

# Helping Children Understand Cancer: Talking to Your Kids About Your Diagnosis



CANCER  
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OF THE FINGER LAKES

*because no one should face cancer alone*

Your cancer diagnosis has a profound impact on your entire family. There is new information to learn. There are treatment decisions to make. You're probably also concerned about how much to tell your children about your diagnosis and what you are going through.

Every child is different and since you know your child the best, it's important to use the suggestions that you feel may be helpful in communicating with your children. You can talk to them over time, giving more information when you feel it is appropriate. Healthcare professionals can also provide more ideas and advice on creating a dialogue with your children about cancer.



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## *When to Start a Conversation*

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**Talk honestly with them sooner rather than later.** It's usually best to talk with your children soon after the type of cancer (the diagnosis) is known. Sharing information early on will help build trust. When children know they are being kept informed, it helps make the experience less frightening. This is not to say that talking about cancer is easy. Having frequent conversations will help your children feel safer and more secure. Finding out what they might have heard about cancer is helpful in order to clear up any misinformation.

**To the extent possible, make communicating with your children a priority.** Cancer treatments may leave you with less energy but try to make every effort to really listen to your children. This will show them how much you love them and help them to feel comfortable coming to you with their concerns in the future.

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## *Helpful Communication Tips*

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**Set the tone:** Use a calm, reassuring voice, even if you become sad. This will help your children see how you are trying to cope and will help them do the same.

**Use simple and concrete terms:** For example, you might say: “Mommy is sick with an illness called cancer. The cancer happened on its own—nobody did anything to make it happen. I have very good doctors, and I am going to do everything possible to get better.”

**Use words that are common and familiar:** This helps your children have an easier time understanding what cancer is and what to expect. In addition, keep in mind that children at different ages have different ways of understanding things. Every parent knows his or her child’s level of maturity and comprehension, so adjust the conversation with your child to their level.

**Avoid over-explaining.** Children who are under 2 years old will understand that “Daddy’s feeling sick today” without needing to go into details. Children between 2 and 5 need just simple explanations. Above the age of 5 or 6 children are likely to have more questions. Be prepared to answer their questions to the best of your knowledge, but keep in mind that there is no need to talk beyond what is asked.

**Express your feelings.** It’s okay if you become sad or feel like crying. Some adults and children who think of crying as a sign of weakness will bottle up their feelings inside, causing more distress. However, crying can be a good way to cope. When a parent expresses sadness through crying, it shows children that it’s okay for them to do the same.



**Be open to all of their feelings.** No matter what their age, it’s important to let your children know that what they are feeling is normal and okay and that their feelings may change often. Children can have many different reactions when they learn that a parent or relative has cancer. They may be afraid, confused, or feel guilty or angry. Share with them that they can express any feelings, even those that are uncomfortable. Let them know, too, that it’s okay to say, “I don’t feel like talking right now,” if that is the case.

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## Strategies to Consider

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**Prepare what you want to say and when.** Some ideas:

- Practice or write down what you want to say before the first conversation.
- You could ask your spouse, partner, close friend, or a relative to be with you when you talk to your children, if that makes you more comfortable.
- Choose a quiet time when you and your children are rested so the conversation might be less stressful.
- If you have children of different ages, you might speak with your older children first. Perhaps, the older children will want to help you tell your younger children. Try to have these conversations as close together as possible so that all members of the family are aware of the situation and have a chance to support each other.

**Create a question and answer dialogue.** Remember that children, especially young ones, tend to have short attention spans. Do not talk longer than they can listen but be sure to ask them if they have questions. If you don't know the answer, let them know you will find out and get back to them as soon as possible. This teaches children that although parents don't always have all the answers, they will do their best to help their children. This also lets children know that they have permission to ask any questions they like.

**Explain the treatment plan and how it will affect their lives.** Prepare your children for any physical changes you might go through during treatment (for instance, hair loss, extreme tiredness, or weight loss). Let your children know that their needs will continue to be taken care of (for example, "Mommy/Daddy (or someone else) will take you to soccer practice instead of me for a while.") Also, allow them to participate in your care. Give them age-appropriate tasks such as bringing you a glass of water or an extra blanket.

**Use alternative ways of communicating.** If your children become upset or wander off, tell them that you know this is a tough conversation and you understand how they feel. Instead of talking, some children may feel more comfortable drawing, moving, or making music/noise to express themselves. You can also read a children's book together about cancer to open up a conversation.

**Give your children accurate, age-appropriate information about cancer.** Don't be afraid to use the word "cancer." Tell or show them where the cancer is on your body. Practice your explanation beforehand so you feel more comfortable. Remember that if you don't talk to your kids about cancer, they may invent their own explanations, which can be even more frightening than the facts.

**Answer your children's questions as accurately as possible.** Consider their age and prior experience with serious illness in the family. If you do not know the answer to a question, don't panic. It's okay to say, "I don't know. I will try to find out the answer and let you know."

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## ***Emphasize Reassurance and Support***

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**Reassure your children that it is not their fault.** Explain to them that no matter how they have been behaving or what they've been thinking, they did not do anything to cause the cancer. Let your children know that they cannot "catch" cancer like they can catch a cold.

**Reassure children that they will be cared for.** Don't be surprised if a child between the ages of 5 and 8 is mainly concerned about himself. "Who will take care of me?" is a common question. This is not because young children are selfish. At their developmental stage, they see the world from their point of view and do not see the larger picture until they get older. Discuss possible differences in family routines during cancer treatment and how you will help them cope. Consider setting up a network of family and friends that can offer support. Older children also need to be reassured that their needs will be met.

**Let them know they can turn to other members of your support system, too.** These people include your spouse or partner, relatives, friends, clergy, teachers, coaches and members of your health care team. Let your children know that they can ask questions of these adults and talk to them about their feelings. You may want to consider telling the teacher or social worker at your child's school about your current situation so that he or she can support your child if needed.



**As always, show your children a lot of love and affection.** Let them know that although things are different now, your love for them has not changed. When helping your children cope with a cancer diagnosis, it's almost impossible to be prepared for every situation. Sometimes, you may not know what to say. This is normal and okay. Remember that you are the expert on your children. Cancer can be overwhelming and disruptive, but it doesn't change the fact that you know your children best. Trust your sense of how to best support them during this difficult time.

**Ask professionals for guidance.** If you need more information, oncology social workers can help you find age-appropriate ways to answer your children's questions and concerns and can refer you to helpful resources.

*Sources: Adapted from [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org) and [www.simmsmanncenter.ucla.edu](http://www.simmsmanncenter.ucla.edu)*