



# SUPPORTING CHILDREN of CANCER PATIENTS

**AGES: 3 to 7 years old**

**UCSF** Helen Diller Family  
Comprehensive  
Cancer Center

When someone has cancer, it affects the entire family, particularly children. Since this is a complex topic, there is no easy way to describe cancer to children. However, sharing information with tools to support their level of understanding is key. Avoiding these conversations can make matters worse. The best way to get started is with things to consider and a checkpoint before you begin your conversation.

## General Considerations: Where to start the conversation

- ▶ **YOU know your child/children best** (if more than one child, some conversations can be together and some separately)
- ▶ **Children are extremely observant, they notice more than you might think**
  - ▶ Secrecy can lead to increased stress and worry
- ▶ **They have a right to know**
  - ▶ Clear communication has been found to reduce stress in children
- ▶ **Studies have found that children cope best when using *developmentally appropriate language*.**
  - ▶ **An example of how to start the conversation with a child aged 3-5:**  
(Conversation mommy talking to the child)  
"Mommy's body is sick. That means that mommy is going to have a lot of doctors' appointments. Sometimes daddy will come with me."

## Check Point: At the beginning and at the end of the conversation

- ▶ **Understanding where they are**
  - ▶ This can help shape your conversation:
    - What is most important topic to share today?
    - What could wait?
    - What key words will your family be using? (sick vs. cancer)

## Have tools in place

- ▶ **Using pictures to identify how they feel**
- ▶ **Have crayons and paper available** (drawing can aid their concentration)
- ▶ **Using medical play to help demonstrate can make it easier to understand** (a doll or action figure, building blocks, etc.)

You can use a chart as simple as this. The response may be the same for both questions, but they could also have a very different meaning.

## How was your day? How are you feeling now?



At this age, understanding their needs, and what they may think about can help you find the words to share this information. Do not be afraid of questions or not having all the answers.

### Understanding their needs:

#### ▶ Main Concerns of children...

- ▶ Allow them to ask questions to show they are included and heard.
- ▶ Is cancer (illness) contagious / can they get it too?
- ▶ How did you get it? (assure them that they are not the cause of your cancer)

#### ▶ Level of Understanding... (Conversations to have)

- ▶ Beginner's level – keeping it simple “Mommy is sick right now.”
- ▶ Share the initial news and updates in small doses
- ▶ Slowly see impact – it may take time to understand or accept
- ▶ Concrete thinking

Using the above sample conversation could be too much at one time (depending on the child's age and level of understanding). See below how the same information can be shared in doses.

*(Pause to see the response after each statement to help guide you for the next)*

- Mommy's body is sick.
- That means, I will go to the hospital and have a lot of doctors' appointments.  
(may add: sometimes I may even feel sick or tired afterwards)
- Sometimes I may spend the night, and daddy will take care of you.  
(If the routine changes, make them aware ahead of time)

Assure them that they will be taken care of while you are at the doctors. Mention the name of the person(s) that will be caring for them while you are away.

### ▶ **Common Reactions...**

- ▶ Vary between little concern & lots of questions
- ▶ Focus on symptoms they can see
- ▶ They may experience nightmares and disturbed patterns of eating & sleeping
- ▶ Fear of separation
- ▶ Repetitive playing out of events
- ▶ Mimic emotional states to see where they are with understanding

### ▶ **Common Feelings: Take all feelings into consideration and know they are normal**

- ▶ Anger
- ▶ Sadness
- ▶ Guilt
- ▶ Fear
- ▶ Confusion
- ▶ Frustration

General recommendations are to help remind you, you know your child/children better than anyone. Rely on what you know, what to watch for and listen for. New changes in emotions and their responses to day-to-day experiences (at school and home) may come. Keep things simple, clear, and have common routines.

