

# Talking with your children about cancer

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**Parents' thoughts often go first to their children when they receive a diagnosis of cancer.** They are filled with many anxiety-provoking questions:

- How do I tell them about my diagnosis?
- What if they ask me difficult questions like whether I might die?
- How will this change my relationship with my children?
- Will my children be okay?

Though your child's personality and your relationship with your child will inform the most effective way to communicate with your child, the following *general suggestions* are important to consider:

- **Communication is very important.** How much and how you communicate will vary depending on your child's age, personality and level of functioning.
  - However, children who are NOT told about their parent's diagnosis and need for treatment often find out on their own, which can 1) break the trust between parent and child, and 2) cause children to imagine the worse possible scenario or come up with ideas that are not true (like that they can "catch" cancer).
- A guiding principle when communicating with your children is to **tell the truth in a way the child can understand** and prepare him/her for the changes that will occur in the family. 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 in order to cope well from day to day.
- **Children should, at the minimum, be told:**
  - 1) The name of the cancer
  - 2) The part of the body affected
  - 3) What the treatment plan is, and
  - 4) How their lives will be affected
- **What you tell children** and how they think about cancer is usually **based on age**:
  - **Young children, up to age 8, often do not need a lot of detailed information.** They can be given basic information about cancer by saying something like, "*The body is made up of a lot of different parts. When someone has cancer, it means that something has gone wrong with one of these parts and it's stopped doing what it's supposed to do. Part of the body is no longer normal. Over time, a tumor (a bunch of bad cells) started to grow that should not be there. Cancer can spread and grow into other parts of a person's body, so the person needs treatment to either take out the tumor or stop the bad cells from spreading to other places.*"
  - Children, especially younger children, may worry that **they did something to cause the cancer** and, in turn, feel guilty. This is often called "magical thinking;" kids believe they are the center of the world and that they have the ability to make all sorts of things happen. You can reassure kids by saying something like, "*The doctors have told us that no one can cause someone else to get cancer—it's nothing that any of us made happen.*" It's better not to wait to see if children bring this up because they could be feeling guilty without saying so.
  - Children may worry that **cancer is contagious**. Parents can explain that cancer is different from a cold and it can't be passed from one person to another.

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- **Older children may want more information** or may want to see pictures/read about cancer.
- Whatever the age of your child, **encourage him/her to ask questions.**
- Along with the basic information, it is usually helpful to tell children:
  - 1) No one caused the parent to get cancer. (It's not the child's fault.)
  - 2) You can't catch cancer like a cold or the flu—it's OK to hug or kiss the person with cancer.
  - 3) The family will work together to cope with cancer and its treatment.
  - 4) The children are loved and will be taken care of while the parent is sick.
- Often, parents worry that their child **will ask if the parent is going to die** or how to talk to the child about death. What you say depends on the child's age and what they understand about your cancer and treatment. **There is no "right" or specific way to talk with your child.** Below are a few examples of things you may say:
  - *Sometimes people do die from cancer. I'm not expecting that to happen because the doctors have told me they have very good treatments these days, and my type of cancer usually does get better with treatment.*
  - *The doctors have told me that my chances of being cured (the cancer going away) are very good. I'll tell you if I find out anything new or different.*
  - *There's no way to know right now what's going to happen. I'll know more after this treatment is finished. When I know more, I'll be sure to tell you.*
  - *Right now there's not a lot known about the kind of cancer I have. But I'm going to give it my best shot and do everything I can to get well.*
  - *My cancer is a hard one to treat but I'm going to do everything I can to get better. No one can know right now what will happen down the road. What you can be sure of is that I'll be honest with you about what's going on. If you are worried, please tell me so that we can work on that together.*
- **Connect children with good sources of adult support**, such as family members, school counselors, and teachers who can provide ongoing support.
- **Maintain children's routines as much as possible.** Routines help kids feel safe. Whenever possible, try to keep children in the same school, and try hard to find a way to keep them involved in the extra-curricular activities that matter to them.
- **Regularly ask your child how he/she is doing:** It can be helpful to try and establish open and regular communication with your child so that he/she feels comfortable coming to you with questions or concerns. Regularly "checking in" with your child may be comforting to him/her.
- **Set time aside each day to spend quality time with your child.** If you are hospitalized, this may be accomplished by phone or a computer program (such as Skype) that allows you to see each other.