



When **kids** ask

10 tips for parents coping with cancer in the family

cancerFAMILYcare
provides **Strength** for
the Journey when
cancer strikes.

About Cancer Family Care

Since 1971, Cancer Family Care (CFC) has provided counseling, education, and emotional support to people affected by cancer. CFC offers four programs: The Center for Individual and Family Counseling, Treehouse Children's Services, The Coping Connection – Education and Outreach, and Tresses Wig Program.

Cancer Family Care seeks to help children and adults cope with the effects of a cancer-related illness or loss. CFC is known throughout Southwestern Ohio and Northern Kentucky as a force of compassion and strength in the face of cancer and bereavement.

Put yourself in the place of a child who has never experienced serious illness in the family. Chances are, you would be frightened not only by what is happening to the sick person, but also by the unexpected behavior of the healthy grown-ups around you. Children, like everyone, fear what they don't understand. You can help your child by explaining to him or her the changes that normally take place in a family when a life-threatening illness strikes.

1. Explain adult behavior.

Adults recognize that emotional reactions are normal in times of serious stress. Children, however, mistakenly may conclude that the family is falling apart. Explain to your child: "I've been crying a lot because your daddy is very sick," or "Your mother has been acting angry lately because she's upset about the cancer. She's not upset with you." Assure your child that such behavior is normal in stressful circumstances and that the family will survive.

2. Listen to your child's feelings.

Small children may react to an illness by changes in their behavior (for example, having nightmares, getting in fights, wetting the bed, clinging to parents, or withdrawing into themselves). These signs mean that children need more attention. Sit down and ask them what they're feeling. Make them feel safe in talking to you. If they report something outrageous like "I made Daddy get sick," don't react quickly by denying these perceptions. Encourage children to explain their feelings. Then gently persuade them to a different point of view.

3. Give reassurance.

Child experts tell us that children think of themselves as the center of the world. They believe their actions and thoughts can cause things to happen magically. Johnny may think that his bad report card caused Grandpa to get sick, or that getting angry at Mom is what made her slip into a coma. Make sure your child does not feel responsible for the illness.

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4. Share information honestly.

When children ask questions about the cancer, always answer honestly and accurately at the child's level of understanding. Avoid the risk of having to go back and admit that you were not truthful at an earlier stage of the cancer. This will erect a barrier of mistrust between you and your child that will cause greater suffering in the long run. If you do not know the answer to a question, tell the child that you do not know. "We don't know yet whether this treatment will make Mama better. The doctors tell us they're hoping it will. We won't know for six more weeks."

5. Be prepared for the "D" word.

When someone in the family is very ill, you can bet that the children are thinking about the possibility of death as much as you are. Resist the impulse to protect them from the pain of such thoughts. They can cope with it—on their own level—if the adults can cope with it. Unless death is imminent, wait for your child to bring up the subject. Then be honest in your reply. If Daddy is very, very sick and may die, tell your child this is a possibility. Share your hopes but never say, "Your daddy is not going to die." We all will die some day. Pretending that this isn't the case will not banish the thought of death from your child's mind. It will only banish open discussion about death, leaving your child alone with such thoughts.

6. Encourage visits with the sick person.

Since the unknown is almost always scarier than reality, encourage children to spend time with the sick person. If the sick person has changed in ways that might startle the child, such as weight loss or mental confusion, simply prepare the child ahead of time. Talk about medical equipment that may be in the room: IV drip, heart monitor, or oxygen mask. Assure the child that despite outward changes, "Uncle Joe is still the same person inside."

7. Strengthen your child's social network.

Tell your child's teacher, soccer coach, and dance instructor that Susie's brother is very ill. Since you may feel too drained of energy to give Susie all the attention she needs, ask other

adults in her life to pay special attention to her. Also ask them to report any unusual behavior to you.

8. Give the child a task.

All people, including children, feel less frightened when they do something helpful. Making a card for Grandma, helping with the dishes so Mom can get to the hospital, or making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches so the sick person will gain weight are all ways to make children feel included.

9. Teens have special needs.

Though all children have a desire to feel included when their family is in crisis, teenagers have a competing need—the need to be separate from the family. Teens are at a point in their psychological development where they are seeking to establish an identity apart from the family. The best approach is compromise. First of all, parents should tell teenagers that the conflict is legitimate, so the children will not feel guilty about it. Secondly, parents and teens should work out an agreement by which the teens accept added responsibilities at home, yet have permission to be away on a regular basis.

10. Consider outside help.

If you find you can't help your child, get help for yourself. A professional such as a counselor can guide you or your child in dealing with an emotionally charged subject like illness or approaching the death of a loved one. Children take their cues from adults. Can they handle the news about Mom's cancer? Yes...if you can!

A serious illness brings many changes to family life. But families have an amazing capacity to adapt to change and to grow from it. A cancer crisis can bring out the best as well as the worst in people. These suggestions will improve your communication and strengthen your love for one another.



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