

Helping Children Understand Cancer: Talking to Your Kids About Your Diagnosis

Your cancer diagnosis has a profound impact on your entire family. There is new information to learn. There are treatment decisions to make. And if you have children, you're probably also concerned about how much to tell them about your diagnosis and what you are going through.

Q What kind of information do I need to give my children so that they feel comfortable and secure?

A The best thing you can do for you children during this difficult time is to talk to them about cancer and help them with their feelings.



Here are CancerCare's 10 tips for communicating with your children:

- 1. Give your children accurate, age-appropriate information about cancer.** Don't be afraid to use the word "cancer." Tell or show them where the cancer is in the body. Practice your explanation beforehand so you feel more comfortable. Remember that if you don't talk to your kids about cancer, they may invent their own explanations, which can be even more frightening than the facts.
- 2. Explain the treatment plan and how it will affect their lives.** Prepare your children for any physical changes you might go through during treatment (for instance, hair loss, extreme tiredness, weight loss). Let your children know that their needs will continue to be taken care of (for example, "Daddy will take you to soccer practice instead of Mom for a while.")
- 3. Answer your children's questions as accurately as possible.** Take into account their age and prior experience with serious illness in the family. If you do not know the answer to a question, don't panic. It's okay to say, "I don't know. I will try to find out the answer and let you know."
- 4. Reassure your children.** Explain to them that no matter how they have been behaving or what they've been thinking, they did not do anything to cause the cancer. Let your children know that they cannot "catch" cancer like they can catch a cold.
- 5. Let them know they can turn to other members of your support system, too.** These people include your spouse or partner, relatives, friends, clergy, teachers, coaches, and members of your health care team. Let your children know that they can ask questions of these adults and talk to them about their feelings.
- 6. Allow your children to participate in your care.** Give them age-appropriate tasks such as bringing you a glass of water or an extra blanket.

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7. **Encourage your children to express their feelings.** Let them know that they can express any feelings, even those that are uncomfortable. Let them know, too, that it's okay to say, "I don't feel like talking right now," if that is the case.
8. **Reassure your children that they will be cared for.** Let them know that even if you can't always provide the care directly, their needs are important and will be taken care of.
9. **To the extent possible, make communicating with your children a priority.** Cancer treatments may leave you with less energy, but make every effort to really listen to your children. This will show them how much you love them, and help them to feel comfortable coming to you with their concerns in the future.
10. **As always, show your children a lot of love and affection.** Let them know that although things are different now, your love for them has not changed.

Talking About Feelings

Children have many different reactions when they learn a parent or relative has cancer. They can be afraid or confused, or feel guilty or angry.

Let your children know that ...

...feelings are never wrong.

...whatever they are feeling is okay and normal.

...it is even normal to feel one way one day and another way the next.

Tell your children that you, too, have a wide range of feelings.



When helping your children cope with your diagnosis, it's almost impossible to be prepared for every situation. Sometimes, you may not know what to say. This is normal and okay. **Remember: you are the expert on your children.** Cancer can be overwhelming and disruptive, but it doesn't change the fact that you know your children best. Trust your sense of how to best support them during this difficult time.

CancerCare for Kids® Can Help

CancerCare for Kids has a staff of professional oncology social workers that can help your family cope with a cancer diagnosis. Our services, which include counseling, education, financial assistance, and practical help, are *completely free of charge*. Call us at **1-800-813-HOPE (4673)** to learn more, or visit us online at www.cancercareforkids.org.