## **General Recommendations**

- ▶ **Invite questions, but answer only what they ask**
- ▶ **Explain and repeat what they can expect** (at their level of understanding)
- ▶ **Understand that a child's** (temporary) **need to revert to acting younger is common**
- ▶ **Dispel guilt** (not anyone's fault)
- ▶ **Shorten time away from the child** (when possible)
- ▶ **Make it clear that cancer is not contagious and that they didn't cause the illness**
- ▶ **Be sensitive to what the child may see** (until the time is right)
  - ▶ **Ask how they feel about what they have seen**
- ▶ **Avoid too many new activities or challenges**
- ▶ **Continue with usual discipline and limit setting**
- ▶ **Maintain structure and routine** (keeping things as usual)
- ▶ **Encourage fun & play!**
  - ▶ May illustrate illness with toys and/or dolls
  - ▶ Continue with usual/familiar play
  - ▶ Feelings will come out through play time

Adapted from "[Cancer Care for kids](#)"

## Books and Video References

Are you still having problems coming up with the right words to say? That is understandable and there is help out there through illustrated books and videos that you may find helpful in sharing with your child/children.



### Books:

- ▶ **“Mommy’s Going to the Hospital”** by Josie Leon
- ▶ **“Chemotherapy 101 For Kids : An Easy to Understand Guide for Children about Chemotherapy”** by Chelsey Gomez (ages 3-9)
- ▶ **“Nowhere Hair”** by Sue Glader
- ▶ **“Stickers on Her Bald Head”** by Chelsey Gomez
- ▶ **“Hunter’s Hero: My Mommy Has Breast Cancer”** by Shannon Pierce
- ▶ **“Mommy Has a Boo Boo”** by Marci Greenberg Cox
- ▶ **“The Invisible String”** by Patrice Karst and Joanne Lew-Vriethoff
- ▶ **“Someone I Love Has Cancer”** by Sara Olsher (up to age 9)



### Videos: of books with reviews or readings

- ▶ [A Kids Book About Cancer](#) by Dr. Kelsie Storm & Sarah Porter: YouTube story read aloud
- ▶ [Butterfly Kisses and Wishes on Wings](#) by Ellen McVicker: YouTube story read aloud
- ▶ [Someone I Love Has Cancer](#) by Sara Olsher - **Review: Cells, how schedules change, hospital visits, and treatments**
- ▶ [The Color Monster](#) by Anna Llenas **Book about Emotions:** YouTube story read aloud
- ▶ [The Way I Feel](#) by Janan Cain - **Book about Emotions:** YouTube story read aloud
- ▶ [Cancer Hates Kisses](#) by Jessica Reid Sliwerski  
(Disclaimer: The word “butt” is used in the book) YouTube story read aloud



## Resources & Retreats

After sharing with your child/children and you may be starting treatment or surgery, it may be a good time to explore other resources and retreat options. Introducing the idea of your child/children meeting other children going through a similar circumstance may help them realize that they are not the only one and that they too can make it through the “not so easy times.” Lastly, build other communities; like teachers, counselors, coaches, and extended family members for extra support to them when you are not available.

### Resources:

- ▶ **UCSF Child Life Services:** Various supportive services for children and their families
- ▶ **Kids Circle by Cancer Support Community:** SF/Bay Area families come together monthly
- ▶ American Cancer Society: **[“Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer”](#)**
- ▶ Cancer Support Community video: **[What Do I Tell the Kids?](#)**
- ▶ **CLIMB Programs:** The Children’s Treehouse Foundation with CLIMB or call: [303-322-1202](tel:303-322-1202) or email: [info@childrenstreehousefdn.org](mailto:info@childrenstreehousefdn.org)
- ▶ **Pickles:** Pickles hosts Webinars and National Events for Children/Teens to share with each other as well as get support from counselors. **[Request your family kit here](#)**
- ▶ **Bright Spot Network:** Offers resources and support helping families through cancer.
- ▶ MD Anderson Center: **[“When a parent has cancer: Helping teens and kids cope”](#)**

### Retreats:

- ▶ **[Camp Kaleidoscope:](#)** Lighting the way through cancer

At Camp Kaleidoscope, we understand that life can throw unexpected obstacles, especially for children and youth ages 6-18 dealing with a parent's cancer diagnosis. Our mission is to create a comforting space where kids can explore their emotions, forge new friendships, and discover resilience. We offer year-round support for children and community support for parents, serving the California Bay Area community.

- ▶ **[Camp Kesem:](#)** A child’s friend through and beyond a parent’s cancer

Camp Kesem is a free, one week, summer camp for children ages 6-18 who are coping with a parent’s cancer. This unique camp experience provides fun-filled activities and a supportive community, helping kids navigate anxiety, isolation, and uncertainty — reminding them they are never alone.

