the child or other people).
- Teach acceptable expressions of angry feelings such as talking, drawing, or pounding a pillow.
- Create opportunities for physical activity.

- If a parent is in the hospital, caregivers can use video, phone, and other means so the child can see and hear their parent in real time. Arrange in-person visits when possible.
- Arrange for one family member or trusted friend to take a special interest in each child.
- Consult with the child's health care team about any concerns or changes in the child's behavior.

Talking to children ages 7 to 12

At this age, children are more likely to have a better understanding of cancer. They might also understand the concept of time better and be able to anticipate the future.

Children of this age might have a hard time telling an adult about any distress they are experiencing and might be afraid that what they say might upset loved ones.

- Tell the child about the illness and keep them up to date about the parent's treatment and be sure to explain what the child sees and hears. Be prepared to repeat the explanation.
- For older children, more detail about the cancer can be given, as appropriate. Try not to overwhelm them with information, but be open and honest in answering any questions they might have.
- Listen for unasked questions, especially about the child's own health and well-being.
- If it's a parent that has cancer, tell the child's teachers, coaches, and other school staff about the family's cancer situation.
- Support the child's having fun, despite the parent's illness – make sure they don't feel guilty about it. It's OK to still be a kid!
- Plan for daily time with a parent or trusted adult who is a regular part of the child's life.
- Give the children permission to ask you questions and express feelings that they think might upset others.
- It's OK for the child to see the parent cry or be angry if the child understands that they're not to blame for these feelings. Try to help them understand that it's normal to have strong feelings and it's good to express them.
- If it's the parent that has cancer, suggest the child write or phone, and send drawings, text messages, or voice messages to the parent when the parent is away.

- Ask one family member or trusted friend to take a special interest in the child.
- If the child shows severe anxiety, is afraid to go to school, blames himself, acts depressed, or shows low self-esteem, talk to the child's health care team.
- Help the child stay involved in after school activities and sports and keep them in contact with friends. Remind the child that it's OK to still have fun.

Talking to teens

At this age, they can understand the complexities of a cancer diagnosis and treatment more. They also have a better understanding of how the cancer diagnosis can affect a loved one's future, and because of that, they can worry more. Teenagers are highly influenced by their friends and are developing their own identity so this can impact how they look at a cancer diagnosis, especially if it's a parent who has been diagnosed.

Teenagers experiencing distress might act out, withdraw from friends and family, and feel overwhelmed. Reassure them that it is OK to have these feelings and encourage them to learn how to respond and cope in healthy ways. Teenagers may try to protect parents by hiding their sadness, anger, or fears, so it's important to check in with them regularly. They might also ask fewer questions and turn to the internet, social media, or friends as sources of information. They might also try to find ways to help their loved one.

- Give detailed information about the parent's condition, symptoms, possible side effects of treatment, what they might expect, and other information, if they're interested.
- Keep open lines of communication and let them know they can talk to you at any time and ask any questions. Be honest and open when communicating with them.
- Keep the teen up to date with what's happening with the parent's treatment. Answer all questions honestly.
- Find out if the cancer center has a special group for teens with cancer in the family and encourage them to be a part of such available groups.
- Reassure them that cancer is not contagious.
- Assure them that nothing they did or said caused the cancer.
- If it's a parent who has cancer, tell the teen's teachers, coaches, and other school staff about the family situation.
- Encourage sharing of feelings and talk about what's normal.
- Arrange to keep a normal daily life at home, as close to the usual routine as possible. Offer choices and promote independence as appropriate.

