

Tips for Communicating with Children

Internet version of this handout with active resource links at: <http://cancer-help.me/children-Peoria>

A cancer diagnosis has a profound impact on an entire family. There is new information to learn and treatment decisions to make.

Set the tone. How you talk to your children is as important as what you tell them. Use a calm, reassuring voice, even if you become sad. This will help children see how you are trying to cope, and will help them do the same. All feelings are OK. Don't be afraid to show emotions in front of your kids. Parents help to model that it is ok for children to have emotions and can model ways to cope with challenging emotions.

Give your children accurate, age-appropriate information about cancer. Don't be afraid to use the word "cancer." Tell or show them where the cancer is. A simple explanation is "cells that are fast growing and crowd out the good, healthy cells." Tell them cancer is not contagious. This will help reduce kids' fears about "catching" cancer.

Explain the treatment plan and how it will affect their lives. Tell children how you hope to get rid of cancer (i.e. surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, etc.) Prepare them for any physical changes expected during treatment (hair loss, extreme tiredness, or weight loss). Let them know that their needs will be taken care of (for example, "Another family member or family friend will take you to soccer practice instead of Mom for a little while.")

Explain side effects

Tell children about any side effects of treatment that you expect to happen. Preparing children for these side effects will help them understand what is happening. Often, children see the side-effects of treatment and conclude that you are getting sicker.

Answer children's questions as accurately as possible. Take into account their age and prior experience with serious illness in the family. If you do not know the answer to a question, don't panic. It's ok to say, "I don't know. I will try to find out the answer and let you know."

Reassure children. Explain that no matter how they have been behaving or what they've been thinking, they did not do anything to cause the cancer.

Let them know they can turn to other members of your support system, too. These people include your spouse or partner, relatives, friends, clergy, teachers, coaches and members of your health care team. Let your children know that they can ask questions of these adults and talk to them about their feelings.

Allow children to participate in care. Give them age-appropriate tasks such as bringing you a glass of water or an extra blanket.

Encourage children to express their feelings. Share with them that they can express any feelings, even those that are uncomfortable. Let them know, too, that it's ok to say, "I don't feel like talking right now".

Reassure children that they will be cared for. Let them know that even if you can't always provide the care directly, their needs are important, will be taken care of.

As always, show your children a lot of love and affection. Let them know that although things are different now, your love for them has not changed. Trust your sense of how to best support them during this difficult time.

Adapted from "Helping Children Understand Cancer: Talking to Your Kids About Your Diagnosis" on www.cancercare.org and Wellness House Talking to Children about Cancer: Tips for Sharing Information

Local Organizations providing support for anyone impacted by cancer:

UnityPoint Health Cancer Support Services	Downtown Peoria	https://www.unitedpoint.org/peoria/services-cancer.aspx	309-672-4224
OSF St. Francis Cancer Support Services	Downtown Peoria	https://www.osfhealthcare.org/saint-francis/services/cancer/cancer-support-services/	309-308-0200
Kids Connected	Central Peoria		

Resources for Additional Information:

- [American Cancer Society](#) (800) 227-2345
- [LIVESTRONG](#) (855) 220-7777
- [CancerCare, Children, CancerCare for kids](#)
- [Children's Treehouse Foundation](#)
- [Kids Connected](#)
- [SuperSibs!](#)
- [American Cancer Society, Helping Children When a Family Member has Cancer](#)
- [Cancer.net, Talking About Cancer](#)
- [NIH, National Cancer Institute, Talking to Children About Your Cancer](#)
- [NIH, National Cancer Institute, Support for Teens When a Family Member has Cancer](#)

Información Española

- [NIH, Instituto Nacional Del Cáncer, Hablar con sus hijos acerca del cáncer](#)

Camps

[Camp Kesem](#), supports children through & beyond their parent's cancer
[Camp Erin](#), Where Children/Teens Learn to Grieve and Heal
[Gilda's Club Chicago](#), Kids & Teens camps and programming

Books for Children:

- The Jester Has Lost His Jingle by David Saltzman (ages 3-12)
- Sammy's Mommy Has Cancer by Sherry Kohlenber (ages 3-8)
- Mothers Can't Get Sick by Sylvia Wickstrom (ages 3-9)
- My Mommy Has Cancer by Carolyn Stearns Parkinson (ages 4-7)
- I Was So Mad by Mayer Mercer (4-8)
- The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn (3 – 7)
- Mommy's in the Hospital Again by Carolyn Stearns Parkinson (ages 4-7)
- The Rainbow Feelings of Cancer by Karrie Martin (4-8)
- When Eric's Mom Fought Cancer by Judith Vigna (ages 4-7)
- When Someone You Love Has Cancer: A Guide to Help Kids Cope by Alaric Lewis (ages 5-10)
- Because Someone I love had Cancer, ACS Kids Activity Book (ages 6-12)
- Love Sick: Teens Reflect on Growing Up with a parent who has Cancer, KidsConnected.org, (ages 12 – 18)
- What Makes Me Feel This Way? Growing Up with Human Emotions by Eda LeShan (ages 8-18)
- Coping When a Parent Has Cancer by Linda Leopold Strauss (Teens)

Books for Parents

- How to Help Children Through a Parent's Serious Illness by Kathleen McCue
- Moms Don't Get Sick by Pat Brack and Ben Brack
- When a Parent Has Cancer – A Guide to Caring for Your Children by Wendy Schlessel Harpham