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Memorial Sloan Kettering
Cancer Center

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We encourage you to explore our tips for parents, teachers, classmates, and returning students. If you have particular concerns, please contact our Child Life Office at [212-639-8285](tel:212-639-8285) or childlife@mskcc.org.

For Parents

If you are a parent of a child or young adult with cancer, you may have spent many hours by his or her side at home and in the hospital. When your child returns to school, he or she will spend much of the day with teachers and peers.

If you are concerned about your child's well-being during this re-integration period, you can:

Speak with your child's doctor to be sure your child is medically ready to return to school.

Meet with the school nurse and develop a plan in the event that your child feels ill during the day.

Let the school staff know of any special accommodations that your child may need – particularly related to learning needs – as soon as possible.

Most children will require minimal changes to their routines when they return to school, and will thrive socially and developmentally in the classroom setting.

For Teachers and Classmates

Many teachers have questions about what to tell other students when a child comes back to the classroom after cancer treatment. Students may ask: Why has my friend been out of school for so long? Will he or she look different? Can we catch what he or she had?

The answers to these questions and others will vary depending upon the ages of the student and classmates. We recommend that you give your students developmentally appropriate information – but not too much detail that could overwhelm them.

To prepare your students, you can:

Encourage them to ask questions, providing a safe environment for students to share their concerns.

Speak with a hospital social worker or child life specialist, or a school psychologist or social worker, to get an idea of what is developmentally appropriate to tell your students.

You and the child's parents may notice that he or she is anxious about keeping up with classmates. We recommend that parents and teachers work together to address these concerns. In some cases, a school psychologist may be helpful in evaluating the child and providing strategies to deal with issues that arise.

Some students may experience late effects of cancer treatment and require cognitive or physical accommodations to help them throughout their schooling. If you are concerned with any of these issues, please contact your medical team for a referral to a specialist.

For Returning Students

For most kids, being able to return to school also means that they are healthy enough to get back to their normal routines. This can be an exciting time for children and young adults who are looking forward to reconnecting with friends and participating in activities they enjoy.

However, kids returning to school during or after the treatment of a long illness may be concerned about how their peers will respond to them, what questions they will ask, whether they will be treated differently than the other classmates, and whether friends will mention changes in physical attributes (such as hearing loss) or in appearance (especially hair loss). Occasionally, they may have concerns that are similar to those of their parents, such as what happens if they feel sick during the school day.

Because all children are different, we recommend that you speak with your child about the fears that he or she has and address any questions directly – throughout the process, not just at the beginning. Often, a social worker or other healthcare professional such as a child life specialist or nurse can talk more specifically about any uneasiness or worry your child might be feeling.

Dealing with Teasing or Bullying

Whether initiated by siblings or peers, children of all ages may at some point experience teasing or bullying. Some children are more vulnerable to teasing than others – especially those who have experienced the trauma of undergoing cancer treatment.

Frequent teasing can be painful and harmful to a child or young adult's self esteem. As a caregiver, educator, or supporter, you can teach the child constructive ways to respond to teasing.

Tips for parents and teachers to address teasing or bullying

Gather Information – Find out the environment surrounding the incidents. Who is doing the teasing? How frequently? Where does the teasing occur? How does the child's reaction to the teasing vary from episode to episode? Does the child encourage the teasing? Is there a pattern?

Teach Appropriate Responses – Discourage teasing by encouraging the child to walk away without saying a word. At first, the teaser may try even harder to get a response, but it's important that the child hold his or her ground and not respond. Or, a child could have a quick response ready that will disarm the teaser, without teasing back.

Practice Responses – Role-playing can increase a child's confidence in dealing with teasing. The more a child practices appropriate responses, the more likely he or she will be to use them when teased.

Provide Love and Encouragement – When a child comes up with a method that works, support him or her in these efforts by mentioning how proud you are.

If teasing does not stop with these interventions, parents and teachers should intervene. Bullying should not be dismissed. You can support your child by acknowledging and addressing the issues in an effort to boost the child's self-esteem.

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