



Canadian
Cancer
Society

Talking with Your Child About Cancer



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Talking with Your Child About Cancer

We provide a support system for people affected by cancer. Our services help answer your questions about cancer, manage life with cancer, find community and connection, and build wellness and resilience. Many of our programs are available in different languages.

From diagnosis to treatment to life after cancer, you can trust our publications for reliable information that's easy to understand.

We're here to support you.

This booklet is based on Children and Adolescents Coping with a Parent's Cancer: Guide for Families and Care Providers by psychologist Lisa Corbeil, which was originally published by the Canadian Cancer Society in 2016.



We have short, easy-to-understand videos on common cancer topics. Visit cancer.ca/cancerbasics.

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Why is it important to talk with your child about cancer?

As adults, we may think that we are protecting children if we don't tell them about something scary like cancer. But children of all ages can sense changes to their routines and when things aren't "normal." They are sensitive to words, tone of voice and body language. They know when people are keeping secrets from them or when they're being left out of conversations. They can also sense when the people they love are sad, worried or even scared.

Because children are so sensitive to the world around them, they can feel confused and anxious when they know that something is wrong but we don't tell them what it is. In fact, when they don't have enough information, children may imagine that things are worse than they really are.

Children often cope with difficult situations better when they know what is happening and can take part in discussions and some decision-making. This is why it is important to help your child understand what it means when someone they love has cancer.

How you talk with your child about cancer – and what you tell them – will depend on their age. This booklet can help you start the conversation. It provides ideas for what you might say about cancer and how you can answer your child's questions and help them cope with their emotions.



How can you talk with your child about cancer?

You can use the different approaches suggested below whenever you talk with your child about cancer. No matter which approach you take, the key is to be open, kind and honest.

Active dialogue – “Let’s talk about it.”

Active dialogue means trying to start a conversation with your child. Talking with them can help you identify their feelings, including those they might not be able to name. Through active dialogue, your child can learn how to tell you what they need and put confusing ideas into words.

Open and active dialogue helps children learn to cope with the frustration and uncertainty they might be feeling. It can also teach them how to handle disappointment. It can even help them accept difficult and upsetting information about cancer.

You might use active dialogue when you first talk with your child about cancer. It is also a useful approach to giving updates throughout treatment.

Receptive dialogue – “I’m listening. I hear you.”

Receptive dialogue means being open and giving your child a safe space to discover, explore and express their feelings. Allowing them to come to you and talk about how they feel teaches them that emotions can be uncomfortable but they can learn how to cope with them.

During receptive dialogue, it’s important to let your child open up at their own pace. Allow them to go through a wide range of feelings. This will help them understand, manage and give a voice to all of their emotions, including the uncomfortable ones.

Being open and listening carefully can also help you notice any signs that your child is upset or worried. Through receptive dialogue, you can watch for changes in their behaviour, personality or body language.

Other ways to communicate

Don't feel like you need to plan every conversation you have with your child about cancer. Allow kids to be kids. Look for moments when you can check in to find out how they are feeling or how well they understand what is happening.

Allow your child to express themselves in different ways. Encourage them to write stories, songs or poems, to draw, to paint, to play with modelling clay or to dance. These activities can help them explore their feelings and relieve tension. They can also help your child process and share ideas that they have trouble putting into words.

TIPS FOR HAVING A CONVERSATION WITH YOUR CHILD

- Think about what you want to tell your child. If you aren't sure what to say, try writing down the important points or practising with another adult.
- Find some time when you and your child can talk for as long as you need to.
- Choose a quiet place where you both feel comfortable asking questions and expressing your feelings.
- Tell the truth and try to be as direct as you can using words that your child will understand.
- Remember that you can say, "I don't know." If possible, offer to try to find answers to your child's questions and do your best to follow up with them.
- Give your child time and space to think about and to react to what you've told them. They might be quiet, cry or ask questions.
- Keep in mind that your child may not react how you think they will. Be patient and let them know that they are allowed to feel however they feel.
- It's OK if your child doesn't have a visible reaction or doesn't want to talk. Let them know that you will be there to listen when they're ready.
- Check in at a later time to find out what your child understands about what you have told them.

What should you talk about and how should you say it?

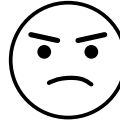
Do your best to talk with your child in ways that match their intellectual and emotional development. Try to avoid overwhelming them with too much information. Tell them what they need to know when they need to know it.

It's important to keep in mind that children take in and process information differently at different ages. The words you use and the details you give will be different if you are speaking to a 5-year-old or a 10-year-old.

The following are some general guidelines for talking with children of different ages about cancer. You will know what is best for your child. Take your time, be patient and check in to find out what they understand and how they feel.

HOW DO YOU FEEL?

Depending on the age of your child, you may want to use the chart below to help both of you identify and share your emotions.

