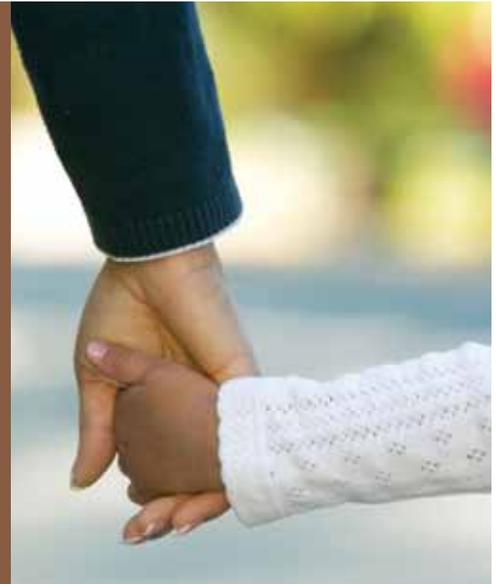


Talking to Your Children About Cancer

Kids Express Program

Department of Social Work
Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center



Kids Express is a program to help adult cancer patients talk with their children about their illness. We offer consultations, counseling, and educational material for patients and families. Inside are some of our recommendations to help you start this discussion.

It can be difficult to talk to children about your cancer. You may want to try to protect them from your illness. We understand this feeling. Still, talking with your children is very important. The Department of Social Work is also available to help you through this.

Be honest about your illness.

Children can sense when something is wrong. They are very sensitive to tension and stress in the home. If you do not tell them what is happening, it may cause more fear. Being open with your children helps them to build trust. It shows them that they can come to you with any questions and concerns. Remember to choose words that they can understand. It is also helpful to talk to your children's teachers and other caregivers. This helps the people in your children's

lives understand and be aware of how your children are doing. It can help them to look out for changes in your children's behavior or ability to cope.

Use the proper name ("breast cancer" or a "brain tumor").

Terms like "a lump," "a bump," and "boo boo," are confusing. If you do not say the word "cancer," your children may hear it first from someone else. Explain that "cancer" is a general name for many illnesses. This helps make clear that what is happening to you may not be the same as what happened to someone else.

Tell your children they did nothing to cause your illness.

Young children sometimes blame themselves for things they have no control over. Let them know that nothing they did caused your cancer. It is not anyone's fault.

Cancer is not contagious.

Children often learn about sickness by getting a cold or the flu. They might be afraid that someone else in the family will “catch” cancer too. Let them know that cancer is not contagious.

Invite your children to ask any and all questions.

Let them know there are no questions too big or too small. Don't worry if you don't have all the answers. If you don't know an answer right away, tell them you will find out and get back to them.

Validate your children's feelings.

Children will have many different feelings and reactions. These reactions may surprise you, so it is important to ask how they are feeling. Listen and accept their feelings. Let them know that these feelings are okay.

Be accessible. Set aside protected time to focus on your children.

Give your children time with you where cancer is not the main focus. Let them feel that the good parts of life are still going on.

Maintain your children's daily routines.

Children find comfort in set routines and limits. Try to keep their regular schedule and maintain the house rules as much as possible. Let them know that there will always be people to care for them. Try to prepare them if there are going to be changes to their routine.



Seek out resources for you and your family if needed.

Ask for help from family, friends, teachers, or neighbors. Getting help with daily tasks can help keep your children's lives as normal as possible. Remember, if you need more help, we have counselors available for you. The Department of Social Work can provide services for you to help manage your cancer treatment.

Kids Express Program
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