The Impact of a Parent’s Cancer on Children

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Factors to Consider When Helping Children Cope-

- Talking with your child:
  - Clear, specific, and developmentally appropriate language is important
  - Teenagers may prefer to talk with friends
- Personality of the child: Some children can more easily express their feelings, permitting an adult to better understand their reactions
- Seriousness of the illness: More serious or life-threatening parental illnesses will require different words or messages
- Family dynamics: Availability of and relationships with siblings and other caregivers may help/hinder the child’s ability to cope
- Some children may seek information from outside sources (such as teachers, internet). This information should be filtered as it may be inaccurate or create unnecessary fear
Factors to Consider When Helping Children Cope-II

• Children sense more than most parents realize
• Withholding information or providing vague information may result in children assuming the worst
• Sharing information lets them know that you care about their feelings
• Modeling appropriate emotional/behavioral responses can help children learn how to cope
• Hiding information can burden the parent(s) and caregivers
What Might Children Need to Know?

• The type of cancer (for example, breast cancer or lymphoma)
• Where the cancer is in the body
• What is expected to happen with treatment
• How your and their lives are expected to be changed by the cancer and its treatment

*Information should be tailored to the child’s age, developmental level and personality

Source: American Cancer Society: Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer: Dealing With Treatment
Signs a Child Needs More Support

- Seems unable to handle sadness
- Feels sad all the time
- Inconsolable
- Suicidal or self-injurious thoughts
-Feels extra irritable
- Easily angered
- Declining school performance
- Withdraws or isolates himself or herself
- Acts very different than usual
- Has appetite changes
- Has low energy
- Shows less interest in activities
- Difficulties concentrating
- Frequent crying
- Difficulties managing emotions
- Has trouble sleeping

Source: American Cancer Society: Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer: Dealing With Treatment
Strategies to Help Children Cope with a Parent’s Cancer-I

- Seek help from family, friends, and hospital personnel
- Ensure that the child knows that the parent(s) love them regardless of any medical limitations the illness presents
- Support the children to maintain their own routines (for example, continue piano lessons, remaining on the school soccer team)
- Continue requiring children to meet responsibilities at school and home
- Encourage children to express themselves in a healthy way, such as keeping a journal
- Make sure that you listen to their feelings and needs
- Continue to share fun and positive experiences with them
Strategies to Help Children Cope with a Parent’s Cancer-II

• Make sure children (depending on their age) understand how your illness will change their lives—be realistic and remember that they often fear the worst
• Understand that your illness may affect their mood, concentration, and attitudes
• Let the child’s teachers, instructors, coaches, etc. know what is going on
• Make sure that you and the child understand that family life might change for a while or forever
• Have frequent family discussions
• Assign tasks to family members to allow life to go on as smoothly as possible
Which Special Circumstances May Affect a Child’s Ability to Cope?

- Parental illness in a single parent household may cause more stress and more adversely affect the usual routine
- Financial stresses may be more severe if one parent cannot work or if the family finances were challenged already
- Legal custody or adoption issues may increase coping challenges
- Other current stressors (e.g., academic, social, etc.) may increase coping difficulties
How Involved Should My Child be in My Illness?

- Depending on the age, taking a child to a doctor appointment may reduce some of their fears.
- Avoid exposing children to your suffering.
- If a procedure (such as placing an intravenous line) occurs with your child nearby, ask a nurse or doctor to explain what is going on.
- Help them understand that certain side-effects (such as hair loss from drugs) are not serious and temporary.
- Make sure they understand that changes occur and there are good and bad days.
References and Resources

American Cancer Society: Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer: Dealing With Treatment

Cancercare for Kids:
Toll-free number: 1-800-813-4673
www.cancercareforkids.org

Cancer Really Sucks:
www.cancerreallysucks.org

Kidscope:
www.kidscope.org

Kids Konnected:
Toll-free number: 1-800-899-2866
kidskonnnected.org

National Cancer Institute:
www.cancer.gov

National Children’s Cancer Society:
www.thenccs.org

Super Sibs!:
http://www.alexslemonade.org/campaign/supersibs