

Be Honest With Your Children About Your Cancer

If you are diagnosed with cancer when you have young children, you're faced with what to share with them and how to share it.

It is important to realize that cancer affects the entire family and not just the person with cancer. As a member of that family, children have the right to be included.

Children can usually sense when something is wrong. And they will likely overhear the word "cancer" when you're talking with someone else. If you tell them the truth, they can focus on the reality rather than the even scarier things in their imagination.

When you talk with your children, it is important to use language they understand and to be sensitive to their concerns.

Here are a few suggestions:

- Children need to be assured of their own security. How will family life change as a result of what's happening? Who will pick them up from school? Who will make dinner? These questions come up even during a brief hospitalization.
- It's OK to say you don't know the answer to a question. This is often the reality with cancer – we may not know why something happened or what is going to happen next.
- Be honest. Don't promise what you may not be able to keep.
- Encourage your kids to ask questions and set aside time for that purpose.
- Reassure them that cancer is not passed from one person to another. Nothing they did caused your cancer nor can they get cancer from you.
- Let them know about your treatment and any expected side effects. If you're going to lose your hair from chemotherapy, let them know in advance so they won't be surprised.
- With teens, it's helpful to ask them specific questions: "When I go for treatment, what is it like for you?"
- Watch for any changes in behavior that could indicate they are not coping well. Consider counseling if there are significant changes in academic performance or social life, or indications of anxiety, depression, or drug and alcohol use.

- A good hug and maintaining a sense of humor can help – even with teenagers!

Breastcancer.org provides an illustration of how to answer a difficult question: "The doctors have told me that my chances of being cured are very good. I'm going to believe that until I have reason to believe something else. I want you to believe that too. I'll tell you if that changes."

An excellent resource is *When a Parent Has Cancer: A Guide to Caring for Your Children* by Wendy Schessel Harpham, a physician, mother, and cancer survivor. The book is available in the Tompkins County Public Library, at the Ithaca Breast Cancer Alliance, and at local bookstores.

[Hurricane Voices](#) provides lists of suggested books about cancer, from picture books to those targeted to young adults. Although focused on breast cancer, most of the books are appropriate and helpful for understanding any type of cancer.

The National Cancer Institute produces an excellent booklet, [When a Parent Has Cancer: A Guide for Teens](#). Printed copies are available from the Ithaca Breast Cancer Alliance, and from the Department of Radiation Medicine at Cayuga Medical Center.

[Camp Good Days](#), near Rochester, offers camping adventures for kids who have a parent with cancer.

[Kidsconnected.org](#) is a California-based organization with chapters springing up nationally. It offers a 24 hour hotline for kids (800-899-2866). They answer questions, share concerns, or just listen.

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