Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Preparing Your Child for a Parent's Death

This information explains how to talk with your child about the end of your life.

Knowing that you're nearing the end of your life and that you will be leaving your child can be devastating. What to say and how to support your child during this time can feel overwhelming and scary. Like adults, children may need help understanding and coping with this information. This resource can help guide the conversation you have with your child about the end of your life.

Preparing your child

There is no easy way to prepare a child for the death of a parent, but you don't have to do this alone. Ask your spouse, partner, family member, religious or spiritual leader, or your social worker to help you with this conversation.

How your child responds to you approaching the end of life will depend on their age, understanding of death, and how people close to them are coping. You know your child best. Every family is different in how they approach this conversation. Here are some ways you can help your child understand and cope with the end of your life.

Keep your child informed

Your child may be aware that you're getting sicker by noticing changes in your behavior and appearance. They may also notice that you're going to the hospital more often or staying in the hospital for a longer period. It's important to talk to your child about what they see and hear and let them know they can ask questions.

It's also important to be open and honest about what is happening. You may

say “the cancer is growing, and the doctors say the medicine isn’t working anymore. I’m not getting better and I’m going to die.” While you may want to protect your child and make them feel that you’ll be okay, you want to avoid overpromising or lying. This can cause even more confusion for them. Be honest and give them the space to ask questions and form their own thoughts.

Share your own thoughts and feelings

It’s normal to want to avoid crying in front of your child, but expressing your emotions can show them healthy coping skills. If you feel comfortable, you can share your own thoughts and feelings with your child about approaching the end of your life. It can be helpful for them to hear what you’re feeling and help them express their own feelings. If your family follows a religion or spirituality practice, you may find it helpful to include your beliefs in the conversation.

Talk about past experiences with death

Talking to your child about other experiences they had with death, whether it was the death of a family member, pet, or TV character, can help guide your conversation. It can be helpful to use their reactions to those experiences to talk about their feelings in relation to your death.

Help your child feel connected to you

You can also talk with your child about ways to feel connected to you even after you’re gone. Talk about memories they have with you that will stay with them forever. You can write letters to your child or record videos of yourself for them to watch on special occasions or milestones in their future.

Talk to their teachers and coaches

If your child is in school, let their teachers know about what they’re experiencing. This can help them feel supported at school too. A teacher or counselor may be able to provide a place for your child to express their feelings throughout the day. You may also want to talk to other members of social groups that your child is a part of, such as coaches, instructors, or religious figures. Adjusting to life without you will be hard but building a network of support will be helpful to your child.

Take care of yourself

The best thing you can do for your child is take care of yourself. Choose someone you feel comfortable talking to, even if you're not sure what to say. Let family and friends help you with your daily tasks. Creating a support system for you and your family is important. Remember that people are there for you just as you are there for your child.

Resources for you and your family

MSK resources

No matter where you are in the world, there is support available to you and your family. MSK offers a range of resources for grieving families and friends. You can learn more about these resources at www.mskcc.org/experience/caregivers-support/support-grieving-family-friends.

Talking with Children About Cancer Program

Talking with Children About Cancer is a program to help support adults receiving cancer treatment as they parent their children and teenagers. Our social workers offer family support groups, individual and group counseling, connections to resources, and guidance for professionals in the community including school social workers, school psychologists, guidance counselors, teachers, and school staff. To learn more visit, www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/talking-with-children.

MSK Counseling Center

646-888-0200

Some bereaved families find counseling helpful. Our psychiatrists and psychologists lead a bereavement clinic that provides counseling and support to individuals, couples, and families who are grieving, as well as medicine to help if you feel depressed.

Spiritual Care

212-639-5982

Our chaplains are available to listen, help support family members, pray,

contact community clergy or faith groups, or to simply be a comforting person and a spiritual presence. Anyone can request spiritual support, regardless of formal religious affiliation.

Additional resources

There are books, educational resources, and community support programs available for parents and children. For more information about these programs, call your social worker or visit www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/talking-with-children/resources.

Helpful websites

Bright Spot Network
www.brightspotnetwork.com
This is a national nonprofit that offers resources, education, and support to families experiencing a cancer diagnosis, treatment, and survivorship. They focus on young parents and guardians caring for young children at the time of diagnosis, including those diagnosed during pregnancy.

Cancer*Care*
www.cancercare.org
800-813-HOPE (800-813-4673)
This is a national nonprofit organization that helps people with cancer and their caregivers through counseling, education, information, referrals, and financial assistance.

Cancer Support Community
www.cancersupportcommunity.org
Provides support and education for people affected by cancer.

Red Door Community
212-647-9700
www.reddoorcommunity.org
Provides meeting places for people living with cancer and their family and friends. Gives people a place where they can meet others to build support systems. Offers free support and networking groups, lectures, workshops, and social events. Red Door Community used to be called Gilda's Club.

Ann's Place
www.annsplace.org
203-790-6568
Provides counseling, support groups, and wellness activities for people with cancer and their caregivers and family.

The Gathering Place
www.touchedbycancer.org
216-595-9546
The Gathering Place offers free programs and services addressing the emotional, physical, spiritual and social needs of people affected by cancer.

Helpful books
Books for children about death, dying, and grief

Always by My Side
For ages 4 to 8
Author: Susan Kerner

Everett Anderson's Goodbye
For ages 5 to 8
Author: Lucille Clifton

Gentle Willow: A Story for Children about Dying
For ages 4 to 8
Author: Joyce C. Mills

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf
For ages 4 and up
Author: Leo Buscaglia

The Goodbye Book
For ages 3 to 6
Author: Todd Parr

Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children
For ages 5 and older

Author: Bryan Mellonie

The Memory Box: A Book about Grief
For ages 4 to 9
Author: Joanna Rowland

I Miss You: A First Look at Death
For ages 4 to 8
Author: Pat Thomas and Leslie Harker

The Next Place
For ages 5 and older
Author: Warren Hanson

Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss
For ages 6 to 9
Author: Michaelene Mundy

Samantha Jane's Missing Smile: A Story About Coping with the Loss of a Parent
For ages 5 to 8
Author: Julie Kaplow and Donna Pincus

Saying Goodbye to Daddy
For ages 4 and older
Author: Judith Vigna

Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss
For ages 8 and older
Author: Pat Schwiebert

What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?
For ages 5 to 10
Author: Trevor Romain

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death
For ages 4 to 7
Author: Laurie Kransy Brown and Marc Brown

Where Are You? A Child's Book about Loss
For ages 4 to 8
Author: Laura Olivieri

Activity books for children about death, dying, and grief

Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies
For ages 5 to 8
Author: Janis Silverman

When Someone Very Special Dies: Children Can Learn to Cope with Grief
For ages 9 to 12
Author: Marge Heegaard

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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