

## Talking to Your Child About Cancer

The word cancer can trigger high levels of emotions for anybody. This is particularly true for children, because of what they have seen on television, heard or learned from others. One of the first things he or she may think is "Timmy said his grandmother died of cancer. Are you going to die?" Be prepared: Explain that there are lots of things that doctors do to help get rid of cancer. Explain that lots of people who have breast cancer live and having cancer does not necessarily mean you will die. Keep in mind that different diagnoses mean different things for different people, and outcomes will vary. Remain hopeful and optimistic, but most importantly, remain truthful.

You should tell your children what your specific care plan is going to be like. You can say that the doctor is going to do surgery (or "a procedure," a softer word for younger children) to remove the cancer. Explain you also will have "special treatments/medicine to try and shrink the cancer and get rid of it." Most children will not need to know the exact process of chemotherapy or radiation. Remember, the simpler the better. Provide answers only to questions being asked. Be sure that if you do not know the answer to a question, you say you do not know, but add that you will try to find out and let them know as soon as you can.

You might also want to talk about how some of the "treatments" necessary for you to get better might make you feel tired, sick or look a little different. Again, you will probably not need more of an explanation than that.

This will be a good time to explain that your children are going to need to be big helpers during that time. Giving children jobs and roles can make them feel like they are participating in your care. You can do this by mentioning different things they can do to help around the house or with family life. A chore chart is highly recommended to keep children focused and on task. Even things like "try not to fight with my sister," "try to play quietly while mommy/daddy is resting," or "make my own lunch" can add a little extra sense of importance to their helping jobs.

### Emotions Your Child May Feel

Your child may feel many conflicting emotions after learning you have been diagnosed with breast cancer. Most are going to be very specific to the child's age, personality and temperament. Below are some of the more common emotions your child may experience.



### Fear and Anger

Fear and anger are two emotions that are almost one and the same. Most anger is fear based. Since many people don't know how to identify or deal with fear, anger takes its place. Fear and anger are very natural emotions for anyone of any age to feel when finding out a loved one has cancer. Children may feel angry at you for getting cancer, angry at the cancer itself, fearful of what cancer means and how it may change their life. Sometimes it's easy for fear and anger to be misdirected. Children may become quickly frustrated at school or during play. They may express anger directly towards you or at others.

### Sad

Sadness is another typical reaction. Often you and other adult loved ones may express sadness by crying. Children can see and feel your sadness and it may contribute to their own. Parents sometimes experience sadness while holding or hugging their children. Remind your children that you are not sad because of them. Explain that you are sad because of your illness, and it is okay for them to feel that way, too. Older children also may feel sad, but they are less likely to express it in front of you.

### Embarrassment

Some children may begin to feel embarrassed by your illness. They may worry that other children may start to treat them differently because they don't understand cancer, or because they think they might be able to catch cancer. It is possible that they might start to feel uncomfortable with how you look as you start to have physical changes in your appearance. Discussing any expected physical changes, such as hair loss, before it happens will give your children a chance to cope and accept changes. Even so, it is common for children to remain embarrassed throughout your illness.

## Developmental Considerations

Every child will have different needs when it comes to explanations and coping. Typically, this is related to their developmental age. Understanding each unique developmental stage will help you address your child's individual needs.

### Infants and Toddlers: 0-3 years

Even the youngest infants and toddlers can sense change within the family. They experience the abundance of emotions their family members are feeling, and are sensitive to stress within their environment. With no concrete understanding, babies have no idea how to control or explain what they are feeling.

#### Reactions to stress include

Disruption in eating or sleeping habits  
Clingy and extra fussy  
"Meltdowns" or temper tantrums  
Regression of developmental milestones, return to security behaviors

#### How to help

Keep routines consistent  
Limit the number of additional caretakers  
Give choice, which creates control  
Be understanding of possible developmental setbacks

### Preschool: 3-5 years

Children at this stage engage in a lot of magical thinking. Often their thoughts are very creative and exaggerated. They also typically believe that illness/death can be caused and even reversed by their own thoughts or feelings. At this age, children do best learning and coping through play.

#### Reactions to stress include

New established fears  
Guilt  
Regression  
Play

#### How to help

Reassure it's nobody's fault  
Suggest words to identify how they might be feeling and why  
Provide simple explanations  
Offer choice to create control  
Play, play, play

### School Age: 6-10 years

School age children have a more realistic understanding of illness. These children may ask more questions and need more detailed explanations. However, try to stick to the basics and provide only answers to questions being asked.

