



When a Parent or Loved One has Cancer: Helping Children

A cancer diagnosis has a profound effect on the entire family, including children. It is normal to be concerned about how children will react to a diagnosis of cancer in a parent or loved one. It may be helpful to know that there is no right way to talk to children or teenagers about cancer – just being honest with them is the most important thing.

Protecting children can make things worse

Children can sense when something is wrong, even if they do not know what it is. Talking it over with them, in words that they can understand, is always better than hiding it. If you keep things from them, children will think that things are worse than they really are.

Tell them about the illness

Give age-appropriate, accurate and honest information about the cancer.

Although cancer is complicated, there are appropriate ways of discussing it with children of any age. “Mommy is very sick, so she has to go to the hospital to get well again,” is usually enough for very young children. For older children, a more detailed explanation is better. The more they can know the less helpless and afraid they will feel.

Practice your explanation beforehand

It will be a great help to your child if you can be as calm and objective as possible when you discuss cancer, especially if you are the one who is ill. You should practice the conversation with your spouse or a friend, so that you can focus on your child’s fears and put aside your own for the time being. However...

Don’t fear if you cry or show emotions

Some parents worry about crying or showing negative emotions in front of their children for fear of scaring them. Teach and demonstrate positive coping by acknowledging that there is nothing wrong with crying when there is a crisis in the family. There will be times when crying can help everyone (the parents and the children) feel better.

Tell your children it is not their fault and avoid blame

The younger children are, the more they think the world revolves around them. It is not uncommon for young children to think that their actions somehow caused a parent or loved one to get cancer. Assure them by saying that nothing they or anyone else did caused the cancer. It is important not only to communicate with your children, but to listen to them to make sure you understand what they are saying. Understand their concerns.

Explain to them that cancer is not contagious

Most children first experience sickness when they get a cold, chicken pox, or some other childhood disease that might have been contagious. It is important that you explain to them that cancer is not contagious. They will probably already be afraid that someone else in the family will get it. Assure them that this is not true and that it is OK to hug or kiss the person with cancer.

Try to balance optimism with pessimism

Telling your child that someone will be “all better” will only make him or her more confused and upset if it is not true. On the other hand, being very pessimistic can scare them needlessly. It is usually best to try to offer a realistic but hopeful assessment of the situation.

Take your children’s feelings seriously

It is common for children to have many different reactions when they learn that a parent or loved one has cancer. These can include anger, sadness, guilt, fear, confusion, and even frustration. All of these responses are normal. Let them know that it is okay for them to have lots of different feelings and that you have many of them, too.

Children often show us with their behavior how they are feeling. Children tend to regress (act younger) when they are under stress. Some children will become withdrawn, while others may fight, whine, or complain. It is important that parents are prepared for a wide range of reactions from their children. Remember, children thrive on routine, and continuing with their daily routine will help children feel safe.

Answer questions honestly

Discussing cancer with a child can be difficult, especially when there are so many questions that adults or even doctors cannot answer. It is best for you to be as honest as you can with your child, and not be afraid to say, “I don’t know” if you don’t. For children, the amount of information you give them is usually less important than making them feel comfortable with what you say.

Keep in touch with your children

If you are in the hospital for any extended period of time, your children may think that you don’t want to be at home with them. Staying in touch will help reassure them that your illness has nothing to do with how much you love them.

Make time to be with the children

Although treatment and caring for ill loved ones can take time, it is important to make the time to be with your children and let them know that they are still special to you. Consider asking a neighbor, relative, or school professional to be a special friend to your child; pick someone the child knows and trusts, and ask that person to be there if your child needs someone when you are not available.

Help children understand treatment

Children often fear the unknown. They can think that a situation is worse than it really is. Explain the treatment process in a way that is appropriate for their age. Don’t forget it is easy for a child to imagine something like chemotherapy or radiation therapy as bad because it can cause hair loss, nausea, and other unpleasant side effects.

Prepare your children for the effects of treatment

Cancer and cancer treatment can often dramatically affect someone's appearance. A physical change such as hair or weight loss can sometimes frighten them, or make them think a person has changed or is different. It is better to prepare them beforehand. For example, you can say, "When mommy was sick in the hospital, she lost weight, and her hair fell out – but don't worry, it will grow back. She is still the same mommy on the inside."

Let children help but don't burden them with responsibility

It is important to let children know that they can help their parent or loved one feel better; it will make them feel less helpless if you let them run an errand, fetch a glass of orange juice, or perform some other task that is appropriate for their age. Be careful not to burden them with too much. The stress of having someone ill in the family can be great. They will need lots of time to just play, relax, and be children.

Be prepared to discuss death

This is a complicated topic, but if you or a loved one is very ill with cancer, you should be prepared to discuss death with your children. Given the limitations of this publication, it is impossible to suggest ways to discuss this with your child. You may want to consult a trained counselor or clergy member first. One of the most important things to remember is to take your child's age into account when discussing death. Preschoolers, for instance, do not understand that death is final. School-age children tend to know that dead things don't eat, breathe, or sleep. By the age of ten, children begin to understand that death is the end of life. There are helpful books and other resources available to you to help facilitate the discussion of death with children (refer to the resource section at the end of this publication).