1	2	3	4	5
happy calm safe	bored confused impatient	nervous worried tense	sad upset frustrated	angry scared powerless
				





Talking with babies and toddlers

3 years of age and younger

Very young children focus on their needs and wants. They live in the present and find it hard to understand what they can't see, hear or touch. They feel secure in familiar settings and may get nervous or scared in new situations or strange surroundings.

At this age, children learn about the world through sounds and feelings more than words. They can't yet understand all the complexity and nuance of language. So the way something is said is as important as the words themselves when talking to very young children.

Babies and toddlers may not understand what it means when someone they love has cancer, but they can still be affected by it. They will notice changes to their daily routine or to the people in their lives. They are also sensitive to emotions and can tell when something is wrong even if they don't know exactly what's going on.

You can communicate with very young children through words, sounds, physical contact and play. Warm words and cuddles, songs and smiles, tickles and laughs comfort children and give them a sense of security. You can help set the stage for good communication by connecting during daily activities. Look for opportunities to talk to your child when they are playing, colouring or reading. Try to avoid talking about difficult topics before naptime or bedtime.

While children are very sensitive at this age, they don't have the words to tell you how they feel. So it is important to look for signs that they are upset. Try to be present and attentive, to watch and to listen.

What should you say about cancer?

Because babies and toddlers are so sensitive to the world around them, they may sense that something is wrong even if you don't tell them. They might notice that you are more tired than usual and want to cuddle with you. They might ask questions about changes to how you look, the medicines you are taking, where you go when you leave the house or why you are away so much. You can use their questions as opportunities to talk with them about cancer and see how they are feeling.

Very young children usually understand simple statements of fact better than detailed explanations. They can also understand more than they can express. So you will want to reassure them as much as you can with kind words and loving tones.

When you talk to babies and toddlers about cancer, try to be clear and use simple words. You might want to use toys or picture books to help them understand what is happening in the body when someone has cancer. Try to give your child the information they need in small doses. You may need to tell them the same thing more than once to help them understand and remember what you have talked about.



What can you say?

Do your best to answer your child's questions directly without going into complex details. For example, you might use the following phrases to talk to a very young child about cancer and treatments:

- "The doctor told Daddy that he is sick. That's why he is so tired and needs to rest."
- "Mommy is sad because she is sick."
- "Daddy is going to the hospital a lot because he is sick."
- "I need to go to the hospital to take medicine to help me get better."
- "The medicine is very strong. I may be sick or feel very tired when I take it. My hair may fall out, but it will likely grow back."

How might a baby or toddler react?

Babies and toddlers live in the present, physical world. It is hard for them to understand what cancer is because they can't see or touch it. They can't process that it may take time for treatment to work and that someone with cancer might be sick for a while.

When very young children don't understand what is going on, they will express themselves through their body language, mood and behaviour.

Babies and toddlers may show their fear, anger and sadness in different ways:

- They may cry easily or get very mad and be difficult to settle or comfort.
- You might notice changes in their sleeping or eating habits.
- They may demand more physical contact or refuse to be left alone.
- They could isolate themselves or show less interest in activities they usually enjoy.



- They may show signs of regression, such as sucking their thumb or wetting the bed.
- Their personality might change and they may act out at home or daycare.

IT'S OK TO ASK FOR HELP

It is normal to feel overwhelmed by the idea of talking to a very young child about cancer. You are likely to worry about saying or doing the wrong thing. It can also be very difficult to cope with an upset child, especially when you feel emotional or teary. But try to remember that you know what is best for your child. You can choose when and how to talk to them so you are both as comfortable and calm as possible. And remember that there is help available. Talk to your healthcare team about support groups and other resources in your community.



How can you help your baby or toddler cope?

Consistency is very important for babies and toddlers. Do your best to maintain routines as much as possible. If you are sick, ask family and friends to help where they can.

Keeping a regular schedule gives very young children a sense of safety and security. It also helps them cope with any anxiety they might be feeling. If they're old enough, letting them know if and how things might change can help them prepare for disruptions.

It is also important to surround very young children with as much love and support as possible. If you are unwell or need to be in the hospital, be sure to let your child know who will be taking care of them while you are away. Ask family members or close friends to take your child to their regular activities. Reach out to daycare providers or other people in your support network for help when you have doctor appointments or need to rest.

