

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?

- 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.
- 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.
- 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).
- 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.
- 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.

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- 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.
- 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.
- Feel free to reassure your child that, no matter what happens, they will always be safe and loved.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- **If your child is a carer– they may not recognise themselves as a carer.** Caring can be a range of types including personal care, practical help and emotional support

Local Resources:

<p>TTVS– Torridge Council Voluntary Services Carewise 14 Bridgeland Street Bideford Devon EX39 2QE Tel: 01271 479380</p>	<p>Carewise supports and works with children and young people from across North Devon, up to the age of 18 who look after or support parents, relatives or siblings with care needs. They can offer support and understanding, advice and information, trips and outings to fun places, a Young Carers Information Pack and a quarterly newsletter. Email: enquiries@carewise.org.uk</p>
<p>Bright Futures—North Devon and Torridge Address as above Tel:07855 235550—Abi Mandeville Website: www.torridgecvs.org.uk/services/brightfutures/</p>	<p>Bright Futures offers support to young carers (aged 14-17) and young adult carers (aged 18-24) to help them get the skills, confidence and help they need to manage periods of transition and change in order to build their resilience and improve their</p>
<p>Devon Carer—Young Carers Helpline:03456 434 435</p>	<p>There are different ways you can get in touch with Devon Carers, by phone, Live Chat through Pubble (which is the Advice Line Team) or through The pod. They are here to help you. Just Ask.</p>

Living With and Beyond Cancer Information Sheet

33. Relationship with Children - Resources/Information

Local Resources:

<p>Macmillan Cancer Care Counselling The Fern Centre, North Devon District Hospital Web: https://overandabove.org.uk/fern-centre/</p>	<p>Jess French, Lead Macmillan Cancer care Counsellor Tel: 01271 334472 (ext. 5672) Email: jess.french@nhs.net</p>
<p>Devon Carer—Young Carers Helpline:03456 434 435</p>	<p>There are different ways you can get in touch with Devon Carers, by phone, Live Chat through Pubble (which is the Advice Line Team) or through The pod. They are here to help you. Just Ask.</p>

National Resources:

<p>Riprap http://www.riprap.org.uk/about/</p>	<p>Riprap is a website for teenagers who have a parent with cancer.</p>
<p>HOPE Support Services Overross House Ross Park Ross-on-Wye Herefordshire HR9 7US Tel: 01989 566317 Website: www.hopesupport.org.uk Email: help@hopesupport.org.uk</p>	<p>If the child/ren are aged 11+ - 25 and they have a close family member has been diagnosed with a life threatening illness they are here to help. If you are at school, college or university there are some online resources for you, live group chats with others in your year that understand what you are going through, to downloadable pack to help you make informed decisions about leaving home.</p>
<p>Winston’s Wish Shop Tel: 01242 515157 Website: www.winstonswish.org Email: ask@winstonswish.org Freephone National Helpline: 08088 020 021 Monday -Friday 9.00am-5.00pm Online chat open Wednesdays and Fridays 12pm—4pm</p>	<p>Winston’s Wish was set up to help bereaved children and young people after the death of a parent or sibling. You can buy books from the online shop: A Child’s Grief / As Big As It Gets The Secret C / You Don’t Understand</p>
<p>Macmillan Cancer Support Line www.macmillan.org.uk Call 0808 808 00 00 — 7 days per week 8.00am—8.00pm</p>	<p>Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. Please note that calls to this number are not free when made from outside the UK. If you are calling from outside of the UK call on +44 207 091 2230</p>
<p>Macmillan on-line Community</p>	<p>Online support— to share experiences or vent your emotions find others who understand—join today!</p>
<p>Marie Curie Support Line — Living with a terminal illness and looking for support www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-support</p>	<p>Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. The Support Line is open 8am – 6pm Monday to Friday and 11am – 5pm Saturday</p>

Other Resources :

<p>Book: ‘My parent has cancer and it really sucks’ – by Maya Silva and Marc Silva ISBN9781402273070</p>
<p>Maya was 16 when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. She has written this book with her father in order to help other teenagers.</p>
<p>Film: Macmillan Video ‘What is a young carer’ , please follow link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Th6_pSiRgnY</p>