Regardless of your child's age, when discussing death, remember three things:

- Try to use very clear, specific terms. Being vague will only confuse your child.
- Do not use terms like "sleeping forever" or "put to sleep," because children will think sleeping is like death, or be afraid that if they sleep, they might die.
- Finally, be patient. It will take a long time for a child to fully understand, and to accept, any type of loss. They certainly will not understand the first time you try to tell them.

Remember that when cancer strikes a family, children know something is wrong. Trying to protect them will only make them imagine the worst. Being overprotective may prevent you from helping them to understand and eventually accept what is happening. If you need help in talking to your children, don't be afraid to ask for it. As a parent, you may not always be prepared for every situation. Being unsure of what to say is no reason to be ashamed.

Resources for Helping Children When a Parent or Loved One has Cancer

Support & Counseling

UCSF Psycho-Oncology at the Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center is staffed by psychologists and psychiatrists who care deeply about the emotional and supportive care needs of patients and families as they cope with cancer and cancer treatment. For more information, please call (415) 353-7019, visit the website at <http://cancer.ucsf.edu/psycho-oncology/> or ask your physician for a referral to Psycho-Oncology.

The Cancer Resource Center has a list of support groups, counselors, and other organizations dealing with parenting with cancer in the San Francisco Bay Area. Please call the Cancer Resource Center at (415) 885-3693 for the most updated list.

Compass Care, the pediatric palliative care program at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital, works closely with your child's medical team to optimize his or her quality of life, while providing cutting-edge medical care and support. Our mission is to help your child live as well as possible for as long as possible. Visit the website at http://www.ucsfbenioffchildrens.org/services/compass_care/.

Internet Resources

- **Cancer Care** www.cancercare.org/tagged/children
 - Searchable website of an organization focused on providing free, professional support for anyone affected by cancer.
- **Cancer Support Community** www.cancersupportcommunity.org
 - Searchable website of an organization focused on creating a global network of education and hope.
- **Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer**
 - A series of guides from the American Cancer Society offering extensive information on helping children understand and deal with cancer in another family member. Guides include:
 - Dealing with Diagnosis
 - Dealing with Treatment
 - Dealing with Recurrence or Progressive Illness
 - Understanding Psycho-Social Support Services
 - Dealing with a Parent's Terminal Illness
 - When a Child Has Lost a Parent
 - Available at: <http://www.cancer.org/Treatment/ChildrenandCancer/HelpingChildrenWhenaFamilyMemberHasCancer/index>
- **Kemo Shark** www.kidscope.org/kemoshark.doc
 - A downloadable/printable book for children about chemotherapy.
- **Kids Konnected** www.kidskonnected.org
 - An organization providing friendship, understanding, education and support for kids and teens who have a parent with cancer or have lost a parent with cancer.
- **KidsAid** www.kidsaid.com
 - An internet based resource where children can help each other with grief and loss.
- **KidsCope** www.kidscope.org
 - An organization and website focused on helping children and families understand cancer.
- **Macmillian Cancer Support** www.macmillian.org/uk
 - Searchable website of an organization offering support to those affected by cancer.

- **On Our Own Terms: A Guide to Children's Grief**
 - o An internet article on helping children grieve, available at: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/onourown/terms/articles/children.html>
- **OncoChat** www.oncochat.org
 - o Online peer support for cancer survivors, families, and friends.
- **When Your Parent has Cancer: A Guide for Teens**
 - o An online PDF from the National Cancer Institute available at: www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/coping/When-Your-Parent-Has-Cancer.pdf

Books and Video Resources

- *Bereaved Children and Teens*, by Earl Grollman. Beacon Press, 1995.
- *Cancer in the Family: Helping Children Cope with a Parent's Illness*. American Cancer Society, 2001.
- *How to Help Children through a Parent's Serious Illness*, by Kathleen McCue. St. Martin's Press, 1994.
- *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*, by Bryan Mellonie & Robert Ingpen. Bantam Books, 1983.
- *My Daddy's Cancer*, by Cindy Klein Cohen. Promise Publications, 1999.
- *My Mommy Has Cancer*, by Carolyn Stearns Parkinson. Park Press, 1991.
- *Our Family Has Cancer, Too!*, by Christine Clifford. Pfeifer Hamilton Publishers, 1998.
- *The Paper Chain*, by Claire Blake, Eliza Blanchard & Kathy Parkinson. Health Press, 1998.
- *Talking About Death: A Dialogue between Parent and Child*, by Earl Grollman. Beacon Press, 1990.
- *When Eric's Mom Fought Cancer*, by Judith Vigna. Albert Whitman & Company, 1993.
- *When a Parent Has Cancer: A Guide for Caring for Your Children*, by Wendy Schlessel Harpham. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1997.
- *When Someone Has a Very Serious Illness*, by Marge Heegaard. Woodland Press, 1991.
- "We Can Cope... When a Parent Has Cancer" by W.S. Harpham, et al. (video). – Two videos are available, one video on children discussing their feelings about their parent's cancer, and one on teens discussing their feelings about their parent's cancer.

For additional information or resources, please visit the Cancer Resource Center at 1600 Divisadero Street, Suite B101, on the first floor, or call at (415) 885-3693.

The information in this publication is designed for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace the advice of your physician or health care provider, as each patient's circumstances are individual. We encourage you to discuss with your physician any questions and concerns that you may have. Reviewed by Psycho-Oncology staff members at UCSF Medical Center.