



The Impact of a Parent's Cancer on Children

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Factors to Consider When Helping Children Cope-I

- **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

kidskonnected.org

National Cancer Institute:

www.cancer.gov

National Children's Cancer Society:

www.thenccs.org

Super Sibs!:

<http://www.alexslimonade.org/campaign/supersibs>