LET YOUR CHILD HELP WHEN THEY CAN

When very young children know someone is sick, they want to make them feel better. It can give them a sense of pride to know that they are helping. When possible, you might want to ask your child to do the following so they feel like they are taking care of their loved one:

- offer to bring a blanket or fluff pillows
- choose books to read together
- tell a story or sing a song
- draw pictures to brighten up the room



Talking with young children

4 to 6 years of age

Between 4 and 6 years of age, children think about things in simple, concrete ways. At this stage of their development, children:

- understand and can make sense of what you say to them
- can process clear, straightforward facts, but may get confused by too much information or too many details
- know what “today,” “yesterday” and “tomorrow” mean, but may not grasp the idea of a more distant future
- know what it’s like to be sick or feel ill
- can name many body parts, but may not know what they do

Young children ask lots of questions because they are trying to make sense of the world around them. Take time to listen to your child’s questions and concerns. Try to respond to them as honestly as you can. If they ask you for information that you don’t have, tell them that you will look into it and let them know what you find out. If you don’t know how to answer a question, be honest and say so. Tell your child that you will think about their question, and be sure to follow up when you feel comfortable with your answer.

What should you say about cancer?

Young children have probably already heard the word *cancer* from other adults, in books or on television. They may even have heard you say it when you were talking to someone else. So don't be afraid to use the word *cancer*.

Using real words when explaining the disease can help your child understand what is happening. Speaking honestly and directly about cancer also reduces the chance that they will be confused or misinterpret what you are telling them.

Generally speaking, children of this age can grasp the idea of a cause-and-effect relationship. So they understand that cancer can make someone very sick. But they usually see the disease as temporary. They have trouble understanding that cancer can be life-threatening.





Where can you start?

Here are some examples of how you might start a conversation about cancer and treatments with children 4 to 6 years of age:

- “I don’t really know how to tell you this, but I’m going to try to explain it to you as best as I can. Then, you can tell me if you understand.”
- “I want to tell you what’s happening to me because I want you to know what’s going on.”
- “Have you ever heard about cancer before? What do you think it is?”
- “You know that Mommy hasn’t been feeling well. The doctor told her that cancer is making her sick.”
- “Daddy found out that he is sick with cancer. He will be sick for a while, but we don’t know how long.”
- “I have cancer. This means that something is wrong in my body and it’s making me sick.”
- “Every time the doctor tells us something new, we’ll let you know. We also want to know if you have any questions or if there are things you don’t understand. We will do our best to explain it to you.”
- “To get better, I need to have treatments called chemotherapy and radiation therapy. Have you heard these words before?”
- “Chemotherapy uses medicine to kill cancer inside the body. But it takes a lot of energy for the body to get better. So Daddy is going to feel sick and be more tired after taking his medicine. This is normal, so try not to worry.”
- “Radiation therapy doesn’t hurt. It uses energy to kill cancer cells inside the body.”
- “I may need to have an operation to cut out the cancer.”
- “We don’t know if the treatment is going to work. It could help Mommy get better, but we’re not sure.”
- “Sometimes when someone we love is sick, it can make us sad, angry or afraid. That’s OK. It’s good to talk about how we feel.”

How might a young child react?

Because their vocabulary isn't fully developed, young children rely on emotion-based communication. This means that their reactions may be based more on your body language and mood than the words you use. So try to be patient, use a soft tone of voice and offer physical comfort during your talks.

Children between 4 and 6 years of age are still learning how to express themselves and make themselves understood. They may tell you how they feel, but they will mostly show you through their attitudes and behaviours.

When they find out that someone they love has cancer, young children usually react more to how it affects them than to the disease itself or to the person being sick. They may feel afraid, angry or sad because they can't be with you as much as they want to be. They can also be upset by changes to their routines and regular activities.

Talking with your child about their emotions teaches them to recognize their needs and to deal with life's struggles. It also models how they can recognize and respect other people's feelings. Here are some examples of ways you can talk with young children about their emotions:

- "When something new happens in our family, we can feel things in our body that we never felt before. That's OK. It happens to grown-ups too. Sometimes we feel many emotions at once like joy, sadness and anger. That's also OK. Talking about it with someone who loves us can be very helpful."
- "I am here to listen to you if you want to talk about how you feel. If you would rather talk to someone else about it, that's OK too."
- "Crying is a way to let out any pain or sadness we feel. Sometimes, it does a lot of good. So it's OK to cry, if you feel like it."

How can you help your child cope?

Your child will likely have a lot of questions for you. Take your time to answer them, to explain the situation as best you can and to listen to their concerns.

It's important to check with young children to find out what they understand about cancer and what is happening to the person they love. You might ask them to tell you what they heard you say and what it means in their own words. This can help you discover and correct any misunderstandings or help to relieve some of your child's fear or anxiety.

Children between 4 and 6 years of age need to be reassured that they will be cared for. Whenever possible, let them know if their activities or schedules might change. Tell them who will be looking after them if you have to be away. Do your best to follow your family's routines so children feel safe and secure.

“DID I DO THIS? CAN I CATCH CANCER?”

Young children can feel responsible if someone they love gets sick. They might think that cancer is their fault – that someone is ill because they did something wrong. They may also worry that they can catch cancer from someone with the disease. This is why it is important to talk with them.

