



Talking with Children about Your Illness

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Think before you talk. It is important to think through what you're going to say and how you will say it ahead of time. The more calm and composed you are, the less scared they will be. It may help to write down your most important points so you remember what you want to say and you can focus solely on your child. It may also help to review what you are going to say with another adult first, or consult books with suggestions for talking to children about cancer.

Pick your time carefully. Ideally, talk to your children as soon as possible after you are diagnosed. Plan the conversation with plenty of time to avoid unnecessary interruptions. Try not to begin the discussion when you are feeling tired or discouraged. Likewise, wait until your children are well rested. Don't be surprised if your conversation is very brief or if you don't notice an immediate reaction from your child.

Choose who will talk. As a parent, it is usually best for you to tell your children the news. This is a very difficult thing to do and there is no easy way of saying it. It is okay to get mildly upset or cry. Seeing you cry gives your children permission to cry too. If you don't think you are able to break the news to your children, you may consider asking your spouse or close family member to lead the conversation.

Find a good place. Try to create an environment in which your children feel safe and able to ask questions. There may be particular places where your children may be more likely to discuss things with you. While bedtime may usually be a good time to talk, you may not want to start a difficult conversation right before your child needs to go to sleep. Wherever you choose to talk, make sure you spend enough time with your children so they feel supported.

Keep it simple. Keep the discussion simple and straightforward and use words your children can understand. Use basic information to explain your illness and answer only what they ask. Explain how their life and the daily routine will be affected. Give them a small amount of information at a time. Ask them if they have heard any words that they don't understand. Remember there is no perfect way to have this conversation, so do your best.

Remember their age. What you say and how you say it depends upon your child's age and maturity level. There are numerous age-appropriate videos and books about cancer that you can review with your children, or they can read themselves. Try not to talk beyond their attention span or level of understanding. With younger children, it may help to use role-play, picture books, dolls, or stuffed animals. Older children and teenagers may want more detailed information about the disease and its treatment.

Be prepared to answer difficult questions. Try to anticipate the questions your children will ask and how you will respond to them. Remember that you won't have all the answers. It's okay to say "I don't know but I'll try to find the answer for both of us." Your children may ask, "Are you going to die?" This is a very difficult question. Give your children the most hopeful, optimistic outlook you can justify. Provide assurance that you will always try to be honest with them about what's going on. (*see reverse*)

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Allow time for your child to absorb the news. Children, especially young children, can only handle bits of information at a time. As they ask for more detail you can provide it, but you don't have to discuss everything at once. Listen closely and answer only the questions your children ask. Your children may not have much to say during your first conversation, so try to be patient with them.

Be as open and honest as possible. Answer your children's questions as honestly as possible and, whenever possible, share positive information with them. You can admit that this is an upsetting or scary time, but let them know that you are doing everything you can to get well. The key is to reinforce that you will all get through this together, as a family.

Explain the changes they can expect. Cancer and its treatment can make you feel tired and sick. You may lose weight or lose your hair. Explain this to your children ahead of time so they understand any changes in your appearance or behavior. You may also need to have someone fill in for you during treatment. When you explain these changes, it sends a message to your children that you are still in charge and, most importantly, that they will be taken care of.

Encourage your children to express their feelings. Your children may not express how they feel because they want to appear strong for you. Have them draw pictures, write poetry, or use puppets to show their feelings. Also, don't be afraid to express your own feelings and let your children know that their feelings are normal. If they are finding it hard to talk to you, encourage them to talk to someone close, such as a friend or relative.

Reassure your children. Children depend on their parents for their basic physical and emotional needs. Your diagnosis may challenge your children's sense of security. Reassure them that your doctors are doing everything they can to make you well again. Let your children know that they will always be cared for and loved. Also, remind them that cancer is not contagious and they did not do anything to cause it.

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