

Helping Children Cope with a Cancer Diagnosis

Child psychologist Liz Bolash serves as the child and family program coordinator at Wellness Place. While every family circumstance is unique, in this question-and-answer session, she shares her insight on why communication is important during a health crisis.

Are there any myths about cancer you would like to dispel?

The idea that children should be protected from a family member's cancer. You cannot protect them. You can help them cope.

Can you share a story of parents telling their children that one of them has cancer?

I can describe a typical situation. A mother tearfully explains that her husband has been diagnosed with cancer. Their kids, ages eight and six, know Dad has not been feeling well. Through her tears, the mother reports her husband is scheduled to begin chemotherapy next week. They have not [yet] said anything to the kids so as not to upset them.

What would you counsel them to do?

I try to help parents come up with words that are both comfortable for them and developmentally appropriate for their children. Kids often overhear things. It's better to give them information directly than leave them to make assumptions on their own. Kids' imaginations can often make out things to be worse than they actually are (even in cases where the reality is pretty bad).

I believe it's important to use the word "cancer." Children often overhear adults using this word but may not know what it means. In the case mentioned above, the parents might say: "The doctors have found out why Dad hasn't been feeling well. It's because he has an illness called cancer." It's important to tell kids cancer is not contagious and nothing they did could cause Dad to get cancer.

Do you need to tell kids everything?

I recommend being honest with kids above all else, but limit the details to what they need to know. For example, I think it's important to introduce words that may be unfamiliar, such as "oncologist," "surgery," "chemotherapy," or "radiation." If they ask specific questions, answer them as directly as you can. If you don't know an answer, tell them you don't know, and that you will do your best to find out (and then follow through).

Honesty is particularly important if tough questions come up. Often, children ask if their parent is going to die. An honest reply might be: "Sometimes people do die from cancer, but not everyone—lots and lots

of people get better. Dad's doctors are working very hard to help him get better." Then give examples of all the things the doctors are doing to help Dad get well, such as surgery and chemotherapy.

What about the different stages of treatment?

In the above case, Mom can say that chemotherapy is a type of medicine to treat cancer and that it is stronger than any medicine Dad has taken before. She can continue, "Because this medicine is so strong, it could make Dad feel sick at times. This type of medicine also makes some people's hair fall out." Kids can have a variety of responses to this. For some, it's cool to see Dad in a hat, for others it may be scary to see Dad looking so different. It helps to stress all the things about Dad that will stay the same even if he looks different.

Most children are concerned about how their parent's cancer will affect them. So this should be an important part of the discussion. Let kids know what will be the same and what will be different in their day-to-day lives. I recommend trying to keep things as normal as possible. However, some things will be different. I talk about what the "Dad jobs" are around the house, and who will be taking care of those things if Dad is unable to do them. Kids come up with a list of what their parent does, such as: "He walks me to school, he takes out the garbage, and he picks me up from dance class." They will be less anxious if parents tell them in advance how those logistics are being handled.

Are there things you warn parents not to do?

Yes. I tell them not to make promises they cannot keep. If you say you're going to pick Johnny up after soccer practice, be there on time. While this is good advice all the time, it is especially relevant during the cancer experience, when kids' sense of security may be shaken. They need to know they can trust you when they are worried, and trust is built on kept promises.

Also, do not feel that you always have to protect children from worried or sad feelings. It is better for kids to see you model good coping skills than for them to think you never feel that way. It shows kids that it is okay to feel sad or worried and that there are ways to get through it.

How do families benefit from this approach?

If given developmentally appropriate information and support, children will learn positive ways to cope. In the example above, Mom and Dad were able to sit down with the kids and give them some basic information about what to expect in the coming months and answer their kids' questions. As the days and weeks go by, the kids may have different questions. The family is able to talk openly about changes as they occur because they set the tone early on for open, honest communication.