

SUPPORTING CHILDREN of CANCER PATIENTS

AGES: 13 to 18 years old

When someone has cancer, it affects the entire family, particularly teens. Adolescence can be a challenging time for both teens and parents. Teens may seek more independence but continue to need parental love and guidance. They tend to be concerned about fitting in with their peers, and having a parent with cancer can make them feel even more different and isolated. Avoiding these conversations can make matters worse. When getting your conversation started, consider how they may feel, and the best way is to begin with a checkpoint.

Adapted from “CancerCare”

General Considerations: Where to start the conversation

(If there are more than one child, some conversations can be together, and some are best to be separately.)

Remember, YOU know your teens best Look, Listen, and Lean in (be committed with respect)

Teens are extremely observant, they notice more than you might think. Secrecy can lead to increased stress and worry. Be straight forward and honest. Clear communication has been found to reduce stress in teens.

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

It is an emotional time – take the time – know that coping will take time. Teenagers can be expressive, emotional, or suppressive.

Have tools in place

You can use a chart of How was your day? How are you feeling now? (Response happy, sad, angry, confused, scared, tired.) The response may be the same for both questions, but they could also have a very different meaning.

Preparing for the Conversation

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 where they are.

Shaping the direction of your conversation: What is most important topic to share today? What could wait? When and how often to have talks?

Offer options for them to talk to others: Teacher, counselor, other family members, or friends. (Keep open communication of those you are both comfortable knowing this information).

Starting the Conversation

"Hi. How was your day?" (Allow them to respond.) Depending on their response, will guide you on timing and how much to share on the initial conversation. Don't delay. There is never a perfect time.

"When you put your things away, I would like to talk about something that I am going through."

Example: "I have been feeling sick lately and that is why I have had so many doctor appointments. We are family and I want to include you in what the doctor believes is going on with me." (give time to observe body language and other cues)

"The doctor says it is cancer. We won't know much more until I have surgery. After the results, we will discuss what kind of treatment and go from there. I know this is a lot to take in and I am still processing it. Just know you can come and talk to me at any time."

Understanding their needs:

Main Concerns of teens... Allow them to ask questions. This can help them feel included and heard. What's next regarding... □ What things will change and what will remain the same? What can the doctors do to help you (the patient)? What can they (the teen) do to help you (the patient)?

Provide expressive outlet options for your teens. Write about their thoughts and feelings
Engage in physical activities, like sports or dance; Engage in arts: drawing, painting, music, etc; Engage in support groups of peers their age; Engage in new things – i.e. learning to cook, etc.

After the Talk: Be aware with care

Remind them that there will be ups and downs, but you will get through it together. Support one another and be honest with one another. Be aware that they could have strong reactions or responses to the news. Teens may act out or withdraw from you and/or the family.

Common Reactions...

Variation between appear to have little concern or have a lot of questions.

Teens want honesty about the things they can see and the things they cannot see (*regarding visible and non-visible body changes and/or emotions.*)

They may experience different eating or sleeping patterns.

Fear, frustration, isolation, neglect/ feeling left out (*can stem from not having quality time with the parent, friends may not talk to them as much or visit, etc.*)

Positive reactions: stronger relationship with parent, maturity, self-esteem, and learning new coping skills.

General recommendations are to help remind you that you know your teen(s) better than anyone. Rely on what you know and what to watch and listen for. Recent changes in emotions and their responses to day-to-day experiences (at home and school) may come. Keep things simple, clear, and common routines as possible.

General Recommendations:

Invite questions but answer what they ask / Inquire if they want to know more.

Ensure them that feelings will come and go.

Explain and update what they can expect.

Spend quality time together outside of cancer discussions.

Continue usual discipline and create balance of household chores.

Maintain structure and routine at home and school (keeping things as usual as possible.)

Offer outlets, such as support groups for teens

Pickles online support & events and Bright Spot Network Library Resources.

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:

“My Parent Has Cancer and It Really Sucks” by Marc & Maya Silver

“When Your Parent Has Cancer: A Guide for Teens” by National Institutes of Health

“Mom or Dad Has Cancer...Now What?” by CANCERCare

https://www.cancercare.org/publications/222-mom_or_dad_has_cancer_now_what

“How Schools Can Support Families Affected by Cancer” by CANCERCare

[https://www.cancercare.org/publications/472-](https://www.cancercare.org/publications/472-how_schools_can_support_families_affected_by_cancer)

[how_schools_can_support_families_affected_by_cancer](https://www.cancercare.org/publications/472-how_schools_can_support_families_affected_by_cancer)

Videos: Interview of teen sharing their experience

You're Not Alone | Being a teen when a parent has cancer - Review: by two young girls sharing their experience and how they coped

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 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.