

14 Tips for Talking to Children About Cancer and Illness

Research shows that children need to be told about a parent's illness. Some parents mistakenly think they are protecting children by not telling them anything, but nothing could be further from the truth. Children sense when something is different. They often overhear conversation and get only small bits of information. Left to find out on their own, children often get misinformation that may be worse than the actual facts.

- 1** Be honest. Give accurate information at the appropriate developmental level. Give information in small amounts, answering questions as well as you can.
- 2** Use the correct name of the disease, the diagnosis and the treatments. Using alternate names just creates confusion in the future.
- 3** Do not speculate beyond what you know about the future. Do not overwhelm the child with all the things that "could" happen. Just tell them what you know in the present.
- 4** Give information in small chunks and allow the child to come back with questions. Expect the child to ask the same things several times, until he can fully understand.
- 5** Keep children updated as treatments change.
- 6** Let children know they did not cause the disease and that it is not contagious (if this is true). If it is contagious, let them know everything you are doing to protect them.
- 7** Give children a choice about visits to the hospital and treatment if possible. Sometimes children are reassured by seeing what is happening, as long as they are prepared for what they will see.
- 8** Let children know about side effects of treatments. If these include changes in personality, be sure the children are informed. Keep an on-going dialogue with children about changes.
- 9** Inform the children that sometimes pain and not feeling well can cause people to be more impatient and have less time for them. Let them know they have done nothing wrong and that the ill person still loves them.
- 10** Encourage children to ask questions and express their feelings.
- 11** Maintain as much normal routine as possible. Predictability provides security for children. If possible, let children know ahead of time when routines will change.
- 12** Allow children to have fun and stay involved in activities they enjoy, utilizing the help of family and friends for transportation to activities.
- 13** Inform your child's teacher and counselor so they can provide support and monitor for changes in behavior and school performance.
- 14** If a support group for families dealing with serious illness is available, get involved. Children benefit from being with other children facing a similar experience and from being able to share questions and feelings with trained, objective adults.