

## Should You Tell Your Child's School You Have Cancer?

As you begin to share information about your illness with others, you might wonder whether to tell your child's school. You might feel uncomfortable disclosing the news outside close family and friends, or you might be worried that your child will be treated differently by teachers. If you choose to tell the school, you're creating an opportunity to help your child adjust to life after your diagnosis.

### Why Tell Them?

Your child's school can be a valuable source of stability in a time of change at home. School is an important part of your child's life, and teachers, administrators, and other students can help provide support during this time.

If your child's teacher or other trusted adults at school know about your illness, they can navigate potential challenges, assure your child that it's OK to have a variety of feelings, and encourage your child to express those feelings. Additionally, teachers are often the first to notice changes in children's performance or behavior. Your child's teacher can look out for signs of stress and notify you of any changes.

### Whom to Tell

Talk to your child's teacher and, if possible, a guidance counselor. An in-person meeting is best, but a phone call or an email will work as an alternative. You and your family might still be processing the news, so if you feel overwhelmed by the thought of talking with the school, ask a friend, relative, or social worker to do it with you or on your behalf.

### What to Say

When you're ready to talk about your cancer, you need share only what you're comfortable with. The school doesn't need to know all the details of your diagnosis, but it can be helpful to continue communicating with the school contacts throughout your treatment. The focus of the conversation should be on how your illness might affect your child. It might help to jot down notes beforehand to help keep the conversation productive.

Teachers might not know exactly what you need, so specific requests can be helpful here. Practical details can be worked out in this conversation, as well. You might want to:

- Tell the teacher the terms/vocabulary you use when discussing your illness with your child, so he or she can use the same words.
- Ask if there are any school support services that might benefit your child.
- Tell the teacher if news of your illness can be shared with other school staff.

- Share particular concerns you might have about your child's adjustment to your diagnosis, such as withdrawal or trouble focusing, and ask if the teacher can look out for them.
- Ask for extra academic support if your child's performance at school declines.
- Exchange or confirm contact details with the teacher (or other school personnel), and determine how you should communicate with each other.
- Prepare the teacher for any expected changes in your routine or appearance, such as hair loss from chemotherapy or other adults picking up your child from school.
- Provide the names and contact information of the adults who are allowed to collect your child from school.

Your child's school can be your partner in maintaining as much stability and normalcy as possible in your child's life. Don't delay speaking with the school authorities about your illness, and be sure to continue the conversation throughout your treatment.

### **Questions from Friends and Classmates**

Whether it's a genuine expression of concern or a question arising from sheer curiosity, children are likely to ask questions, especially if your treatment's side effects are noticeable. Your kids should understand that other students don't mean to be insensitive – they're just trying to understand something unexpected or unfamiliar. (However, if your child is repeatedly bothered by another child's remarks or questions, he or she should tell the teacher.)

If your child doesn't feel comfortable responding to questions, he or she can say:

- "Thanks for asking, but I'd rather not talk about it right now."
- "Please ask the teacher [or name of a trusted friend] about that."
- "I'm not sure. That's something my parent talks to his/her doctors about."

### **More Information and Resources**

Learn how [Support Services](#) at Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center can help you and your children cope with cancer.