- If it's a parent who has cancer, let the teen help choose where to go after school and have a voice in whose care they prefer when a parent can't be there, when possible.
- Encourage teens to keep up their usual involvement in school and other activities.
- Be sure that the teen knows parents are aware that having fun and spending time with friends are important parts of their lives, so there's no need to feel guilty about it.
- Teens can step up to the plate and help with some tasks at home, such as cooking meals. You don't want the teen to be overwhelmed but helping is part of becoming an adult. Be sure you balance what you ask of the teen with their needs. If you realize they're doing too much, talk with the cancer care team about your family situation and see if you can get other help.
- Check in with your teens often and let them know that everyone has feelings that can be confusing and overwhelming. Tell the teen it's OK to ask you questions and express feelings that they think might upset others.
- Address feelings of anger and frustration (even if they are unspoken).
- Be willing to tolerate some reluctance to share thoughts and feelings.
- Encourage your teen to keep a journal or log.
- Ask a relative or trusted friend to take a special interest in each teen.

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Telling a Child Someone They Love Has Cancer

Children will likely be upset when they learn that a family member or someone they know has cancer. When the person with cancer is a [sibling](#)¹, the child might feel even more stress and anxiety. Some parents might want to protect their children from fear, or they might be afraid that their children will worry more if they are told.

Children can usually see that others are acting differently and sense that something is wrong. If they think something important is being kept from them, they might feel confused and afraid. Some kids will even look for ways to listen without being noticed. When they overhear these conversations, they might worry more, and even feel more confused and afraid.

- Be honest and open
- Use words they will understand
- Find a balance between too much information and too little
- Explain the physical changes they might see
- Explain cancer is a serious illness
- Let them ask questions and express their feelings
- Children might blame themselves

Be honest and open

It is important to be honest and open with children. If they think something important is being kept from them, children might feel confused and afraid. Some kids will even look for ways to listen without being noticed and what they overhear might make them worry more.

Use words they will understand

Children need to know enough to be prepared for what's about to happen and how it will affect them. Younger children usually need less detail than older kids. However, if it is someone in the family, most kids of all ages need to know these basics:

- The type of cancer (for example, colon cancer or lymphoma)
- Where the cancer is in the body
- What will happen with treatment?
- How treatment might change how the person looks and feels
- How their lives are expected to be changed by the cancer and its treatment

Find a balance between too much information and too little

How much children are told depends on things like the child's age, personality, and ability to understand the information without being overwhelmed. The goal is to tell the truth in such a way that children can understand and prepare themselves for the changes that will happen. Consider using a children or teen's book about cancer to guide discussion. Your local librarian might be able to help you find one. It might be helpful to give children information in little bits and periodically check in with them to see if they understand the information or have any questions.

Explain the physical changes they might see

Cancer can be a difficult secret to keep. **Once treatment starts, the child may see side effects like tiredness, weight changes, hair loss, or vomiting.** Seeing these physical changes can be scary for a child.

- They see that their loved one is sick and might assume that he or she is going to die.
- They may think that others in the family will get the same illness, or the child might fear they will catch the illness.
- They may think that life as they know it will end.

Not knowing what's happening or how to cope with it can be terrifying to a child. To help avoid this, children need to be told about the illness. They should know in advance the kinds of side effects that cancer treatment might cause and the ways their daily lives and how the family works together may change. Reassure children that it is OK to feel angry, scared, or anxious, and that it is important to talk about these feelings with a trusted adult.

Explain cancer is a serious illness

When telling a child that a someone they love has cancer, it is important to talk about the difference between being sick with a non-serious illness (like the common cold or a headache) and a serious disease which could be incurable and lead to death (like cancer). It is important to give them information about the cancer and what to expect in a way that is appropriate for their ages.

Let them ask questions and express their feelings

Speaking truthfully builds trust and gives the child a chance to adjust to changes. Telling the truth is especially important with teens. Levels of anxiety in children who are told about a loved one's cancer diagnosis have been found to be lower than in those who are not told. It is also important to give children space and time to ask questions and express their feelings. This will help them understand what's going on and help them worry less.

When telling children about a cancer diagnosis, it is helpful to let them know that in the future, the family member or loved will be letting the child know if anything changes (for example: a different treatment which affects the family schedule, when treatment is over and how it worked, or if cancer treatment is stopped). Tell the child they can call a family meeting or just ask questions at anytime during treatment. A parent can also plan quiet times to check in with the children and ask if they have questions or concerns. A nurse, counselor, clergy, or social worker can be asked to help plan these talks or to find out how to best support the child.

