



## DEMPSEY™ CENTER

### How to Help Children Cope When a Loved One Has Cancer

Talking with your children about your own or a loved one's illness may be difficult to imagine, and many adults struggle with how to break the news and answer their children's questions. Many parents also feel conflicted by their natural instinct to protect their children from difficult realities while also recognizing the need to help children prepare for the unknown changes ahead.

Although, it is impossible to shield children from the stressful and unexpected realities of life, we can support their resiliency by building a strong foundation of adjustment for life. Providing open and honest information as early as possible is a great way to start and will help your child to feel safe, involved, and establishes the trust they need to cope.

#### **What your child needs to know**

Tell the truth in a way that your child can understand. All children older than three should be told at least this basic information:

- The name of the cancer, such as "lymphoma" or "lung cancer"
- The part of the body where the cancer is located
- How it will be treated
- How their lives will change

Encourage your children to ask questions. If you do not know the answer it's ok to tell them this and even better to come back to them with the answer when you find out.

*Tip:* You may feel emotional having these discussions. That is ok! Letting your children see you expressing your feelings is healthy. It's ok for them to see you cry and even better for them to see you cope. Explain to them that your feelings are not their responsibility because you are an adult and have learned how to help yourself and be ok.

#### **Give children information in a balanced manner**

Cancer is a serious illness that can be a temporary experience, a chronic disease, or a life-limiting condition. Explain in a matter-of-fact manner, what you know about your cancer without inferring your own fear or hope into the facts. Explain that each person is unique and responds differently to treatment and that doctors are working very hard to treat that type of cancer.

*Tip:* After updating a child, finish with something similar to "This is what I know right now. When something changes, I promise I will tell you." and then encourage them to ask questions. Expressing uncertainty is honest and allows for trust to be protected as unexpected changes to the cancer experience occur.

### **Keep routine in mind**

It can be very difficult to keep your children's normal routine when you or another immediate family member is going through treatment. Do your best to keep a routine, even if you need to create a new one. Routines and rituals help children feel safe and secure and will help to manage difficult behaviors.

*Tip:* Give children opportunities each day to perform some type of age-appropriate caregiving task. This will help them to feel involved and in control.

### **Address their worries**

Children may not express their worries to you or they may ask questions that are difficult for you to hear. Common worries that often arise:

- \* Cancer is contagious
- \* I caused the cancer
- \* Another person I love will get sick too
- \* I might get cancer
- \* My life will change in certain ways
- \* No one will take care of me
- \* My friends will treat me differently
- \* My loved one may die from cancer

It is normal for children to be wondering about death or to have fears that their parents will die regardless of the presence of a serious illness. Reassure them that you are willing to speak with them about all their fears including death.

*Tip:* Only make promises that you are sure you can keep. Instead of promising that you will never die, explain that you will do everything you can to live for as long as possible.

### **Prepare for changes and encourage informed choices**

If the loved one is going to be hospitalized, they need to know where, for about how long, what is expected to happen in the hospital, whether they can visit or be in telephone contact, and who will be taking care of them in the meantime. Prepare them for changes in their loved one's appearance and give them choices for what they will be exposed to.

*Tip:* There are many books and other resources available in our lending library and with the Youth and Family counselor which can help prepare them for the changes they may see or experience.

### **Additional ways to support your child**

Talk to their teachers, day care providers, or other trusted adults in your child's life. As they say, "It takes a village to raise a child," your village can support you both and help you keep an emotional pulse on your child.

Children's behaviors will regress during times of stress. Try to respond to these regressions in a patient and supportive manner.

For more information or to learn about programs that may help your child, please refer to the Youth and Family section of our website at [www.dempseycenter.org](http://www.dempseycenter.org)