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By Melissa Taylor

Mommy, What is Cancer?

Talking to Your Kids About Serious Illness



It's hard enough when a parent or grandparent faces cancer or a long-term illness. It's even harder when you have to explain the illness to a child. But questions will arise and your child will look to you for support and answers. If you're facing the challenges that come with a long-term illness, prepare yourself and also learn how to communicate with your child during this confusing time.

Honesty Is Still the Best Policy

Experts agree it's absolutely essential to tell kids about your medical situation. Well-meaning neighbors, friends or other family members could slip and say something, and the child could find out from someone else instead of you.

It's best to be absolutely honest. If a child finds out you've lied to him, that broken trust will create long-term trust issues and behavior problems. That's not to say that you have to explain every possible outcome. Discussions should be adapted

according to your child's age or maturity level. What's more, if you don't know an answer tell your child, "I don't know the answer."

When you or a loved one are diagnosed, here are five basic things you can tell your children:

1. What the illness is.
2. How the illness will affect their life.
3. How the illness will affect the ill person's life (treatments, surgery).
4. Who will take care of them during treatment or if the worst happens.
5. The child did not cause the illness; no one caused it.

The most common illness to affect parents and grandparents is cancer. Certified Child Life Specialist and Therapeutic

Recreation Specialist of Denver's Children's Hospital, Allison B. Donohue, MS, CTRS/CCLS explains cancer to children like this, "Cancer occurs when cells in the body grow so fast, they don't learn how to do their job. Every cell grows in the body with a certain job—saliva to help break down food, white blood cells to help fight infections, etc. When a cell grows rapidly, it is like being a baby one moment and then an adult the next. The cells grew so fast there was no time to learn their job. They are unhelpful; so, if something is unhelpful in our body, the doctors need to work to get it out of the body. We do this through chemo, radiation, or surgery."

After you talk to your child about the basics of the illness, anticipate questions that children commonly ask or will think but not ask:

- The illness is not contagious (if that is true).
- There is nothing the child can do (better) to make the sickness go away.
- Doctors are working really hard to get the ill person well again.
- The treatment will affect the sick person in several ways – such as hair loss, nausea, and fatigue.

After your initial discussion, be sure your children know that you love them and you will always answer any questions.

But, what if they ask the dreaded question . . . Will dad/mom/grandma die?

Peter Van Dernoort, author of *Helping Your Children Cope With Your Cancer, A Guide For Parents and Families* and creator of the support program, C.L.I.M.B., suggests this answer: "We hope not. Right now dad is very ill and we're getting the best treatment and we hope it will be effective. Sometimes it doesn't work; sometimes it does."

Tips to Support Kids Coping with Long Term Illness

Childlife specialist, Donohue suggests two things to help a child cope. First, keep the child a part of the "team" and second, give them a job to do. For example, you could say, "Today mommy is having her chemo medicine. This is the one that makes her tired and her tummy upset. When she gets home tonight, she would love to have a card from you or have you lay down with her and read her a story." This will empower the child says Donohue.

It's also beneficial to keep the routine as close to normal as possible including rules, homework, chores and playtime. If you're asking friends to help with childcare, Donohue recommends asking the child about it. "One child might love the escape; another child might prefer to play at home close to their ill parent. Allow the children to tell you their preferences and then try to provide an activity where they feel best."

If you think your child needs to see a professional for more therapeutic support, consider a support group or a licensed child therapist. For example, here in Colorado, the University of Colorado Cancer Center offers C.L.I.M.B. (Children's Lives Include Moments of Bravery), a free, four-week program for children ages 6 to 10 whose parent has cancer.

If you're facing the challenges that come with a long-term illness, help your children understand what's happening and keep the lines of communication open. Be honest, provide support and remember you are not alone. Many organizations want to help you and support your family. ♦

Melissa Taylor is a mother of 2, freelance writer and an educator with an M.A. in Global Education and more than 10 years of teaching experience.

Resources for Talking to Kids

Books:

Between Me and the River: Living Beyond Cancer: A Memoir by Carrie Host, Colorado wife and mother of three faces cancer with humor and strength.

How to Help Children Cope Through a Parent's Serious Illness by Kathleen McCue Childlife specialist explains what to tell children about the illness with practical advice and stories plus how to tell if your child needs professional help.

Let my Colors Out by Courtney Filigenzi A boy expresses his feelings about his mom's cancer through a rainbow of emotions – sad, jealous, denial, anger, fine.

Mom and the Polka-Dot Boo-Boo by Eileen Sutherland A book for young children to explain breast cancer.

Punk Wig by Lori Ries A boy tells the story of his mom losing her hair from chemotherapy, choosing a punk wig and growing her hair back slowly.

Someone I Love is Sick by Kathleen McCue Customizable book for children ages 2 – 6 about all the stages of cancer in a parent or grandparent.

You Are the Best Medicine by Julie Clark, Colorado mom and founder of Baby Einstein. Clark wrote this comforting picture book after having difficulty explaining her cancer to her young children.

Websites:

Camp Comfort: A Colorado annual bereavement camp for kids that addresses the special needs of grieving children ages 6 to 12. www.mtevans.org

Kimmie Dolls: Kimmie cloth dolls come in seven different ethnicities, with removable hair and bandana to simulate the hair loss of chemotherapy. www.kimmiecares.com

CancerCare for Kids: Support for kids affected by cancer. www.cancercare.org/get_help/special_progs/cc_for_kids.php

Kids Konnected: The mission of Kids Konnected is to provide friendship, understanding, education and support for kids and teens who have a parent with cancer or have lost a parent with cancer. www.kidskonnected.org