Children of different ages will have different concerns. For example, teens, who are testing their independence and limits, will have very different concerns from a 5-year-old who needs parents for basic caregiving. Young children (up to 8 years old) might not need a lot of detailed information like older children (8 to 12 years) or teens.

First, set up a quiet time when you won't be disturbed. You might talk to each child alone so that information can be tailored to each child's age and understanding. Be sure you have time to answer questions and let your child express their feelings.

Choose a time when you are feeling calm to talk to children. If you are feeling upset or unsure about what to say, it might be better to wait until your emotions are a bit more controlled. You might want to write down what you think you want to say before you talk with each child. It might help to have another trusted adult, like the other parent, or a trusted friend or relative present.

- Think about what you want to say and how to answer questions on a level each child can understand, but in a serious and thoughtful way.
- Children are perceptive. They may have noted changes in you and suspect something is wrong. They may have pieces of information, so it is important to ask the child what they know about the loved one's illness to help see what they understand.
- It is also helpful to ask the child if they have ever heard of or known anyone else who has had cancer. If the person the child knew with cancer had a different experience or result of cancer treatment, explain this experience might be different.

- For all children, especially younger ones, it is best to give out information in small doses and periodically ask them if they have questions, and then answer the questions.
- If you are unsure about treatment outcome (prognosis), telling the child in stages may be helpful. The first stage could cover telling the child about the cancer and the planned treatment. During this talk, the child could be told “we are not sure how well this treatment will work, but we will let you know how it is going.”
- Think of possible questions they may ask ahead of time, and you will be less likely to be caught off guard. When questions arise, answer them honestly, but don’t feel like you must have all the answers right away. Try to lay the groundwork for an open line of communication with the child—a way for the child to come to you with their concerns, needs, and fears. Assure them they will not upset you by asking questions.
- Plan to check in with each child regularly before, during, and after cancer treatment. This can be a great comfort to them.
- If a parent or loved one is sharing this information with the child alone without another trusted adult present, suggest to the child someone they can talk to in the future if questions arise.
- When checking in with a child, avoid general questions like “How are you?” Ask more specific questions like, “What is it like for you when I don’t spend as much time with you?”

Children might blame themselves

Besides the illness itself, children can have other worries about the cancer. A common worry that children have is that something they did or didn’t do might have caused a parent’s or loved one’s illness. Reassure children that they couldn’t cause the cancer.

Children of certain ages, like teenagers, might benefit from joining a support group and /or talking to other trusted adults. There are local and national camps or support groups for children whose parents have a cancer diagnosis. [Camp Kesem²](#) is a national camp that has local chapters. Other support groups might also be available in your area.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/childhood-cancer/helping-siblings.html

2. kesem.org

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Helping a Child Cope When Someone They Know Has Cancer

How children react

Provide reassurance

Keep to routines as much as possible

Reduce stress and family tension as much as possible

If treatment side effects embarrass or upset your child

Share information with other people in your child's life

Find a network of support

Recognize the signs your child might need extra help

Be honest

How children react

A child's emotional reaction to the news that someone they know has cancer will depend on many things, including their age, relationship to the person, how the information is given to them, and their experience with illness. For example, if they know someone who has died from cancer, they might think that the same thing will happen again. It is important to be as honest as possible when talking to children, and to encourage them to talk about and express their feelings. When thinking about how a child might react, it is important to remember:

- Children can't always tell you in words but may show you how they feel. You might notice your child being more dependent, worrying more, or acting out of character. They might also express themselves through drawing, coloring, or playing.
- Children might regress (act younger) when they are under stress. For example, a child who had just become toilet trained might start having accidents. Some children might begin to have separation anxiety or difficulty paying attention in school.
- Children might worry about their loved one dying. Be honest and let them know that sometimes people do die from cancer and while there is no way to know what's going to happen, let the child know about the outlook of the person's cancer in a way that is appropriate for their age, and let them know that if you find out something new or different, you will let them know. This does not mean that parents should tell their kids everything they know as soon as they know it. It means that children should be given truthful information when they need it to cope well from day to day.

