



# Parenting with Cancer:

## What Kids Understand and How You Can Help Them

### What can I do to support my child through a parent's cancer journey?

#### Communicate with your child about cancer.

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- Our instinct is to shield our kids from harm. But it can be scarier for a child to sense that something is going on but not be told explicitly.
- Start with honest, clear language, parceling out information as your child is able to process it. Start small, open and honest.
- Repeat concepts as needed. All of this language around cancer was new to you upon diagnosis; your child may not understand it the first time. As children grow and develop, they come back to information and process it differently and fill it in a bit more with each discussion.
- Avoid euphemisms such as “under the weather.” Use real words. Use the word cancer.
- Describing where the cancer is and how doctors are helping can help make it more concrete. Some children may need honest broad strokes more than very small details.

#### Prepare your child for changes in the person with cancer.

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- Try to anticipate some of the physical changes that may occur, and talk to your child about them. Many children have questions about hair falling out from chemo, a port in someone's chest, or other changes in appearance.
- Tell your child that cancer is different than an illness that they can “catch.” That means that sometimes medicine used to treat cancer can make people feel sicker, not better—this may be a new concept for them. Let them know that the person may feel good some days and not so good on other days.
- If the parent is having surgery, let your child know they may not be able to hug them tightly or sit on their lap, and that their parent might be more tired than usual.
- Give them alternatives. Explore ways your child might feel helpful, such as bringing their parent a drawing or watching TV next to them. Come up with a special symbol like a secret handshake to bond with their parent if they can't hug the way they're used to.



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### What can I do to support my child through a parent's cancer journey? (con't)

#### Pay attention to structure and routine.

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- Even as adults, it's comforting to know the plan! Children feel comfort when they know what to expect. Explain that there's still a plan, but that everyone may need to be a little flexible about it.
- Your child's daily schedule and roles of family members may change for short or long periods of time. Help your child anticipate these changes as best as possible.
- Use a calendar, checklist or picture schedule to provide guidance and reassurance about the daily routine. Having this as something to refer back to may help your child feel rooted in their routine.
- Reassure your child that even when someone has cancer, there will always be a daily routine and plan, and that they will be taken care of.

#### Address your child's concerns.

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- Some children worry that they caused their parent's cancer or are in some way responsible. Reassure them that there's nothing they did or said to cause the cancer, and there's nothing they can do to fix it. It's not their job to heal and cure the person who is sick.
- Assure your child that they are not alone, as many other children have someone in their lives with cancer.
- Children are likely to worry about someone dying from cancer, even if they don't ask. Assure your child that there's a lot of complexity, but that you will help them know what to expect.
- Reassure them that doctors do their very best to find the right treatment so that people with cancer can get better.