Being honest and direct will help young children understand what is happening to the person with cancer, to themselves and to the family as a whole. Keeping them informed about what is going on and how it will impact their lives will help them understand that it's not their fault, that they won't get sick if they spend time with the person with cancer and that they are not alone.



Talking with preteens

7 to 12 years of age

Between the ages of 7 and 12, children are very curious about their surroundings. They want to understand how things work and to make sense of their own feelings, so they ask a lot of questions.

At this age, children start to think more abstractly. They understand the concepts of good and bad, and they are beginning to tell the difference between what is and isn't socially acceptable.

As part of their development, preteens try to be more independent. Their relationships with people outside their family become more important to them. Although they are becoming more mature and want to do things on their own, they still need guidance, affection and attention to help them find their place in the world.

When you talk with your child about cancer, give them clear and simple explanations. Try to be patient, do your best to answer their questions and encourage them to come to you for more information or further explanation. Taking the time to talk with your child and discuss issues that will affect them can help develop open dialogue. It can also help avoid having them withdraw because they feel misunderstood or unheard.

IT'S OK TO NOT BE OK

If you notice that your child is acting differently or isolating themselves, they may be finding it hard to express their thoughts and feelings. There are resources available to help both you and your preteen cope with feelings around a cancer diagnosis and what it might mean for your family. Ask your healthcare team about support groups and other resources in your area.

What should you say about cancer?

Preteens can understand some things about cancer, such as the different types and the parts of the body they affect. But for the most part, preteens understand cancer based on the symptoms they see. At this stage of development, they mainly experience the disease in the ways it changes their daily lives.

Children between 7 and 12 years of age can recognize cause-and-effect relationships. So they understand that cancer causes symptoms, and that treatments can cause side effects. They realize that cancer can be life-threatening, but they also know that treatments can help make you better.

At this age, children will ask a lot of questions because they want to understand the whole process of the disease. Cancer is like a puzzle they are trying to solve. They want to collect information and find connections between the disease and the symptoms they can see. Preteens usually think that everything has a beginning and an end. So they will want to know why and how you got cancer, how the disease will progress and when it will be cured.

Many of your child's questions about cancer will be difficult – if not impossible – for you to answer. It can be hard to know what to say and how much detail to give them. Remember that it is OK to tell your child if you don't know the answer to some of their questions. Let them know that you will get back to them when you have the information they are looking for.

What is important is that your child feels like they can come to you to talk and ask questions. Try to keep in mind that it is better for them to find out what is going on from you rather than hearing it somewhere else. Without details, preteens may feel confused or worried. Like younger children, they may also use their imagination to fill in the blanks and think that things are worse than they really are.



What words should you use?

The following are some examples of what you might say to children 7 to 12 years of age to start a conversation about cancer and treatments:

- “What do you know about cancer? Do you know there are different types of cancer?”
- “Mom has a disease called cancer. She’s going to be sick for a while. We don’t know for how long and we don’t know what the chances are that she will get better.”
- “Although some people die from cancer, the type that Dad has can be treated. His doctors believe that he should get better.”
- “The doctors are going to treat the cancer, and we hope that will make me feel better. But that’s all I know for now. I promise I will tell you as soon as I find out anything else.”
- “I need to have chemotherapy and radiation therapy. They are supposed to get rid of the cancer, but we don’t know for sure if they will. After my treatment is done, my doctors will tell us if I will get better.”
- “Chemotherapy uses medicine to kill cancer cells inside the body. This treatment is strong, so it will make me tired and sick. My hair might fall out, but it should grow back.”
- “Radiation therapy doesn’t hurt. A machine sends x-ray beams through the skin to reach the tumour and kill the cancer cells.”
- “The cancer is very advanced, which means that it is now in different parts of Dad’s body. The healthcare team will do everything they can to help him, but we don’t think he has very much time left to live.”
- “Every time the doctor gives us an update, we’ll tell you. We also want you to come to us if you have any questions.”
- “I would like for us to talk about how you feel. It can be whenever you’re ready, and we can discuss anything you want.”
- “I’m here to listen if you want to talk to me about how you’re feeling or what you’re thinking. It’s OK if you would rather talk to someone else. What’s important is that you can talk to someone about the things that bother you.”

How might a preteen react?

Children between 7 and 12 years of age are still developing their vocabulary and coping skills. So it can be hard for them to express and deal with everything they feel when they find out that someone they love has cancer.

Preteens may express their anxiety and fear in different ways. They can have trouble concentrating and may lose some of their self-confidence. They may cry, be irritable or even yell to get out their anger and frustration. Preteens may become more dependent and not want to leave you because they're afraid you won't be there when they get back. They could also withdraw because they worry that they might say something to upset you or that something they did made you sick.

“ARE YOU GOING TO DIE?”

