

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

WHEN TO TALK TO KIDS ABOUT CANCER

DO: Wait until you have some information about your diagnosis and what your treatment will be.

DON'T: Tell them when you're waiting for biopsy results and your diagnosis is still a "what if."

DO: Understand that when kids are suspicious that something is wrong at home, they usually jump to the conclusion that it's their fault.

DON'T: Talk about cancer with your partner when the kids are home. Whispered voices behind closed doors put kids on high alert.

Kids thrive on consistency and knowing what to expect, so during times of major change, they may develop anxiety, get angry and lash out, or refuse to listen.

When you're going through cancer treatment, there are major disruptions to family life. You may not have the energy to do things you did before. Different people may be doing school pick-ups and drop-offs or helping with homework.

It's important to be open with your kids and keep talking about the changes that are happening.

Developmentally, kids believe the world revolves around them. So while our instincts might be that the kids will mostly care about how treatment will affect us, the reality is that they first need to know that you'll be okay, and then they need to know how cancer will affect their lives.

They care about things like: Will you be too tired for your regular activities? Will another parent take over some responsibilities? Will extended family members be around to help? Let your kids know if you won't be working for a while, or won't be able to volunteer in their classroom while your immune system is compromised.

A visual calendar like Mighty + Bright's helps kids truly understand these disruptions; your kids can keep track of what's happening and when, and get an idea of what to expect each day, decreasing anxiety. The calendar can show which caregiver will be helping each day, what's for dinner, and what activities they can look forward to.

WHAT'S NEXT?

AFTER THE BIG CONVERSATION: A GUIDE TO DAY-TO-DAY LIFE

1 GO BEYOND BOOKS. Books are great for explaining complex concepts like cancer. But once they understand what cancer is, kids need to see how it affects real, day-to-day life, and anticipate any changes.

2 KEEP TO A ROUTINE. Kids get anxious when they don't know what to expect. A visual calendar helps your child understand how treatment will **actually affect her life** — meaning she has time to ask questions and prepare emotionally. We like the visual calendar for kids with a parent facing cancer found at mightyandbright.com/cancer

3 PROVIDE A CONSTANT REMINDER. Your kids will need to hear important concepts over and over again. Remind them what comes next in your treatment and what it will mean for them.

4 MAKE FUN PLANS. If cancer can be fun, that is. Plan out activities that are doable for you, so you have something to look forward to together. Easy crafts, movie nights, or easy games, to name a few.



Resilience Campaign helps families facing hard things (like a cancer diagnosis) talk honestly and create routines that put the whole family at ease.

resiliencampaign.org

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT YOUR CANCER DIAGNOSIS



HOW TO TALK TO KIDS ABOUT CANCER

There are few things harder than having to tell your child that you've been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. This conversation is made even more difficult if you know someone who passed away from it, or your kids have been traumatized by it in some other way.

Before you tell your kids, inform their teachers, camp staff, and any caregivers that may be able to lend your child a shoulder to cry on or notice if they're acting out. Ask them to be understanding, but not to ask the kids about it, or bring it up unless your child mentions it. Some kids may want to be private about this information and not talk about it in front of others. Respect their choice.

The best time to talk to your kids about any heavy topic is the beginning of a weekend, for two reasons. First, it often takes kids awhile to process information, and they may come to you with questions over the course of a few days. Secondly, they deserve as much emotional space as they need with no added pressures like school or activities. While it may seem like a distraction is a good idea, that's only true up to a degree. Playing a board game or watching a movie together is much different than sending them to summer camp or on a playdate. Set aside a no-pressure time when you don't have anywhere to be.

The easiest way to begin the conversation is by asking your child if they know what cancer is, and reminding them of someone you know who has survived cancer. For example, "Do you remember last year that Grandma had cancer? And we didn't see her awhile because she was very tired from the medicine they gave her? She is okay now but it wasn't fun for awhile."

Kids are naturally curious and will have a lot of questions about what cancer actually is. The book *What Happens When Someone I Love Has Cancer?* by Sara Olsher (available on Amazon) is an accurate and kid-friendly explanation of what cancer is and how it functions in the body, and it's not at all scary. This explanation is a great, age-appropriate way to help kids understand cancer, and follows up with an explanation of how this will affect them.

