

Explaining a Cancer Diagnosis:

Planning for Conversations with Children

A cancer diagnosis is overwhelming. Many parents wonder if, when, and how to tell their children. Talking to children soon after the diagnosis creates a sense of inclusion and trust.

Be truthful. Provide accurate information appropriate to your child's age. Use the word "cancer." Answer questions honestly. If you do not have an answer, tell your child that you do not know the answer right now but will try to find out.

Speak to your child in a private, comfortable place. Meet in a space where everyone can express emotions. Some children will cry or be upset; others will not say much or may seem unaffected. If you have more than one child, think about whether it would be better to talk to your children together or individually. Avoid talking immediately before significant transitions, e.g., going to school or bedtime.

Keep things simple. When explaining your diagnosis, plan to cover the following topics:

Tell your story. Explain the key events or symptoms that led to your diagnosis. Avoid general terms like "I'm sick." Provide the name of the cancer and explain where it is in your body.

Find out what your child knows about cancer. Children are exposed to information about cancer through many sources. It is common for children to have misconceptions or incomplete information.

Explain cancer in child-friendly terms. Accurate information helps children understand how cancer is different from other illnesses and that it is unique to each individual. Children worry less when they can make sense of what is happening around them.

Focus on what is happening now. Explain current symptoms and physical changes. Prepare your child for the next step in your treatment (e.g., surgery, chemotherapy, radiation).

Discuss changes your child will experience. Children want to know how your diagnosis affects them. Talk about their routine: what will stay the same and what will change.

Repetition is Key. This is the first of many conversations about your diagnosis and treatment. You don't have to cover everything or get it all right in one conversation. Create a routine for sharing updates, and provide opportunities for children to ask questions and express concerns.

Activity Idea - Create a Wonders & Worries Jar: These jars help children express their questions and concerns, while providing a place to store them until they can be addressed. Have your child decorate a jar. Cut paper into strips to have available to write down or draw questions or worries. Encourage your child to use the jar as a place to "hold" or "release" their questions and worries until a time when you can focus on them together.



Wonders & Worries

Professional support for children
through a parent's illness.

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We will help you talk with your child, together.

Need additional guidance?

Call Wonders & Worries Helpline at 844-WE-WONDER (1-844-939-6633)

Finding *the Right Words*

Explaining A Cancer Diagnosis:

Finding the Right Words

As you plan what to say to your child, here are some examples and conversation starters.

Tell your story.

“My body isn’t working like it should. I have been coughing and went to see my doctor. I had an MRI (like an x-ray), and the doctor looked at my blood cells. The results told us that I have lung cancer.”

Find out what your child knows about cancer.

“Have you ever heard the word ‘cancer’?” | “What do you know about cancer?”

Clarify misconceptions at this time:

“No one caused my cancer.” | “Cancer is not contagious.” | “You may have heard that sometimes people die of cancer, but most people who have cancer live. I am doing everything I can to help my body get better.”

Explain cancer in child-friendly terms.

“Our bodies are made up of cells. Cells are building blocks in the body. Healthy cells have a job in the body. Cancer cells do not have a job in the body. They get in the way of healthy cells doing their job. They grow and spread if not treated.”

Focus on what is happening now.

“Right now I feel mostly ok. On Thursday, I will start taking medicine called chemotherapy. The job of chemotherapy is to help get rid of cancer cells. I may feel sick and my hair may fall out. This is normal.”

Discuss changes your child will experience.

*“You will still go to school, soccer practice, and piano lessons. Our friends and neighbors will drive you when I can’t.”
“There may be more people calling or coming by to help. You can let me know if this bothers you.” | “Whatever you are feeling is ok. It is normal to feel one way one day and another the next. You can still share your feelings with me.”*

Activity Idea - Weeds in a Garden: Children better understand things they see. Using an example of cancer being like weeds in a garden can help them understand your diagnosis and treatment. “Weeds crowd out healthy plants and flowers like cancer cells crowd out healthy cells. If not treated, weeds spread. Some weeds spread faster than others. There are different ways to get rid of them like pulling or spraying, just like surgery, chemotherapy and radiation are ways to get rid of cancer.” Offer the opportunity for your child to draw a garden or draw what cancer might look like.



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