

## Navigating Cancer in Nontraditional Families

Whether you're a single parent, part of an LGBT couple, or have an otherwise nontraditional family, dealing with cancer can be particularly difficult. Children might already feel different from their peers, and cancer adds an extra concern. Many of the resources for parents with cancer might seem geared toward those in conventional families.

A strong support network is the key to navigating cancer in nontraditional families. Having a group of people you can rely on and trust – friends, family, neighbors, social workers, and teachers – will help you and your children better cope with your illness. If you're lacking a support network, talk to a social worker at your treatment center. At UT Southwestern, we make a special effort to connect nontraditional families with the resources they need.

Here are common struggles and solutions for nontraditional families who are dealing with a parent's cancer diagnosis:

### Single-parent Households

**Unique problems:** Often, single parents are spread thin as they push themselves to do the work of both parents. This applies to a cancer diagnosis, too: You might be solely responsible for talking to your child about your illness, checking in with your child's school, and coordinating child care. The stress can cause role reversal in some single-parent families, with the parent leaning on children for support.

**What you can do:** Focus on creating a network of friends and family who can provide support, whether that's offering a sympathetic ear or picking up the kids from school. At the same time, be aware of the potential to rely too much on your children, and look out for instances where they might be taking on more responsibility than is typical for their age. If the other parent is still involved in your children's lives and it's feasible, consider deepening that relationship. Your children might greatly benefit from some one-on-one time with your former partner.

### LGBT Families

**Unique problems:** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender parents face health disparities linked to social stigma. You might not feel completely welcome or understood in cancer treatment centers, or you might struggle to find a care team that's familiar with the needs of LGBT people. Legal custody or guardianship might also be an issue, especially if you're unmarried. If the legal parent becomes hospitalized, the other parent cannot act on the children's behalf if he or she isn't the legal guardian.

**What you can do:** Ask your cancer center’s social worker if the center offers support specifically for LGBT families. He/she might be able to connect you with a therapist, support group, or even another LGBT family. If you haven’t already, prepare for the worst-case scenario by making sure your legal guardianship plans are in order. LGBT parenting laws vary by state – consult a lawyer familiar with these issues for help drawing up necessary documents.

### **Adopted Children**

**Unique problems:** Adopted children might experience grief and loss associated with leaving their biological family. Many face questions about who they are and where they belong. Your children might still be adjusting to a new home and school environment. When a parent is diagnosed with cancer, it might disrupt adopted children’s sense of security and belonging.

**What you can do:** Communication is especially important here. Talk openly with your children about the plans you have in place for their care, no matter what happens. If appropriate, share positive news and express hope about your prognosis. Your illness could trigger a desire in your children to find their biological parents, especially if your cancer has a genetic component. Be prepared to have that conversation with them.

### **Unmarried Couples**

**Unique problems:** Like LGBT families, legal custody or guardianship can be an issue. Your children might be uncertain about who will care for them if you’re unable to, which causes additional stress. They could even be scared that a parent will leave if things get difficult.

**What you can do:** Tell your children what will happen if you’re not able to care for them – they’ll feel much more secure with a plan in place. Reassure your children that both parents love them and that the entire family is working through this together. Most importantly, consult a lawyer and make sure your legal guardianship plans are in order.