

Moving oncology care forward so that you can look forward to life's moments

Guidelines for talking to
children about a loved
one's cancer diagnosis



Guidelines for talking to children about a loved one's cancer diagnosis

How you speak to children and what you tell them about the cancer diagnosis of a loved one will depend on their age and what you think they will understand. All children are unique and may respond differently, but here are some general guidelines around how to approach talking about a cancer diagnosis. If you are still unsure how to approach the subject with children and teenagers, reach out for support from your doctor, a nurse, social workers, paediatric psychologist, clinical psychologist or consider getting help from a qualified play therapist.

Age Group: 0 to 3 years



Child's understanding

Cannot understand *cancer* as they can't see or touch it

Cannot understand what causes illness and what to expect in present time or in the future

Most afraid of separation and abandonment

Can become confused if there is a change in their usual routine



What to say or do

Simplify how you explain things

Focus on today, not what will happen in the future

If loved one is in hospital, use video or voice calls to stay in touch

Offer frequent reassurances

Cuddle and hug them often

Maintain their routine as much as possible



Age Group: 3 to 7 years



Child's understanding

Understand cancer explained in simple terms

May look for a specific cause for the cancer e.g. something they thought, said or did

They may see cancer as an infectious disease

Will likely show more fear and anxiety when separated from the parent or loved one who is ill

Behaviour may regress e.g. bed-wetting when they are already toilet-trained

May have changes in sleeping patterns and have temper tantrums



What to say or do

Simplify how you explain things

Reassure them: They did not cause the cancer, it is not contagious, they will not be abandoned

If parent / loved one is in hospital, use video or voice calls to stay in touch

Stick to the child's usual routine as much as possible

Arrange for reliable daily care if the primary care-giving parent has the cancer diagnosis – a close relative or a trusted adult who is a regular part of the child's life is a good option

Set up a consistent time each day, like bedtime, when they can ask questions and share feelings

Use play and artwork to help explain what is going on or to get them to share their feelings

Offer choices when possible (for example in clothes, food, or activities)

Do not tolerate biting, hitting, kicking, or other aggressive behaviour. Teach acceptable expressions of angry feelings such as talking, drawing, or pounding a pillow

Create opportunities for physical activity

Guidelines for talking to children about a loved one's cancer diagnosis

Age Group: 7 to 12 years



Child's understanding

May understand a more detailed explanation of cancer – name of the cancer, where it is, how it will be treated and how their lives may be affected

Most likely understand the concept of time better and be able to anticipate the future

Are less likely to believe that a parent / loved one's cancer occurred because they did something wrong

May have difficulties expressing their distress as they don't want to upset their loved ones

Will hear messages about cancer from other sources, such as school, social media, TV, and the internet. Try to encourage your child to share any details they learn about you. It will help discussing things together with them rather than having them worry alone



What to say or do

Tell them about the illness:

- Keep them up to date about the treatment
- Explain information or questions about what they may have heard
- Be prepared to repeat the explanation

Older children may cope with more detail but try not to overwhelm them with information

Give them permission to ask questions and express feelings that they think might upset others

Be open and honest in answering any questions they might have. Be attentive to unasked questions, especially about the child's own health and well-being

Inform their teachers, coaches, and other school staff about the family's cancer situation, so they can also get support there

Plan for daily time with a parent or trusted adult who is a regular part of the child's life

It's OK for them to see adults cry or be angry if they understand 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

Age Group: 7 to 12 years *continued*

If a parent / loved one is in hospital, use video or voice calls to stay in touch

Help them 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 and make sure they don't feel guilty about it



Age Group: Teenagers



Child's understanding

Will understand the complexities of a cancer diagnosis and treatment

Will have a better understanding of how the cancer diagnosis can affect a loved one's future, and because of that, they may worry more

Teenagers are highly influenced by their friends and are developing their own identity so this can impact how they view a cancer diagnosis, especially if it's a parent who has been diagnosed

May also ask fewer questions and turn to the internet, social media, or friends as sources of information

Teenagers experiencing distress might act out, withdraw from friends and family, and feel overwhelmed

May try to protect parents by hiding their sadness, anger and fears

May try to find ways to help their loved one

Guidelines for talking to children about a loved one's cancer diagnosis

Age Group: Teenagers *continued*



What to say or do

Give detailed information about the parent's / loved one's condition, symptoms, possible side effects of treatment, what they might expect, and other information, if they're interested

Check in with them regularly:

- Keep them updated with new development or changes regarding treatment
- Let them know they can talk to you at any time and ask any questions
- Be honest and open when communicating with them

Inform their teachers, coaches etc. about the family situation

Arrange to keep normal daily routines at home, or as close to the usual routine as possible. Offer choices and promote independence as appropriate

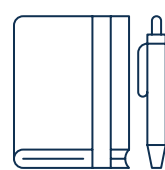
Allow them to have a say about where to go after school and, wherever possible, in whose care they prefer when a parent can't be there

Encourage them to keep up their usual involvement in school and other activities – let them know that this is important and there is no need to feel guilty about it

They can step up to the plate and help with some tasks at home, i.e. cook a meal, but make sure not to overwhelm them

Address feelings of anger and frustration (even if they are unspoken) – let them know this is normal and help them find constructive ways of expressing them

If they won't talk to you, encourage them to keep a journal, confide in a relative or trusted friend, or consider getting professional counselling



Notes:



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