At this age, children know that cancer can be very serious. So their first reaction might be to worry that you are going to die. To prepare for this reaction, you might want to gather your own thoughts about death. Being prepared for questions about death can help you answer them in ways that feel right for you and your family. See “Talking about death” on page 39 for more suggestions.

How can you help your preteen cope?

Do your best to be an active listener. Try not to assume that you know what your child is thinking or going to say. Responding before they have finished expressing themselves can make them feel like you aren't listening or you don't understand them. Instead, be patient and give them time to put their thoughts into words as best they can.

Try to create a large network of care around your preteen. Encourage them to stay involved in their regular activities. Reach out to their teachers, friends' parents and other community members to let them know that your child might need extra support and attention. (When you talk to people in your child's network, you don't have to reveal that you have cancer if you aren't comfortable doing so. Just let them know that your family is coping with a personal or health issue.)





Talking with teenagers

13 years of age and older

Teenagers are going through a lot of physical, mental and emotional changes. Their bodies are developing, they are exploring their own ideas and beliefs and they are building relationships outside of the family.

At this age, children are developing a greater sense of themselves and exploring their growing independence. Teens are old enough to disagree with the adults in their lives and to question their ideas and ways of doing things. Teenagers start to question family rules and values, as well as social norms in general. They put a lot of importance on friends and are greatly influenced by their peers.

As they explore the world and different ideas, home should be the place where teenagers can find security, comfort and someone who listens without judging them. They need their family's trust and encouragement to build their self-confidence. As they become more independent, teens need guidance, limits and responsibilities.

Teens are bright, observant and mature enough to have their own opinions. Because they are observing and thinking about their surroundings, teenagers can tell when something is wrong. This is why it is important to hear them out and consider their point of view. This can be uncomfortable and you may not always agree with them. So try to keep in mind that communication is a 2-way street. If each person can be truly heard, then you will be better equipped to support each other and find solutions to meet everyone's needs.

Because teenagers want to express their independence, they may share their concerns and feelings with their friends rather than with you or other family members. So it is important to try to keep the lines of communication as open as possible.

What should you say about cancer?

Teenagers know enough about the body to process more detailed information about cancer, treatment plans and side effects. They understand that it can be a serious illness and that you can die from it. So when you talk to teenagers about cancer, it's important to accurately name and explain the disease.

Teens want to understand the body and how it works, and they will likely do their own research to try to find answers to their questions. But there is a lot of information online – and not all of it is accurate or applies directly to their loved one. So it's important to check in with teens to find out what they have learned. You can use what they have found out to explain what is happening to you.

Encourage your teen to share their ideas, join discussions and help in decision-making where appropriate. Being included can help them cope with feelings of helplessness and anxiety, which many adults also have when someone they love has cancer. It will also make them feel recognized, trusted and reassured.



Conversations with teens about cancer can be difficult. A counsellor, social worker or psychologist can help you create a safe space where everyone's needs can be heard and understood. They can offer ideas and advice about how to approach teens and encourage them to talk about what they are thinking and feeling.

A FEW IDEAS FOR TALKING WITH TEENS

- Be available and encourage discussion about the way you both feel.
- Be as honest and direct as you can.
- Trust them and hear them out.
- Ask them for their opinion and encourage them to take part in family decisions.





How do you start the conversation?

Here are some examples of how you might start to talk to your teenager about cancer and treatments:

- “I have something important to tell you. It’s really hard to talk about this, but I want you to know what’s happening.”
- “Do you know what cancer is? We will try to explain it to you, but you can also do some research to find out more. Then we can talk about it and what applies to me.”
- “We will do our best to keep you informed about what’s happening. We want you to know that we are available if you have any questions or concerns. We will be here, whenever you want to talk.”
- “To have the best chances of recovery, Dad needs to have chemotherapy and radiation therapy. When these treatments are finished, he will have more tests to see if they got rid of the cancer. Once the doctor knows how effective these treatments were, they will be able to tell if Dad needs more or different treatments.”
- “Chemotherapy and radiation therapy can cause side effects. Some are unpleasant. For example, Mom’s hair might fall out and she might be sick to her stomach. We might not be able to see other side effects, but they can be serious. So we will keep in touch with the healthcare team and they’ll tell us what to do.”
- “I have been diagnosed with cancer, but it’s at an early stage. The doctor says that the treatments should help me get better.”
- “Right now, the doctors can’t say for sure how the cancer will respond to treatment or if I will recover. I will need to have more tests before the healthcare team can give us more information.”
- “The cancer has spread to different parts of my body, which means that I probably won’t get better. The healthcare team will do all they can to slow down the disease, but we think I might only have a few months left to live.”
- “What are your thoughts on what I have told you about my cancer? Do you have any questions? How do you feel about it?”

How might a teenager react?

