How to Talk to Your Children About Cancer

Talking to your children about cancer can be an emotional challenge, but it helps prepare them for the changes ahead. These guidelines can help you have a transparent and supportive conversation about your illness.

Prepare for the Talk

A sensitive conversation like this one deserves much thought and preparation. What to say, when to say it, and who should be there are just a few factors to consider.

Wait until you understand your illness and prognosis before you sit down with your children. If you’re still in shock over learning you have cancer, delay having a conversation about it. While it’s important not to wait too long to talk to your children, it’s better to do it when you’ve had time to process the news and are composed. You’ll appear more confident to your children, which will help them feel more comfortable and secure.

While you don’t need to prepare a detailed script, take time to think about what you want to say, and jot down a few notes if that’s helpful. Consider who will be present. Can your spouse or a friend be there for support? Consider timing as well: Ideally, your conversation will happen when everyone is free of commitments and has the time to give this topic as much attention as it needs.

Share the Facts – But Don’t Avoid Emotion

Speak openly and honestly about what’s happening. Tell your children what they need to know about your illness, how you’re feeling, and how treatment may affect your family’s routine. Use the word “cancer” – experts say that euphemisms like “boo boo” can cause anxiety and confusion. Communicate in a way that’s best for their age, using brief, simple explanations for younger children.

It’s likely your illness will impact your family in substantial ways. You can’t predict the future, but you can help your children prepare for likely scenarios. Let them know if you’ll be travelling for doctor’s visits, if you expect to lose your hair from treatment, or if you’ll need more rest than usual. If possible, provide information about alternative plans that are in place, such as a family member picking them up from school temporarily.
At the same time, reassure your children that it's okay to be upset. Suppressing emotions can lead to more distress, and that applies to both you and your children. Instead of “protecting” them from feeling bad, allow them to have their own reactions. Make it a safe place to show fear or confusion. If you express sadness by crying, it gives your children permission to do the same. You might tell them that their feelings may change over time, and yours may too.

**Listen to What They Have to Say**

In addition to sharing important information, the conversation serves a critical role: Clearing up confusion your children may have. Your children may have heard the word cancer, but they may not know that there are many different kinds. Provide details of your type of cancer in a way that is age appropriate. Younger children may think that cancer is contagious, like a cold. Let them know that they can’t catch it from you. Also, reassure them that they in no way caused your illness.

**Let them ask questions.** Don’t be afraid to say that you don’t know the answer to something but can try to find out. Be prepared for the tough questions, such as “Are you going to die?” Your answer will depend on what the doctor has told you about your prognosis, but whenever possible, share positive news and express hope. You may say something like, “I’m sick, but I’m not dying right now. The doctors are doing everything they can to get of the cancer so I can get better. Some people do die from cancer, but a lot of people don’t. There are a lot of new treatments for cancer, and I’m receiving the best care available.”

Consider asking your children if they plan to share the news with their friends and, if so, what they will say. This gives you an opportunity to see how much they understand your diagnosis and to clear up any areas of misunderstanding.

**Give Them Space**

Each child will react to the news differently, so let them take time to process it in their own way. Remember that this conversation is only the first of many. Be prepared for a conversation that is shorter than expected. If your children indicate that they don’t want to talk anymore, respect their wishes. You can revisit it later.

**More Information and Resources**

Learn how **Support Services** at Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center can help you explain your illness to your children.