#### Reactions to stress include

Behavioral changes  
Asking lots of questions  
Fear and worry



#### How to help

Maintain rules and expectations  
Provide accurate information  
Continue open communication

### Tweens: 11-13 years

Typically, children in this age group are well aware of what cancer is and what that means for you as well as them. They have a concept of death and often relate cancer to people dying. You may need to provide significant amounts of information to help them feel a part of what is happening. Behaviors can vary for these children; overly sweet and funny one minute, but sad and needy the next.

#### Reactions to stress include

Insecurity  
Emotional outbursts  
Extreme mood swings

#### How to help

Provide accurate information  
Encourage discussion about feelings  
Facilitate the expression of feelings

### Adolescents: 13 years +

Most adolescent behavior is extreme and unpredictable. That's why it can be difficult to know what to expect from your teenage children. For the most part, teenagers are very involved in themselves and what is going on in their own lives, and therefore may act completely normal about the situation with no reaction. Other more emotional children may be embarrassed by your circumstances and worried about your appearance in front of their friends.

#### Reactions to stress

Utilizes time with friends as a coping resource  
Defiant, risky behavior  
Embarrassment, emotional outbursts

#### How to Help

Encourage time with friends  
Maintain rules  
Discuss illness at adult level  
Continue open communication  
Give space, privacy

## A Visit to the Hospital?

Hospital stays may or may not become a frequent occurrence for you throughout treatment. This can often be difficult for children because it leaves them wondering about what is happening and why you are gone. They can usually understand that sometimes when someone is sick they must go to the hospital. However, it can become confusing because children may think “Mommy has been sick for a while, but she was at home while she was sick. What has changed so that now she must go to the hospital?” They begin to wonder and their fear of the unknown becomes much more intense. Talking about the hospital and why you may have to be there can help children understand more about what is happening. You can say something like “Mommy needs to get special medicine that only the hospital has.”

You may want to ask your children if they’d like to visit you while you are hospitalized. But before you offer that option, be sure to check hospital policies, because different facilities have different rules regarding visits from children. Even if your hospital allows kids to visit, remember that some children may not want to visit. Allow this to be their choice. Those who do not want to visit may experience guilt. Assure them their decision is ok; ask if they would like to draw or send pictures of themselves, or write a letter about their day that can be taken to you in the hospital.

Several things should be taken into consideration when preparing a child for a hospital visit. First, what type of unit is the child going to be visiting? Critical care units and non-critical care units are very different. Regardless, you should prepare children for what they’ll see. Talk about what the hospital looks like, show pictures if you can, and talk about rules for visiting.

Because critical care visits can be a little more overwhelming, you should try to plan the visit, and, as much as possible, keep these visits brief. Give your children details of what the room - or you - might look like. Additionally, point out that sometimes everyone feels new or increased emotions during hospital visits, and reassure your kids that this is normal and okay.

For non-critical care visits, prepare your children by giving them precise jobs to do while they are there. Suggest they decorate one wall in the room with art and letters, or talk about something specific that happened at school that day. Even a small bedside activity that you and your children can do together would be nice. You can show them how to adjust the bed, talk about the different equipment used throughout the room and how you have lots of people to take good care of you, introducing them if possible.

Keep in mind that it is your children’s visit, and it is important that they have separate visits aside from other family and friends. Establish a time frame for



the visit that your children are aware of beforehand, so they will know when to expect to leave. Pay attention to the way your child behaves throughout the visit to determine if the visit is becoming too overwhelming and needs to be cut short. Ask the children how they are doing, or if they think it might be a good idea to go home now. Children will usually be honest about whether they are feeling too uncomfortable to stay, or whether they would like to continue the visit.

## Things to Remember

Understand children will deal with different information in their own unique way. Several factors including age, developmental stage, temperament and personality will affect the way your children react to your cancer. They may act out in seemingly inappropriate ways or even go on playing normally for days. Address issues of disruptive behaviors as soon as possible in an attempt to resolve the problem. Be understanding but don’t let your cancer be an excuse for poor choice behaviors. At the same time, play is a healthy way for children to cope and to manage their thoughts and feelings. Doing so does not mean they are not affected or do not care. It simply means they are coping appropriately for their age.

