



# Talking with Your Child about His or Her Illness

*I don't know when the best time is to talk to my child about some of the things I know we need to discuss. I want to make sure she isn't wondering about something and is afraid or having a hard time asking about it.*

No matter how young or old a child is, each child handles illness and treatment in unique ways. Reactions can be influenced by past experiences, how the child is treated, how safe he or she feels, how much discomfort he or she has, and other issues.

You can help your child find ways to cope with this life-changing experience in a positive way. As a result, your child may discover important things—about himself or herself, as well as about you—that might otherwise never have become known. Together, you can grow in love, courage, patience, resiliency, strength and hope.

## **Talk with your child about the illness and treatment.**

You may feel like there is so much to talk about with your child that you don't know where to begin. You may also be having difficulty getting your child to open up and share how he or she is feeling and coping with the news about the illness. Perhaps he or she feels too upset to do much talking. Whatever the case, it is important that you and your child keep the lines of communication open. The following are tips that may help you talk with your child:

- Let your child know you will always love him or her no matter what he or she might say or think. Repeat this often.
- If you don't feel completely comfortable talking about goals and hopes, take a few moments to think about how you have talked about other difficult issues with your child and draw upon that experience. Try to use those same ways to engage your child so he or she will feel safe.
- Rather than trying to cover everything all at once, try discussing things in smaller bits, giving your child time to take in the information.
- Trust your instincts to help you determine how much to say and when. The right moments will appear and when they do, you can talk with your child lovingly and confidently.
- If your timing is off, just be patient. Your child will let you in when he or she is both able to talk and needs to do so.

## Talk with your child about the illness and treatment. (CONTINUED)

- Young children naturally focus on more concrete information. Make sure your child understands the plan for today and what's going to happen in the next few hours or next couple of days.
- Older kids often try to go it alone. They may find it easier to talk to peers with similar medical conditions. Talk to your child's medical team about appropriate chat rooms and making contact with other children with similar experiences.
- Reassure your child that you will do whatever you can to prevent pain and help him or her cope with any changes.
- Ask to meet with a child life specialist (at the hospital or clinic), who can help your child talk about feelings and fears, through conversation and/or play therapy.
- Be kind to yourself and to other family members who may be involved. This is a challenging time for all of you and each of you will have your "difficult moments" along the way.
- Keep communication open during health care visits. How much and when to share information regarding your child's condition is an important topic. Ask your doctor and the team caring for your child for guidance as they begin to know and understand your child. Discuss ways to help your child feel in control at a time when so much seems beyond control.
- Use comforting language and a tone of voice that expresses confidence and warmth.
- Be sure your child understands everything that is discussed during doctors appointments or treatments.
- Don't be afraid to give the healthcare team feedback if they are not getting through or are confusing or frightening your child. "Medical talk" confuses most adults, let alone children who may be scared by their doctor and other health care workers.
- Help your child prepare a list of questions for the healthcare team before visits and practice going through the questions to help your child become confident about speaking up when something is not understood.
- Remember, you know and understand your child better than anyone else.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

#### CaringInfo

[www.CaringInfo.org](http://www.CaringInfo.org) • [CaringInfo@nhpco.org](mailto:CaringInfo@nhpco.org)

Consumer InfoLine: 800-658-8898 • Multilingual InfoLine: 877-658-8896

#### Children's Project on Palliative/Hospice Services

[www.nhpco.org/pediatric](http://www.nhpco.org/pediatric)

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