

# **Talking with children.**

However difficult, talking about a cancer diagnosis with your children or grandchildren is extremely important. Children of all ages have a keen sense of what is going on around them. You may want to protect your children from your diagnosis, however, they are already aware that something is not right and children's fears can be worse than the reality of what is happening.

## **Children's basic needs are:**

- Clear, accurate and age-appropriate information about the diagnosis and treatment
- Feeling involved and important
- Being reassured about the reactions of the adults around them
- Knowing they have their own thoughts and feelings about the changes in their lives
- A safe environment in which to voice concerns and ask questions
- Encouragement to maintain their age-appropriate activities and interests
- Being reassured they will be taken care of

Talk to children on their level using age-appropriate terminology. It's OK to use the word "cancer." In today's society most children know of someone whose mother, father, grandmother or grandfather was diagnosed with cancer. Perhaps one of their classmates or friends was diagnosed with cancer.

When talking with your children, pay attention to their body language. Your child will let you know either verbally or physically how much they want to know about your diagnosis. Don't be disappointed if your child does not respond immediately to what it is you're telling them. Young children will often listen quietly, then scamper off and begin playing, as if you told them something totally benign only to come back later with a lot of questions. That's OK when you've provided a safe, loving atmosphere in which your children know it is OK to talk about what they are thinking and feeling.

Children will need a lot of reassurance during this time. They need to know that no matter what happens, you love them and they will remain safe. You may need to be hospitalized following surgery and your children need to know that someone will be there to care for them. Some patients chose to record a book for their children to listen to just before bedtime. Others give their child a piece of their clothing to sleep with to provide additional comfort during their absence. You need to discuss with your children what the plans will be for their care. For example, "Dad will drive you to football practice, and Aunt Barb and Uncle Dave will be staying with us while I'm in the hospital."

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Your children need to know that you may feel more tired than usual and that you may not be able to play with them for long periods of time. Explain to them that you will play with them more often for a shorter period of time or that the activities will be quieter ones, such as reading a book or coloring. You may even want to ask your child to read a book to you. The activity is not important — the fact that you are together is what is most important to your child.

As you know, children ask a ton of questions. Answer them as truthfully as possible. Do not be alarmed if your child asks if you're going to die. Tell them honestly that you and your doctors are doing everything possible to make you better. What your child is really wanting is reassurance.

Talk with your children's teachers and school counselors. They will help you gauge how your children are coping while providing additional support to your children.

Finally, ask your social worker for pamphlets and books on how to talk to your children and about support groups for children whose parent has cancer.

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