



Wonders & Worries

Professional support for children  
through a parent's illness.

We will, together.

# Tips for Discussing Illness with Children

**Honesty is your best asset.** Provide honest and accurate information that is appropriate for your child's developmental level related to the illness and its treatment. It can be helpful to talk with older children first, and to give them the opportunity to help explain the situation to younger children.

**Children process information differently** and often need to hear things more than once. It is normal for a child to request to "go play" soon after hearing difficult information. This does not mean that he/she did not understand.

**Say the name of the disease.** Many children will hear it eventually. If your child hears family members explain the diagnosis, it can help them feel included and trustworthy.

**Keep children and teens informed** about the current medical status as you know it. You do not need to have all of the answers when you talk with your child.

**Find out the answers to their questions.** If your child asks a question, and you don't know the answer – tell them. And tell them you will let them know when you have more information.

**Share the treatment plan.** Let children know what you are doing to help treat the illness and what the side effects might be. Explain changes related to your energy level, appearance and mood.

**Fill in missing information with facts and experiences.** If possible, offer children the choice to go visit the treatment center or visit the hospital. Or find an appropriate video online. Make sure they are well prepared for what to expect. Wonders & Worries partners with Texas Oncology to provide tours of their cancer treatment centers, for example.

**Talk about biological origins of disease.** Stress to your child that they did not cause the illness in any way and that it is not contagious (if this is true).

**Encourage children to ask questions.** Older children and teens may even want to ask the medical staff questions.

**Provide space and opportunities for emotions.** Help your children express their feelings and let them know that you are willing to talk about anything they would like to discuss. Help your child find acceptable ways to express anger.

**Express your emotions in front of your children.** This models for them that it is alright to feel, and have different emotions at different times.

**Encourage your children to talk to alternative support people.** They may be afraid or embarrassed to talk to the person with the illness in fear that it may upset them.

**Maintain your routines.** Predictability gives your children a sense of security during an uncertain time. Explain any necessary changes in routines. For example, “Nana will pick you up from school this week.”

**Give permission to play.** Let children and teens know they can still have fun and do normal activities even though your family is dealing with a serious illness.

**Reassure children that they will be cared for** no matter what happens. Talk about who is available to help take care of them, and make a safety plan in case you need to go to the hospital unexpectedly.

**Allow children to find ways to help** and include them in new family routines related to the illness. Be careful, however, not to put too much additional responsibility on children.

**Look for changes in behavior.** Specifically, look for changes in mood, eating habits, interests, sleeping patterns, etc.

**Inform schools** about what is going on in the family, as it may impact your child’s school performance.

**Find others like you.** If possible, have your children interact with other children and teens who may be facing similar life experiences. It helps them know they are not alone.

**Be prepared to discuss difficult topics, including death.** It is normal for children to ask if someone might die from a serious illness. With a cancer diagnosis you might say, “Some people do die from cancer, but most people get better.”

If the illness is terminal, you can focus on what is happening now and what is expected in the near future. You can let children know that you will keep them informed if/when things change.

