WHEN SOMEONE A CHILD LOVES HAS CANCER

A guide from the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media
TALKING WITH A CHILD About Cancer

When you need to talk to a child about cancer, whether it is your own diagnosis or someone else's, you may feel worried about the best way to share and talk about this hard news. Here are some reminders that may help.

- **Being there for the child is what matters most.** There are no perfect words and no perfect timing. Your care and attention is the most important thing for helping the child through the hard news and hard times.

- **Follow the child’s lead.** You can follow a child's lead by asking them what they already know about cancer and letting them ask you questions. A child may want to ask a few questions at first and come back to you later with more questions. You can begin to have conversations about the loved one's illness in small pieces, understanding that the child may not be ready for all of the details at once. You can begin a conversation about the cancer by asking the child what they have noticed has changed about their loved one.

- **Speak simply and honestly.** Use the word “cancer” and talk in terms the child can understand about how cancer is different from other illnesses. Young children may need help understanding that a common cold, for example, is different from cancer. Be sure the child understands that you can’t “catch” cancer. You can use a doll to talk about what parts of the body are sick.

- **Be open about what you know.** Children may ask questions that you might not know the answers to, and that is okay! Let the child know that while there are many unknowns with cancer, there are doctors working on a plan. Be clear with the child that they can trust you to let them know about new information or changes. You can make a list together of questions to continue to think about or ask a doctor.
WHAT A CHILD MAY FEEL

Just like you, children will have all sorts of emotions about their loved one's cancer: sadness, worry, helplessness, anger, guilt, and more. And, there will be many times that they are happy and able to enjoy life like always. Children may switch between different emotions very quickly. Different feelings and behaviors are normal, and you can help a child know their feelings are okay. Sharing with them some of your own feelings and letting them know they can always talk to you will help them know they are safe. You can always reach out to professionals for support if you see any signs that worry you, such as:

Sudden drastic changes in school performance

Engaging in risky behaviors

Signs that the child is considering harming themselves or others

The child seems sad or worried the majority of the time (rather than these feelings coming and going)

HOW YOU CAN HELP...

Throughout the loved one's illness, the most important thing you can do for a child is to be present for them. Here are a few ideas of things you can do to help the child:

Keep a routine
In times of uncertainty, routines can help us all feel safe. Some changes may be unavoidable when someone in a child's life has cancer, but some predictability in schedules, caregivers, fun activities, and expectations at home and school can give a child some sense of control and normalcy. When changes do need to happen, be open with children about why things might need to change and what they can expect to stay the same.

Define a role
When a loved one has cancer, children may want to know what they can do to help. You can give the child a special role or responsibility that is age appropriate, like caring for a pet, preparing an occasional meal, or making art for their loved one. Make it clear to the child that they are not expected to do more than that – be sure the child understands it is not their job to exclusively care for or heal their loved one.
Include the child
The unknowns that come with a cancer diagnosis can be hard for children, just as they are for adults. You can let the child know that the uncertainty is hard for you, too, and help them feel more secure by letting them know that you will be open with them about new information. Keeping the child informed when there are changes can help them feel included and safe.

Provide space for emotions
Some children may be very expressive with their emotions, some may be very reserved, and some may go back and forth between the two. As a caring adult in the child’s life, you can let them know all of this is okay, and that you are there if and when they want to share with you. You can share some of your own feelings with the child and talk about some things you do when you have big feelings – like listen to music, write, or talk to friends. Sometimes older children, especially, may feel most comfortable having conversations in the car, or on a walk.

Encourage play
Imaginative play, time with friends, and activities the child typically enjoys are important when a loved one is ill, and can be helpful for a child processing difficult emotions. You can also reassure the child that it is good and important for them to continue to play, learn, and grow even while their loved one is sick.

Offer reminders of a loved one
If the cancer has changed how much time the child is able to spend with their loved one, the child might appreciate having something tangible from their loved one to keep with them. You can help the child find a photo, toy, or article of clothing that they can keep with them.

Prepare the child for what is unfamiliar
Doctors and nurses are there to help people who are sick, but the tools they use may look scary. If the child lives with the person with cancer, some unfamiliar medical equipment may even come into the child’s home. You can help children understand the purpose of the tools and treatments that are helping their loved one heal. During cancer treatment, the child’s loved one may even begin to look or sometimes act differently. You can prepare the child that changes like this may happen, and remind the child that their loved one is still the same person who loves them.

A MESSAGE
From Fred Rogers...
“Human relationships are primary in all of living. When the gusty winds blow and shake our lives, if we know that people care about us, we may bend with the wind... but we won’t break.”
Many communities have support groups and faith-based programs to help children and their families as they face cancer. You can ask the child’s school and the hospital where the loved one is being treated about support options.

If you have questions about cancer, treatment options, or need to talk to a professional, The American Cancer Society provides 24/7, confidential and free support. Please call the following number: **1-800-227-2345**

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