

How to talk to children about cancer



Telling children that someone they love or know has cancer is not easy. It may be a grandparent, family friend, a loved one or a parent. It may of course be themselves. Take time to prepare what you want to say and to think about what questions they may ask. Finding resources and help as to what to say may help you to feel more prepared.

Find a place where you all feel comfortable and where you can all be together as a family. In general, older children are usually

able to understand more about the illness and treatment. It is best to be open and honest with children. This will help them to ask questions and for you to be able to clear up any confusion or fears they may have about cancer.

Sometimes children will show their feelings through their behaviour. They may be clingy, act out, be angry or tearful. They may complain of tummy aches and feeling sick or they may become withdrawn. These are

all normal reactions to their feelings of upset. Contrary to what many people believe, talking about difficult feelings and subjects, doesn't exacerbate them, but will provide a release and stop children having to push them down.

Whilst it is a natural desire to protect children from the distress of knowing that someone they care for is ill, children often pick up that something is amiss without being told. Telling children the facts can help them to feel

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included, allow fears and misunderstandings about cancer to be talked about and for them to feel less alone with their anxiety.

It is not easy to know what to tell a child. This will depend on the child's age and own ability to understand. Older children will usually understand if you talk about cancer as good cells and bad cells while younger children may need it explained in broader terms. It is important to be clear and honest. Keeping the explanation simple, giving small amounts of information at a time and going step by step, will help children to understand. If you don't know the answer to a question, it is ok to say you don't know. Similarly, you can ask them open questions to encourage discussion



and check that they have understood. This way you can correct any misguided interpretations. Be guided by your child's understanding and interest.

All children will need reassurance at this time and to be told that the cancer is not their fault. Teenagers will also need to be reassured and may need to be given permission to continue seeing their friends. They may feel

guilty about going out, thinking that they should stay at home. However, reassuring them that although the news of cancer is distressing and brings with it changes, other parts of their lives can continue as before, such as seeing friends and school.

Talking openly and regularly with children and teenagers will allow you to help them manage their feelings and responses in a way that is supported.

We rely entirely on voluntary donations from our clients, local businesses, individuals, community groups and grant making trusts.

If you would like to support our work or find out more about the emotional support we provide please do get in touch.

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