Provide reassurance

When someone is first diagnosed with cancer, the outlook of the cancer and its treatment may not fully be known. Still, it is important to offer a child some level of reassurance. You can assure the child that no matter what happens, they will always be cared for. This is especially important if the person with cancer is the parent of the child. If you have a plan, you may choose to share it with your child.

Children in some family structures may need extra reassurance:

- Children of **divorced parents** may have more complicated feelings. If they have already lived through their parents break-up and no longer live full-time with a

parent they feel close to, their grief over a parent's cancer can be worsened. If the other parent has a close relationship with the child, extra visits might be helpful to reassure children that their parents still love them.

- For children in a **single parent home** who have already lost a parent, a cancer diagnosis in the surviving parent can cause the children to be especially anxious and uncertain of the future. They may also wonder if their parent will die from the cancer. It is important to keep open lines of communication, to check in frequently with the children, and get extra help as needed.
- **Parents who never married** might have problems with certain legal and financial arrangements, but children still need to feel safe. Sharing back-up plans with the children, and making needed legal arrangements, will let them know their parent(s) are thinking of their care and safety.
- In a family that includes **lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ+) or gender nonconforming (GNC) parents**, children might feel more different or isolated from their peers when faced with stressful events like a parent's illness.
- **Adopted children** often face questions about themselves as they grow up and try to figure out who they are. They may or may not know who their biological or birth parents are. A parent's cancer diagnosis, whether the parent is their adoptive parent or birth parent, may make adopted children feel less secure. They may need special assurance that they will be cared for if anything should happen to an adoptive parent or birth parent. This is especially true if they are in an adoptive one-parent household.
- **Foster children** might deal with feelings of not belonging and instability, especially if they have lived in multiple foster homes. A foster parent's cancer diagnosis may make them feel less secure and stable, and could bring up feelings of anxiety or other negative emotions they may have had previously. These children may need special assurance that they are loved and will still be taken care of, and that their needs will continue to be met.

Keep in mind that there are many kinds of families, and in some of them, children may already feel different from their peers. Children of any age may experience bias toward adoptive, foster, LGBTQ+, single-or one-parent, or blended families. They may also experience bias if they don't live with their parent(s) and live with a grandparent, relative, or guardian who fills the parental role. Adding a cancer diagnosis to the mix may make a child feel even more different and more isolated from their peers.

In many communities, there are support programs with counselors or therapists who are familiar with the unique needs of non-traditional families. Other special support groups may be available either in your area or online. If you don't know about these resources, ask your cancer care team what's available in case you need help.

Keep to routines as much as possible

In cases where the child lives with the loved one who has been diagnosed with cancer, the child's routine and way of life should be kept as close to normal as possible. Children, especially young ones, thrive on routine and predictability. This helps increase their sense of safety and security. If certain changes are expected to the household's routine, help the children cope better by communicating to them in advance what to expect. For example, if a parent has cancer, the parent might seek help from a neighbor, friend, or another family member to help take the children to and from school, afterschool or activities like sports.

Although it's important to avoid putting too much responsibility on children at this time, some children, especially teenagers, might want to help or contribute to the household more. Younger children might want to help too. It is important to let children help without overburdening them. Have open and constant communication about how things are going for them and what they feel should be different or stay the same.

Reduce stress and family tension as much as possible

If there are communication or other problems between parents, this can add to a child's stress. This may often be the case for parents who are separated or divorced. If needed, parents should ask someone to help resolve the problems out of sight and away from the stressed child. Otherwise, tension will make it harder for the whole family to get through a cancer crisis.

