

Talking with your children about a cancer diagnosis

Tips:

- When talking to your children about a cancer diagnosis it is important to use simple language and give a brief statement of what has occurred.
- Tell your children: the name of the illness; what part of the body is affected; how it was discovered and what will be done to treat your illness.
- Calling illness a "boo-boo" may confuse children about common illnesses being as serious as cancer.
- Ask your children what they know about cancer, and what they want to know.
- Tell your children basic facts about cancer such as:
 - cancer is no one's fault and your child has not caused your cancer
 - nothing they have said, done, or thought can cause your cancer
 - they cannot 'catch' your cancer, it is not like a cold or flu
 - it is not always clear why cancer develops
- Children often need to hear the information again, or may ask the same questions over and over.
- Remind your children that they can always ask questions if they do not understand what is happening.
- Encourage questions, and reassure them there are no dumb questions.
- Accept their unwillingness to talk. Children will talk when they are ready.

Suggestions for helping your child tell others:

- Your children may not want to tell everyone, or know what to say. It is important for them to let their friends know what they are comfortable talking about, and what they are not. You could say to your children:
 - "It's ok to tell other kids. It's ok to share your feelings."
 - "It's ok too if you don't want to talk about it."
 - "You could say to your friends, 'I don't want to talk about it.'"
 - "Or you could just say that your parent is sick."
- Children at school may feel uncomfortable and not know what to say. Sometimes children may say unkind things or make fun of things they don't understand. You could say to your child:
 - "Not everyone has a parent with cancer."
 - "Your friends may not understand how you feel."
 - "You might feel awkward or weird around them."
 - "If your friends say hurtful remarks, you could ignore it or ask how they would feel if it was their parent".

Living with uncertainty:

Sometimes waiting for diagnosis, tests or treatment results can leave you and your family in uncertainty. Here are some suggestions to help with talking to your children in times of uncertainty.

Keep talking:

- Tell your children it is okay to ask questions.
- Tell them that worrying, when things seem uncertain is normal and everyone is different in how they feel and express their worry.
- Ask your children if they are worried or afraid, and what they may be worried or afraid of.
- Acknowledge how hard uncertainty is for them and for everyone in the family.

Reassurance:

- You will let them know of any changes to your health.
- You intend to take the best possible care of yourself so that you hope to live for a long time.
- You have a back-up plan for their care in the worst-case scenario.
- You hope they will share their worries with you, and you will help them find ways to ease their worries.
- You hope your child will be able to put aside their worries and continue with their activities and life as though it will all work out in the end.

BC Cancer resources:

- [Talking to My Family](#) – BC Cancer website information
- [Cancer in my Family](#) – a children’s website especially designed for children age 6-12.
- Children’s Support Group (to register call Patient & Family Counselling Services at a Cancer Centre)
- The Adventures of Fox & Owl and Scribble & Paste workbooks (ask for a copy at your Cancer Centre, Patient & Family Counseling Services. To download or purchase a copy go to [Talking to My Family](#))
- Reaching out to your Children When Comes to Your Family. Slakov, J., (2007) BC Cancer, Vancouver. Borrow from the BC Cancer Library or ask for a copy at Patient & Family Counselling Services at a Cancer Centre