

Talking with Your Children about a Cancer Diagnosis

- When talking to your children about a cancer diagnosis, use simple language. Give them a short statement of what is happening.
- Tell your children:
 - The name of the cancer
 - Where the cancer is in your body
 - How you found the cancer
 - What your treatment will be
- Calling cancer a “boo-boo” or “sickness” may confuse children. They may think it is less serious than it is.
- Ask your children what they know about cancer and what they want to know.
- Tell your children basic facts about cancer such as:
 - Cancer is no one’s fault and your child has not caused your cancer.
 - Nothing they have said, done, or thought caused your cancer.
 - They cannot ‘catch’ your cancer. It is not like a cold or flu.
 - We do not always know why cancer develops.
- Children often need to hear information more than once. They may repeat questions.
- Remind your children they can always ask questions if they do not understand what is happening.
- Encourage questions and reassure them there are no dumb questions.
- Accept their unwillingness to talk. Children will talk when they are ready.
- Normalize emotions. If your children are sad or mad about the diagnosis, reassure them that these are normal reactions and you experience them too (if this is true).

Suggestions for helping your child tell others

- Your children may not want to tell everyone or know what to say. It is important for them to tell friends what they are comfortable talking about and what they are not.

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- You could say to your children:
 - “It’s also ok to tell other kids. It’s ok to share your feelings.”
 - “It’s also ok if you don’t want to talk about it. You can tell your friends that too.”
- Children at school may feel uncomfortable and not know what to say. Sometimes children will say unkind things or make fun of things they do not understand. You could say to your child:
 - “Not many kids have a parent with cancer so they likely do not know what you are going through.”
 - “Your friends may not understand how you feel.”
 - “You might feel awkward or strange around them.”
 - “If your friends say hurtful remarks, ignore it and try not to be offended. Speak to a friend, parent, or counselor if that is helpful.”

Living with uncertainty

Sometimes waiting for a diagnosis, tests or treatment results can leave you and your family in uncertainty. Here are some suggestions when talking to your children in times of uncertainty.

Keep talking

- Tell your children it is okay to ask questions.
- Tell them that worrying when things seem uncertain is normal. Everyone is different in how they feel and express their worries.
- Ask your children if they are worried or afraid. Ask what is worrying or scaring them.
- Acknowledge how hard uncertainty is for them and for everyone in the family.

Reassurance:

- You will let them know of any changes to your health.
- You intend to take the best possible care of yourself. You hope to live for a long time.
- You have a back-up plan for their care in the worst-case scenario.

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- You hope they will share their worries with you. You will help them find ways to ease their worries.
- You hope your child will be able to put aside their worries and continue with their lives and doing the things that they enjoy doing.

BC Cancer resources

- **Talking to My Family** webpage. www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-info/coping-with-cancer/talking-to-my-family
- Individual family counselling sessions and support groups are available for families with children aged 3-16(ish). For more information, check out the Family Art Therapy program: www.bccancer.bc.ca/our-services/services/supportive-care/art-therapy#Groups
- "My Adventures with Fox & Owl" is an activity book for kids aged 5-9 and "Scribble & Paste" is for kids aged 10 and older. Download excerpts from both: www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-info/coping-with-cancer/talking-to-my-family. You can also request a copy from your local Patient & Family Counselling team.
- Book: "Reaching out to your Children When Cancer Comes to Your Family" by June Slakov. Borrow from the BC Cancer Library or ask for a copy from your local Patient & Family Counselling team.



Provincial Health Services Authority

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