**Give time and be patient.** Some children need time to process the information they have just received while others may have several questions right away. Let your children guide you: Don’t push conversations, but check in with them regularly to encourage questions and discussions. Giving the appropriate amount of time and support will allow children to come to you when they are ready. If and when they do, genuinely listen to their questions and concerns. Always give them a sense of love and security. Remember it is typical that older adolescent children will not want to talk to you, but instead will choose to talk with their friends about their feelings. Respect their boundaries, but be sure to reinforce your availability if they do want to talk with you.

**Stay honest.** Evading truths or ignoring facts to protect children can be more harmful than helpful. Children can deal with even devastating truths when told appropriately. Be realistic and hopeful, but avoid making

promises. Your treatment status and plan of care can change at any moment and broken promises can lead to issues of mistrust.

**Reassure and remain consistent.** It will be very important to reassure your children that while you are sick and during the treatment process there will be plenty of people around to take care of them. As a primary caregiver, you are most likely the person who picks them up from school, takes them to practice and gets them ready for bed. Reminding your children that although you might not be able to do all these things, there will be someone who can. For example, "You know how I usually drop you off at dance class? Well, Grandma is going to take you for the next few weeks, ok?" Try to keep your kids on their regular schedules as much as possible. Identify the people who will be around more often, both to prepare your children for the transition and to reinforce the idea that they will still be taken care of throughout your treatment.

**Spend quality time together.** Remind your children that just because you cannot drive them and "take care of them like you usually do," you will always be available for quiet games, talking and snuggling. Make a plan to do an activity, play a game or watch a movie at least once a week. Quality time with your children is an essential part of the healing process and is just as important for you as it is for them.

**Don't be afraid to show emotion.** Displaying your own true emotions in front of your children will demonstrate that it is okay for everyone to have and show different emotions. You can also explain that everyone feels things differently. Tell your children that there are no "wrong" feelings. This will encourage them to be open and honest about their feelings without experiencing any guilt.

**Encourage expression of self.** Make sure your children have healthy outlets for expressing their feelings. Come up with different projects or ideas that your children can implement when feeling a certain way. Discuss or work on them with your children in order to facilitate conversation. If your child is feeling angry, you want to encourage them to work through this feeling. Consider activities that will allow them to be angry safely. Maybe writing things that make them angry on pieces of paper, crumpling them up and throwing them at a target will help. Build up a set of blocks and then knock them over. Support groups specifically designed for children whose parent has cancer are also highly recommended for coping with specific feelings.

## Additional Help

Short episodes of behavioral or emotional changes in your child are normal. Be conscious of and try to understand the meaning behind the behavior rather than reacting to it. Also, be sure to inform your child's

teacher of your cancer. This will help the teacher understand any inconsistent behavioral changes.

Ask that you be notified immediately of any issues that need to be addressed.

If and when issues come up, it is best to start by simply talking to your children. Ask them what is going on and why they are feeling or behaving the way they are. If you have established a strong bond of communication from the beginning, simply talking to your child is often enough to fix the problem. However, if you start noticing long periods of sadness, being withdrawn or severely disruptive behaviors, it may be time to seek additional help. Support groups for children, school counselors and child life specialists can all be called upon to help facilitate the coping process.

## Resources

Butterfly Kisses and Wishes on Wings: When someone you love has cancer...a hopeful, helpful book for kids  
Written by Ellen McVicker and Nanci Hersh

How to Talk So Your Kids Will Listen & Listen So Your Kids Will Talk  
Written By Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish  
Focus is on communication between parent and child

Our Family has Cancer Too  
Written by Christine Clifford (7-12 age range)

Someone I Love is Sick: Helping Very Young Children Cope with Cancer in the Family  
Written By Kathleen McCue (2-6 age range)  
[www.somoneiloveissick.com](http://www.somoneiloveissick.com)  
Story book and website

The Hope Tree - Kids Talk about Breast Cancer  
Written by Laura Numeroff & Wendy Harpham  
Book resource for children

Kids Konnected Hotline 800.899.2866  
<http://www.kidskonnected.org>  
Resource for children to reach out to other children

Camp Kasem  
<http://campkesem.org/asu>

The Wellness Community - Arizona  
[www.twccaz.org](http://www.twccaz.org)  
Abundance of resources available

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