



SUPPORTING CHILDREN of CANCER PATIENTS

AGES: 8 to 12 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 this sickness to children. Children at this age are more likely to have a better understanding of cancer. However, some children may avoid these conversations and internalize their stress not wanting to upset their loved ones.

Adapted from "[American Cancer Society](#)"

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 8-12:**
(Conversation Mom talking to the child)
"How was your day today. Anything exciting happened. (allow them to share).
Well, I would like to share about my day. Remember, I had a doctors appointment today? Well, they ran some test, and the doctors said that I have cancer.
(Pause to see and hear their response before moving on. This will help guide your conversation)

I know this is a lot to take in, so if you have questions, please let me know as we continue to talk. Also, let me know if you need a break.

This means that I will be having a lot more doctors' appointments to see what we will do next. Sometimes dad will come with me. We will make sure that Auntie picks you up from school if we are at an appointment."
 - ▶ **If there is a puzzled look on their face...**
 - ▶ Ask if they know what cancer is? [See explanation below \(Check Point\)](#)

Have tools in place

- ▶ **Using pictures to identify how they feel** (example below)
- ▶ **Have paper and pencil available** (drawing can aid their concentration or write how they feel)
- ▶ **Use a calendar to keep them updated with medical appointments and scheduled play time/activities together as a family**

You can use this type of chart to get started. 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?



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

► Understanding where they are

► This can help shape your conversation

■ What is the most important topic to share today?

► What is cancer?

Our bodies are made up of trillions of cells. Normally, these cells grow and divide to form new cells and replace old ones. When a person has cancer, it means that this cell process is not working properly. This can cause a growth, called a tumor, which may be cancerous. Some types of cancer, such as blood cancers, do not form a solid tumor, but are still cancer.

■ What topics could wait?

► Types of treatments and side effects that are far away

■ Would you like to talk about how you are feeling?

► Assure them that feelings are real and normal

► Let them know that talking about it or a physical sport can help with their feelings

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

Understanding their needs:

► Main Concerns of children...

- Allow them to feel involved in the conversations and/or care
- Assure them that they are not the cause of your cancer
- Assure them that they are not alone (offer peer support groups)
- Encourage them to write, draw, or send messages to you when you (parent) are away.

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

- ▶ Share in small doses and check in weekly (designate a specific day)
- ▶ Concrete thinkers: tangible, facts, and direct relatable experiences
- ▶ Slow impact: it may take a while to see changes in behavior

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.

▶ **Common Reactions...**

- ▶ Vary between little concern & lots of questions
- ▶ Fear of separation
- ▶ Focus on symptoms they can see
- ▶ May experience nightmares
- ▶ May show different eating & sleeping patterns

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

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

General recommendations are to help you remember, you know your child/children better than anyone. Rely on what you know and what to watch 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 common routines.

General Recommendations

- ▶ Invite questions, but answer only what they ask
- ▶ Explain what they can expect (at their level of understanding)
- ▶ Schedule special days with the child
- ▶ Be sensitive to what they may see (until the time is right)
- ▶ Ask how they are feeling – weekly check ins
- ▶ Continuing usual discipline and limit setting
- ▶ Maintain structure and routine (keeping things as usual at home and school)
- ▶ Encourage fun & play!
 - ▶ (It's ok to be kid. Play time is a good stress reliever – don't feel guilty)
 - ▶ Introducing one new activity to look forward to

Adapted from "[American Cancer Society](#)"

Adapted from "[CancerCare](#)"

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:

- ▶ **“Raising an Emotionally Healthy Child When a Parent is Sick”** by Paula K. Rauch
- ▶ **“Daddy & Emma Face Cancer Together”** by Lindsey Coker Luckey (up to age 9)
- ▶ **“Okay Mommy, I Will Help You: Oh No! My Mom Has Breast Cancer!”** by M.N.L., who goes by Madison is a 10-year-old child author
- ▶ **“The Pink Sun: A Story for Children Whose Parent Has Cancer”** by Azaliya Schulz
- ▶ ****“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: Book Review: What are cells, how schedules change, hospital visits, and treatments****



Resources & Retreats

After sharing with your child/children and maybe 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
- ▶ **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.



This information is intended to offer credible and reliable education resources for patients, who want to learn more about sharing with their children. It is not intended to be a comprehensive list of all resources available.