Sometimes, especially if there is no other adult in the home, a parent will turn to their child for emotional support. This is not usually healthy for the child, but it can still happen. With a serious illness like cancer, the chance of reversing roles, or trying to do so, with children is very real. The parent likely needs more help running the household and more emotional support. Children may start taking on more responsibility, and it's important to question whether that responsibility is healthy for their age and stage of development. Single parents can set up and maintain a network of friends and relatives who can be called on for emotional and practical support. Usually, when a parent is aware that they might rely too much on their children, they can help guard against it happening.

If treatment side effects embarrass or upset your child

Children are going to react to the physical changes treatment causes. Trying to prepare them can help, but it can still be a shock. The way you react will affect the way they do. Remind them about the purpose of the treatment.

Children also can be sensitive to the way others react, especially their peers, who can be curious about what's happening. This may be harder for teens than for younger children, because teens tend to think constantly about appearance and are concerned about looking foolish or being different. A little advance warning might make it easier for them to accept changes in how you look. Talk to them about what they can say if their friends start asking questions about your health.

Share information with other people in your child's life

Parents can choose to share some information about their cancer diagnosis and treatment with their child's school. Be sure to tell the child you plan to do this beforehand to give them a chance to offer their thoughts and prepare. If you choose to do so, talk to your child's teacher or guidance counselor. You don't have to tell them

everything about your illness, just enough to help them understand what your child is going through. If your child is having trouble, school staff will probably notice changes in them and having some information will help them help the child.

It is probably a good idea to have a talk with the child about what to share on social media about the parent's cancer diagnosis. You might also prepare your children for people's questions about their parent's illness that they don't want to answer and rehearse with them that they might say. Questions about a parent's cancer can make kids uncomfortable if they're not ready for them.

If kids at school ask about the cancer, here are some ways that your children can respond to questions they'd rather not answer:

- Maybe you can ask the teacher or the nurse about that.
- Thanks for asking, but it's kind of hard to talk about this at school.
- I don't know the answer to that question.

If adults or family friends, ask about the cancer:

- Thanks for asking, but I'm not sure how to answer that.
- You might want to ask Mom or Dad (or name another adult family member).
- I don't know the answer to that question.

Find a network of support

Access to a good support network can make a difference in how the families and children cope. If a supportive network doesn't exist, talk to a nurse, social worker, chaplain or clergy member, or case manager about available resources. It might also be helpful to access community-based mentors like school counselors, teachers, coaches, scout leaders, or even trusted friends and neighbors.

Recognize the signs your child might need extra help

Some children might have more trouble than others coping with the news that a loved one has cancer. Extra help, most times professional help, might be needed if a child:

- Is unable to handle the feelings of sadness
- Feels sad all the time
- Cannot be comforted
- Admits to thinking of suicide or of hurting themselves
- Feels extra irritable
- Becomes very angry very quickly
- Has declining grades
- Withdraws or isolates themselves
- Acts very differently from usual
- Has appetite changes
- Has low energy
- Shows less interest in activities
- Has trouble concentrating
- Cries more than usual
- Has trouble sleeping

You might find it useful to talk with the child's health care team, school counselor, a child psychologist or psychiatrist, social worker, or counseling staff at the hospital where the family member is being treated. Get help immediately if a child admits to thinking of suicide or hurting themselves.

Be honest

Parenting while facing cancer is a challenge. It is a worthy but challenging effort to remain honest with your children about your health. Telling children what is going on is stressful but can also ease your burden. Telling children the truth helps reduce your concerns about them getting false information from someone else. Having a counselor to speak with them can be helpful. Your provider, nurse, or social worker can offer information about where to find this counseling.

If you are having a hard time keeping up with the usual parenting duties or coping with changes, speaking with a counselor or social worker might help. They might also be able to help you identify resources that can be useful for you and your family.

[Financial challenges](#)¹ also are common when faced with a cancer diagnosis. Ask your health care team, including your social worker, if there are any resources that might be helpful for your situation.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/financial-insurance-matters/managing-costs.html

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