

# *Psych Savvy*

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## Talking with Children About Cancer

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A parent getting the news that she or he has cancer has many decisions to make. Among them is what to say to the children. Family routines will change, priorities shift, and children will always know that something is different. They deserve to be told, but what is appropriate to share at differing developmental levels?

- \* If not told children tend to imagine the worst.
- \* Children may not be able to express their fear or anger in appropriate ways without guidance. It can be a good learning opportunity when parents model how they are trying to deal with feelings.
- \* Teenagers and young adults may find it particularly difficult to deal with the emotions of learning about a parent's cancer. They may try to ignore the whole thing and go about their routines. They may be argumentative. Meet defiance with understanding and firmness. Acknowledge that cancer is difficult to deal with.
- \* Teens might find it easier talking to someone other than a parent. Encourage them to seek out a peer, relative, teacher, coach, or school nurse.
- \* Teens and youth may find physical changes in a parent embarrassing; they are very image conscious. Negotiate what is acceptable to both parent and child in the presence of the child's friends.

The following suggestions for talking with children about a parent's diagnosis of cancer come from a variety of sources, mostly gleaned from the Web:

- \* Tell children about the illness. Keep the language age appropriate, such as "Mommy is very sick, so she has to go to the hospital to get well again" for very young children.
- \* Practice your explanation beforehand. Stay as calm and objective as possible.

- \* Avoid blame. Children, even teens, need to know they did nothing to cause the cancer.
- \* Explain that cancer is not contagious.
- \* Try to balance optimism with pessimism. It may be inappropriate to say that someone will be “all better” if that is untrue. But, scaring children needlessly is inappropriate. Be realistic, but hopeful.
- \* Keep in touch with your children. Reassure your children that your illness has nothing to do with how much you love them.
- \* Take your children’s feelings seriously. Fear, anger, guilt, frustration, confusion, curiosity, and other feelings are normal. Let them know you have those feelings too.
- \* Answer questions honestly. Do not be afraid to say, “I don’t know.”
- \* Help children understand treatment. You might consider arranging a visit to the hospital for your children. Let them crank the bed, ask questions about the machines, and explore the room. Do not let them leave a favorite security object at the hospital; they will need it at home.
- \* Prepare your children for the effects of treatment.
- \* Let children help, but don’t burden them with responsibility. Children want to be helpful, but they also need time to play, relax, and be children. Try to change children’s daily routine as little as possible.
- \* Provide more family time. Have your spouse or another significant person spend more time with the children.
- \* Be prepared to discuss death. Discuss this complicated subject with your school psychologist or counselor.
- \* Do not be afraid to show your emotions in your children’s presence.
- \* Do not trouble your children with frightening medical details, money worries (except as it will affect them), or test results that are not in yet.
- \* Do not make promises you may not be able to keep.
- \* Do not push your children to talk. Listen well, and you will know what they need.

#### Resources

[www.nci.nih.gov](http://www.nci.nih.gov) (1-800-422-6237) National Cancer Institute has a booklet, *When Someone in Your Family Has Cancer*. It is written for children, and it is free.

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) (1-800-227-2345) The American Cancer Society has much information.

[www.kidskonnected.org](http://www.kidskonnected.org) This Website is for children to use.

[www.kidscope.org](http://www.kidscope.org) Another Website for children.