Younger teens can't fully control their emotional reactions or mood swings. They can find it difficult to express their thoughts and feelings, so they might act out. They may direct their anger and frustration at those closest to them. They might also regress and act younger than they are, like wanting to sleep next to you.

Older teenagers may become more independent and want to be treated like an adult. They may worry about how you are feeling and try to hide their anger or sadness to protect you. Older teens may act out by criticizing you when you try to support them. They may avoid you in an attempt to detach themselves from the situation. There is also the risk that they might show poor judgment and take part in risky behaviours.

It's important to remember that teenagers are going through strong hormonal and emotional changes. So try to be patient and to see them for who they are rather than for their behaviour, mistakes or mood swings.



Being non-judgmental will allow you to hear what they are really saying under the uncomfortable silences or strong emotional reactions.

Be compassionate and encourage your teen to talk about what they are thinking and feeling. Hearing what they have to say can help you sort out any confused thoughts or ideas they have. You might start by saying something like:

- “I want you to feel free to come to me whenever you need to. I like it when you talk to me about how you feel, even if I become emotional. When you talk to me, it helps me talk to you.”
- “I appreciate that we can talk about how we feel. But I also respect that you don’t always feel like talking or you think that I ask too many questions. If you feel that way, you can let me know and we’ll talk another time.”



How can you help your teenager cope?

Teens may feel torn between wanting to spend time with you and going out with their friends. Let them know that it's OK – and it's actually important for their well-being – to continue their lives and activities outside of home. Friends are a valuable part of a healthy support system and can help teenagers cope with their sadness, anger and anxiety.

Take the time to help your teen better understand their thoughts and feelings, which could include guilt and wanting to avoid facing a difficult situation. Being clear about their responsibilities and letting them know that they also need to take care of themselves will help clarify their role in the family and ease any feelings of guilt.

Teenagers like to help take care of the people they love, especially if they don't feel like they are being forced to do something. They want to be trusted and to take on responsibilities, so you could encourage them to help with tasks like making meals, doing laundry and tidying up.

HAVING RESPONSIBILITIES DOESN'T MEAN BEING RESPONSIBLE

Be careful not to make teenagers feel that your well-being or health depends on what they do or don't do. For example, you getting better doesn't depend on your child completing their chores or helping with tasks that you can no longer do.

Let your child know that it is normal to feel depressed, angry, anxious and many other emotions when someone they love has cancer. Reassure them that you love them and are willing to talk about anything that's on their mind. Watch for changes in their behaviour and reach out to your healthcare team or a mental health professional if you or your child need help to cope.

What else might you need to prepare for?

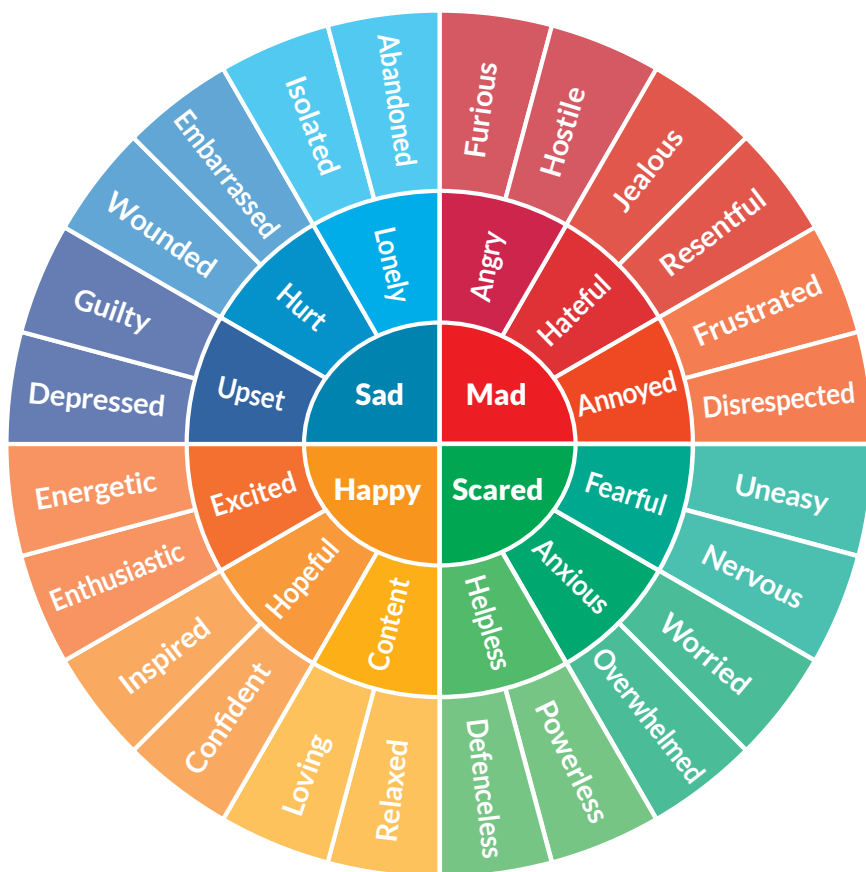
You might not be sure how to deal with other parts of the cancer experience. Children may have trouble coping with emotions. Their behaviour may change. They may want – or not want – to go to the hospital. They may have questions about life and death. The following information can help.

