

## 33. Relationship with Children

One of the most distressing tasks for any parent (or other relative) with cancer is having to tell their children that they have a life-threatening illness. It is even more distressing when children must be told to prepare themselves for the death of their parent. Given the enormity of the news they have to convey, many parents worry about damaging their children by saying the wrong thing, at the wrong time, and in the wrong way. This is particularly the case for single parents who may have no one to talk these issues through with. Parents often imagine that unless they 'get it right', their children will be emotionally scarred for the rest of their lives. First, it is important to state that parents know their children better than any 'expert' could. Therefore parents' judgements about what is the right thing to do for their children should be supported and encouraged.

### How can I manage my relationship with my children?

1. It can be helpful to consider what and why you want to tell your children about the illness. What is it you feel they should know? It can be a good idea to rehearse what it is you want to say, as well as anticipate what they are likely to say and do in response. If you are worried about getting upset in front of your children rest assured that it is not harmful to them. If the children have more than one parent, you should try as parents to be consistent with one another.
2. Start by asking the child what he or she understands about what has been happening. The child may well know you have been ill. You can then correct any misunderstandings as well as gently bring the child up-to-date with the current situation.
3. Think about the age of the child. A very young child's beliefs about illness may be quite limited, while an older child may already have picked up some powerful associations of what cancer 'means'. Younger children will tend to worry about the safety of the family, their own security, and whether or not they are to blame for the illness. They should be very clearly reassured about this. Older children are more likely to be concerned about the impact of the illness on their own lives. Adolescent children often feel conflict between wanting to support the ill parent and wanting to continue to develop their independent life away from the family (consequently feeling guilty when they are not at home).
4. Try to be guided by your child's reactions. Make the illness manageable for the child by not presenting it as a tragedy. Break the news a little at a time. The attention span of young children is short so long-winded explanations are unhelpful. Smaller chunks of information are better. The child should be given ample time to react and say what they feel. If a child withdraws, it may be a sign that they have had enough for the moment. You could suggest returning to the conversation whenever the child feels ready to know more.
5. Use simple unambiguous language so as to avoid misunderstanding. For example, saying that one may have to 'lose' a breast can be confusing to a young child who is accustomed to losing things all the time. Either demonstrate using your body, or use suitable media according to the child's age: e.g. perhaps toys or pictures with a very young child to demonstrate the loss of a breast.
6. Use the term 'cancer' because, by using it, the word becomes less powerful. If the child is in school, explain a few of the basic facts about cancer so that if he or she later hears the word used on the playground they will be better equipped to separate fact from fiction. For example, parents should make it clear that cancer is not contagious, that there are many different types of cancer, and that not everyone dies from it, etc.
7. While being open and honest with one's child is important, it is essential to balance this with the child's other needs. Children don't need to be told about every follow-up test that you undergo or the results of your blood tests. It may be more helpful to discuss the disease with your child only when there is something definite to report that has implications for them.
8. Feel free to reassure your child that, no matter what happens, they will always be safe and loved.
9. Warn your child about the side-effects of treatment: hair loss, nausea, fatigue. Children sometimes worry that these are signs that the parent is becoming more ill rather than being the effects of treatment. Explain that while you are undergoing treatment, things around the home may be different, and that family members may be a bit more emotional than usual.
10. Ask your child if they have any questions of their own. If they have a direct question always answer it rather than skirt around it. If you are unsure about the answer it is better to say "I don't know but I'll try to find out" than to guess or lie. Avoiding difficult questions merely fuels the child's fears.
11. Keep your child focused on the normal activities of their lives rather than your illness. It is essential that your child's developmental needs are not ignored or neglected. In this way they will continue to feel loved and secure.