

Talking to Children about Cancer

A cancer diagnosis is a difficult time for not only the patient, but also for their family. If you have cancer and are the parent or guardian of a young child, you may wonder whether it's a good idea to discuss your illness with your child. Child psychologists agree that it is usually best to give your child accurate, age-appropriate information because when left to their own thoughts and ways of understanding, kids can blame themselves or make up ideas about what mom or dad are going through and what the outcome may be. Talking to a child about cancer is not easy, but it is necessary and important.

Children of all ages require special care during a time of cancer in the family. Kids are sensitive to changes in family dynamics and may experience distress associated with loss and separation related to hospitalizations, decreases in parental availability, changes in family emotional climate, changes in family routines and decreased financial resources.

When talking with kids about cancer of a family member, this may be helpful:

- It is best to start talking with your child soon after the diagnosis. Many parents find it helpful to prepare what they will say and even write it down ahead of time.
- Give your child accurate, age-appropriate information about cancer – where it is on the body, and what the treatment plan looks like. Tell them about physical changes they may see because of the treatment.
- Let your child know that they did nothing to cause this illness – nobody did – and it is not contagious.
- Encourage your children to have feelings and to express their feelings, even ones that are uncomfortable. Be aware of common concerns such as fear of death, exaggerated beliefs about the illness, and fear of abandonment. Cancer Support Community has children's books in our library to check out that may be helpful.
- Encourage children to discuss their true feelings openly. It is natural to try to want to quiet sadness in our children, but they may need to feel sadness or fear, and that is ok. Provide comfort and allow them to feel what they feel, while providing them with age-appropriate information. Kids may not want to talk about it – in that case, raise the issue briefly from time to time.
- Spend special time together as a family and with each child separately. Be available to them when your energy allows.
- Let your child know about their entire support system – grandparents, teachers, coaches, clergy, and friends. Encourage them to ask questions and share their feelings with these adults.
- Frequently, it is helpful to inform their teachers of the family illness. Teachers will be alert to changes in attitude and behavior, and will be able to assist the child in being successful in school.
- In terms of the prognosis, it is important to be honest with your child so they can trust your information. Let them know that with your doctor's help, you'll be doing everything possible to get better.

Finally, both youth and adults appreciate a sense of “normalcy”. Kids will want to stay as “normal” as possible and routine is important. As much as possible, allow kids to continue on with activities and friendships.

Cancer Support Community (CSC) has special programs for kids and families during and following a cancer diagnosis, including a For One Another Family Camp held June 19-22, 2014 at a retreat center on Flathead Lake. CSC also offers Kid Support, a 9-week art/play therapy curriculum-based workshop offered every spring for kids with cancer or facing a cancer diagnosis in their family. Both these programs, like all CSC programs, are offered completely free-of-charge. If you are interested, please contact Sarah at 582-1600 or sarah@cancersupportmontana.org. Or for more information please visit our website: www.cancersupportmontana.org.

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