Give a little introduction to what cancer is and how it is affecting you. "Cancer is when something goes wrong with a part of a person's body, and they have to take a lot of medicine to get better. This is happening in my [body part]. I will need to have some surgery to take care of this, and then I will have some medicine."

Set out cancer-related books for your kids, and allow them to select one and have you read it to them. Never force a book on your child if they are too upset to keep reading. You can offer to read it and see if they are open to hearing; then leave it in their room as an option for later, when they are ready.

REPEAT AFTER ME

IMPORTANT CONCEPTS FOR KIDS TO HEAR OVER + OVER, AGAIN + AGAIN

You can't "catch" cancer, like you can catch a cold.

No matter what, you will be cared for throughout treatment.

Cancer is no one's fault, and it has nothing to do with anything you did or said.

As much as we wish you could fix it, there is nothing you can do fix cancer, because it has nothing to do with you. The only things we can do are the things we are doing. Your kindness is appreciated, but taking care of me is not your job.

Any feelings you have are okay. A lot of different feelings are normal. We all will feel sad, angry, and worried. These feelings are all okay, and you can talk about them any time you need to.

Keep to a routine as much as possible. When you have an established routine, there's a sense of normalcy in your child's life, no matter what is going on. Kids find calm, stability and love through routine, such as breakfast together or time to cuddle and connect before bed. Disruptions to normal routines can lead to anger, sadness, and anxiety, which often result in behavioral issues.

Involving your kids in the process of your treatment helps them feel like they're a part of it, instead of just having cancer happen to them. Here are a few ways you can involve your kids:

- The idea of a parent losing their hair can be really hard for kids. Many people choose to cut their hair short or shave it before it falls out naturally, and it can be very scary for little kids to see you bald for the first time. Make it a bit easier by handing over the scissors and letting your kids do some of the cutting. Even toddlers can do this (with help).
- If you and your kids are comfortable with it, involve your school or religious community as much as possible. The more people available to support your kids, the better. See if your kids might want to teach their class about what cancer is. Keep in mind, though, that some kids — especially those in the middle grades — won't want other people to know. Respect this decision.
- Consider letting your kids dye a strip of their hair in solidarity (pink for breast cancer, for example).
- Set aside time for short, 15 minute bonding activities like playing cards, reading, and easy crafts.

TALKING ABOUT DEATH

While there are people who die from cancer, there are a great many more who do not. You may choose to not bring up the possibility of death from cancer. If your prognosis is good, it might not need to be part of the discussion (at least in the beginning). But realistically your kids may overhear that people can die from cancer, especially if they are in school. For this reason, you might want to bring it up before someone else does.

If you caught your cancer early (and we very much hope that you did), you can assure your kids that modern medicine does a great job of curing cancer, and you will be fine. Let your kids know that people used to die from cancer a lot — but we now have medicines and treatments that make that much less common.

If your cancer is so advanced that you aren't likely to survive, your situation is very different. First off, we are so, so very sorry. To discuss this with your kids takes an epic amount of bravery.

Choosing whether or not to talk about your death is an incredibly personal choice, and it's one that previous generations never even considered. Thirty years ago, most professionals recommended not telling kids about a parent's terminal illness, thinking that kids wouldn't understand — and possibly not wanting to deal with a very sad and scary conversation. But in talking with now-adults who lost their parents when they were children, most would have preferred to know. Knowing gives kids the opportunity to appreciate the time they have left with their parent. Not being told can lead to feelings of anger, betrayal, and resentment.

Our beliefs about death and what happens after it are so different from family to family that it's difficult for us to make a recommendation about how to handle this conversation with your kids. One thing that seems to be a common thread, though, is the idea that just because someone is no longer with us, doesn't mean they're gone totally. Whether you believe in life after death or not, no one can argue that the impact we have on one another can never be erased.

Make sure your kids understand that cancer is a word that can be used to describe a wide variety of different illnesses:

"When people find out that I have cancer, they might have a very strong reaction. I do not want that to scare you. They are having that reaction because I am young, and this usually happens to older people, and because they don't know yet that it isn't very serious."