Coping with emotions

Finding out that a loved one has cancer will cause anyone grief. Psychologists recognize that many people process their grief through denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Children may also go through these stages of grief when they hear a loved one has cancer. Depending on their developmental stage, they may not have learned how to recognize the different emotions that they feel or how to express or deal with them.

When they find out that someone they love has cancer, children may adopt an attitude that doesn't match what they feel. For example, they may seem insensitive, detached or even cheerful. These reactions may be masking their confusion or fear, and you should try not to see them as unfeeling or indifferent.

Ask for help if you are worried about how well your child is coping. Talk to your healthcare team, a mental health professional or a social worker about the resources available to help you and your child work through strong emotions.



FINDING THE WORDS FOR EMOTIONS

You can use this visual to help you and your child express yourselves and make sure that you understand what each of you means when you say certain words.

Dealing with changes in how your child behaves

There is no right or wrong way for a child to react when they find out someone they love has cancer. They are likely to feel a wide variety of emotions and may show changes in their behaviour or personality. Your child may:

- express anger or aggressiveness
- have trouble concentrating or have a hard time learning at school
- have trouble falling asleep or sleep more than usual
- have physical reactions, such as stomach aches or headaches
- seem sad, agitated, irritable or nervous
- have mood swings
- regress to an earlier stage of development, such as acting younger or wetting the bed
- have behavioural problems, such as being aggressive, lying or defying you
- withdraw or isolate themselves from family and friends
- have difficulty in their relationships with friends
- develop nervous habits, such as nail-biting or repeatedly sniffing or clearing their throat

A child's reactions to an illness in the family may also change over time. These changes are normal as it takes time for children to learn how to express themselves.

If an unusual behaviour continues over time or if you are concerned about how your child behaves, you can ask for help. A healthcare professional can suggest ways you can help guide or support your child if you notice changes to their behaviour or personality.

WHAT MIGHT CAUSE BEHAVIOUR CHANGES?

Finding out that someone they love has cancer – especially if it is a parent or guardian – can be very traumatic for children. The changes in how they behave may be caused by their:

- fear of no longer being loved or of being abandoned
- fear that their loved one could die
- feeling responsible for the illness
- anxiety about changes to daily routines or not knowing what will happen

Knowing what might be causing your child to act differently can help you better understand them and help them to cope.



Going to the hospital

It's hard to know if your child should go to the hospital to see a loved one who is coping with cancer or its treatments. A hospital visit can be very scary for young children and it can make older children feel sad and anxious. When deciding about hospital visits, think about their ability to cope with what they see, hear and smell. You'll also need to consider how their visit may make the person with cancer feel.

Talk to the healthcare team before going to the hospital. They can help you figure out when the person with cancer will have the most energy. They can also let you know when medical procedures are scheduled.

It's also important to let your child know what to expect. Tell them that their loved one may look different than they usually do. They may have lost their hair or quite a bit of weight. Depending on the stage of the disease and the medicines they are taking, the person with cancer may not seem like themselves, be very sleepy or be too weak to speak.

Let your child know that their visit could be postponed or cancelled at the last minute. This isn't because the person with cancer doesn't love them or doesn't want to see them – it's because of the cancer. You can suggest that your child draw a picture, create a card or write a letter for the person with cancer if they can't visit them.

There may be times when your child doesn't want to go to the hospital. They might want to see their friends or do one of their regular activities instead. They could also be scared of the hospital because they had a bad experience in the past. If your child doesn't want to go, do your best to respect their feelings. Gently explain that their visit can help the person with cancer feel better, but they can go another day or try calling or video chatting with their loved one.

HELPING AT THE HOSPITAL

Your child could do the following to feel closer to the person with cancer and to feel they are taking care of them:

- Bring a glass of water or ice chips.
- Fluff pillows or arrange the blankets.
- Hold the person's hand or gently rub their back.
- Sing a song or tell a funny story from school.

Talking about death

Adults may think that children can't handle the idea that someone they love may die from cancer. But children actually cope better when they know the truth. Talking about cancer and what might happen can empower your child by helping them make sense of something mysterious, scary and painful.

Before talking to your child about big questions like "what does death mean" and "what happens after you die," take some time to explore these ideas for yourself. Think about how you would answer these questions and what values or beliefs you want to share with your child. It can be very helpful to discuss these ideas with your partner, family and friends. Through these conversations, you can clarify and organize your ideas and put your thoughts and feelings into words.

