

Talking to Children about Cancer

- Set aside a time where there will be no interruptions or distractions and you have enough time to let them fully process and ask questions
- Know that it is not uncommon for kids to not have much reaction or to have an extreme reaction-and everything in between
- Give them permission to feel their feelings and express them
- Use clear language-its ok to use the word cancer-saying you are sick may worry them that they could catch it or if they had recently had a cold that they gave it to you
- Answer questions with honesty that is appropriate for their age-you will use different words for a teenager than a 3 year old. They may come back with questions days later as they work through the news
- Talk about what doctors will do to treat your cancer and how that will affect you
- Talk about how your illness will affect them, your household routines, etc
- Model healthy coping and appropriate expression of feelings



Explaining Cancer to Children of Different Ages

Up to Age 3

- Children of this age don't have the verbal abilities in many cases to talk about what they are experiencing. They are tuned in to the adults in their lives and react to changes.
- Try to keep their routines as normal as possible.
- If you need help with caregiving try to enlist people who are familiar to them and can come to your home where they are comfortable.
- Explain things in the simplest way possible.
- Offer reassurance, hugs, and kind words.
- If a parent is in the hospital reassure them that they will be coming back - use video chat or photos.

Ages 4-6 years

- Children in this age group might have a hard time grasping the complexity of a serious illness. They equate being sick as having a cold or another illness they have experienced and may also worry they could “catch cancer.”
- Reassure the child that any pain or sadness or fatigue the parent is feeling is not related in any way to anything they have done.
- Use play and artwork to talk about feelings and fears. Use children’s books to explain cancer, surgery and treatment in an age appropriate way.
- Arrange for time with a trusted adult to do something fun on days when the parent is not feeling well and needs to rest.
- Keep communication simple and clear and use words they can understand.
- Reassure the child that there will always be someone to care for them.
- Explain that there are doctors who are experts in dealing with cancer that will take good care of their parent.
- Reassure them that nothing they have done caused the cancer or causes the side effects from treatment.
- Check in frequently on how they are feeling and if they have any questions.
- Model acceptable expression of feelings such as sadness and anger and set boundaries when they choose unacceptable behaviors.

Age 7-12

- Avoid secrecy.
- Be honest about treatment plans and give age appropriate info about schedules - Use a calendar to show when treatments are.
- Let your child’s school know and make a plan together of how to respond to challenging behaviors or emotional outbursts.
- Maintain household routines as much as possible and hold them accountable for behaviors.
- Allow them to help in age appropriate ways with household chores and praise them for doing a good job.
- Plan outings with friends and encourage them to go out and do fun things without feeling guilty.

Things that may help kids of all ages

- Physical activity can be a wonderful outlet for stress! Take walks in the fresh air, run, climb play on the playground.
- Find things to laugh about.
- Reminisce and share happy memories.
- Offering choices (clothing activities, etc.) gives a sense of control.
- Let them help with age appropriate tasks.
- Find quiet time to just be together-they may like the closeness but not feel like talking.
- Encourage them to still spend time with friends and tell them not to feel guilty for having fun.
- Create rituals for family time and for coping with scary times.