If, when and how you talk to your child about death will depend on many things. The following are a few questions you might ask yourself before you start this conversation.

Should you talk about death?

You might want to ask yourself these questions before talking with your child about death. Depending on the answers, you may decide that you should talk with them now or wait for a more appropriate time.

- What is the prognosis?
- Is the person with cancer likely to die in the near future?
- Will my child understand what it means to die?

It's important to listen to your child when you are thinking about talking to them about death. Look for clues in their comments and questions – they may be hinting that they are ready to talk about difficult topics. At the same time, they might give you signs that they are uncomfortable and don't want to talk about something. For example, they might change the subject, look away or fidget if they are not ready to talk.

REACH OUT TO THE HEALTHCARE TEAM

Your healthcare team can suggest ways to talk to your child that show your love, honesty and acceptance. They may also refer you to a child psychologist, who can help you adapt the discussion to your child's developmental age.

When should you talk about death?

When you talk to your child about death will depend on the prognosis, as well as when you are both ready.

Some people want to talk about death as soon as they receive a cancer diagnosis. This doesn't mean they're giving up. Talking about death can help them reflect on what is important and what they want to do with their time. It can help them organize their own thoughts, feelings and beliefs about death.

Other people may want to put off dealing with this hard topic. They may need time to process their thoughts and emotions before talking to anyone, especially to their children.

When you discuss death with your child will also depend on their age and if they are ready to have the conversation. They might surprise you by asking about death even before you have thought about it yourself.

Keep in mind that there is no perfect time to have this conversation with your child. Look for everyday moments when you can talk to them and find out what they are thinking and feeling. If you wait for the perfect moment, it might never come.

How should you talk about death?

When you decide to talk with your child about death, take time to prepare yourself for the conversation. Knowing your own beliefs will make it easier to find the words you want to use.

Start by checking in with your child about their understanding of what death means. Ask them what they have heard about death and what they think it is. Do your best to answer your child's questions as directly as you can without making it too complicated.

For example, children may ask "What happens if the medicine doesn't cure the cancer?" or "What happens when you die?" Possible explanations might be, "The cancer will stop Mom's heart from beating and she will die," or "The cancer will shut down Mom's body and she will no longer live."

Allow children time to process this information and ask more questions. You can use their questions as a starting point to find out what they think, talk about their concerns and help them cope with their anxiety.

Having this conversation is important. It will help your child make sense of something that is frightening and hard to understand. It will also let them know that they can always talk to you, no matter how difficult the topic is.



Where can you find more information?

This booklet was designed to help you think about talking with your child about cancer and give you some ideas on how to start the conversation. Other resources are available to support you.

Talk to your healthcare team

Your healthcare team can answer difficult questions and give you ideas on how you might talk to your child about cancer. They can also suggest and put you in touch with professionals in your area. These could include social workers, psychologists and therapists who can offer support and guidance.

Find help in your community

It can help to talk to people in your child's circle who may be able to help. Family members, teachers, coaches, leaders and members of your spiritual community and friends' parents can all be part of a child's support system. People who know and care for your child will understand their reactions and behaviours, and so can help them cope.

Check out the library

Books are excellent teachers and friends, especially during hard times. They can explain, clarify and help your child see things from a different angle. Books about cancer help children understand the emotions they are feeling and the changes that may come with the disease. Relating to characters in a story can also help a child feel normal and less alone.

Talk to a patient educator at your cancer centre, ask your healthcare team or speak to a librarian at your local library. They can suggest books to help your child better understand cancer, adjust to changes in their lives and cope with their emotions.

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WE'RE HERE TO HELP



Find information you can trust

Visit cancer.ca for information on more than 100 cancer types. You'll find topics ranging from diagnosis and treatment to managing side effects, living with cancer and reducing your risk. We also have publications, videos and webinars.

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Get answers to your questions

When you have questions about diagnosis, treatment, prevention, emotional support and other services, our trained cancer information specialists can help you find answers. Call us at 1-888-939-3333. Our Cancer Information Helpline is available in English and French with an interpreter service for other languages.

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Connect with someone who's been there

Visit CancerConnection.ca to join our moderated online community. You can join discussion groups, get support and help others at the same time. It's a safe place to connect, learn and share your experience with cancer.

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Find services in your community

Our Community Services Locator (CSL) helps you find the cancer-related services you need. You can search over 4,500 listings across Canada for emotional support programs, home care, help getting to your cancer treatment, where to find a wig or prosthesis and much more. Start your search at cancer.ca/csl.

The Canadian Cancer Society works tirelessly to save and improve lives. We raise funds to fuel the brightest minds in cancer research. We provide a compassionate support system for all those affected by cancer, across Canada and for all types of cancer. Together with patients, supporters, donors and volunteers, we work to create a healthier future for everyone.

Because to take on cancer, it takes all of us.
It takes a society.



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