

Talking With Your Child's Support System About Your Cancer

As you begin to share information about your cancer diagnosis with others, you might wonder whether to tell your child's teacher, youth pastor, coach, friends' parents, or other adults in their life. You might feel uncomfortable disclosing the news outside close family and friends, or you might be worried that your child will be treated differently. While it can be difficult to share a new diagnosis with others, it can be beneficial to include the influential adults in your child's life as an extra layer of support.

Who Should I Tell?

Many times, children will seek support from a trusting adult in their life outside of their family unit during times of stress. This could be from a desire to protect their loved one who is sick (just like you as an adult want to protect your children) or due to needing a place to express their feelings outside the home at a moment's notice. We highly recommend notifying your child's teacher, at a minimum, of your new diagnosis and cancer experience. Children and teens alike often exhibit physical, behavioral, and/or emotional changes at school because that is where they spend the most time of their day apart from home. When their teacher(s) and school staff are aware, to some degree, of your cancer diagnosis and treatment experience, they can help make accommodations for your child.

We also recommend incorporating other prominent adults in your child's life, whether it's a youth pastor, coach, or even a friend's parent. This way, you and your child can partner together to identify who *they* feel would be helpful if wanting to talk with someone or ask questions. Doing so can also help you feel comfortable knowing their support system.

What Should I Say?

When you're ready to talk about your cancer experience, you do not have to share all the details. Share the information you are comfortable with others knowing, and continue giving updates throughout your treatment. It can be helpful to focus on how your illness could impact your child, such as letting them know when you have a diagnosis, when you're starting a new treatment, or when you're planning for a surgery or hospitalization. Some helpful things to consider include:

- Ask if there are any community support services that might benefit your child, particularly when talking to people at your child's school.
- Let the trusting adult know if news of your illness can be shared with other adults involved, such as school staff, the church community, or other involved parents.
- Notify them of any specific concerns you might have about your child's adjustment to your diagnosis, including any physical, behavioral, and/or emotional changes you have witnessed. Ask them to watch for any changes and notify you immediately of their observations.
- Notify them of any anticipated changes in your medical experience, such as the start of a new treatment, surgery, or planned hospitalization because any of these can also result in changes in your child's schedule and routine.
- Ask for additional academic support for your child if they are having difficulty focusing on tasks or begin to show signs of academic decline.
- If you plan to have additional adults taking on roles in caring and providing for your children during this experience, make sure to notify the authorities at the school and other venues where these individuals may appear in your place (e.g., those in charge of the drop-off/pick-up areas at school or at extracurricular events).

When and Where Should I Tell Them?

We recognize how devastating the disclosure of a new cancer diagnosis can be and how it can take time to process the medical experience that comes with this difficult news. While it can be difficult to say the words, we recommend having these conversations sooner rather than later. As you are beginning conversations with your children about what is to come, partnering with them to determine the adults who need to be informed can also be beneficial. Make sure to give them appropriate choices, such as "I need to let the school know what is going on. If you need to talk to someone, would you feel more comfortable talking with your teacher, school counselor, or principal?" This helps give them a sense of control in an uncontrollable situation, while also helping identify those *they* believe would be helpful, trusting adults.

Ideally, you can have these conversations in person. However, we understand that is not always feasible and you may need to call or send an email. If you are in a situation where none of these methods of communication are an option, consider having a member of your medical team (e.g., a social worker, care coordinator, or child life specialist) reach out on your behalf. You will need to sign a consent for communication, but they can help give notice and let the other adults involved know you will follow up when able.

Why Should I Tell Them?

Your child's support system can be a valuable source of stability in a time of change at home.

If your child's identified trusting adults know about your cancer diagnosis, they can assist in navigating potential challenges, reassure your child that it's OK to have a variety of feelings, and encourage your child to express those feelings in a positive way. Additionally, these adults, especially teachers, are often the first to notice changes in a child's performance or behavior. They can help look out for signs of stress and notify you of any changes.

Questions From Friends and Classmates

Whether it's a genuine expression of concern or a question arising from sheer curiosity, children are likely to ask questions, especially if your treatment's side effects are noticeable. Your kids should understand that other kids do not mean to be insensitive – they are just trying to understand something unexpected or unfamiliar. (However, if your child is repeatedly bothered by another child's remarks or questions, he or she should tell the teacher or other involved adults.)

If your child does not feel comfortable responding to questions, they could say:

- “Thanks for asking, but I’d rather not talk about it right now.”
- “I’m not sure. That’s something my _____ talks to his/her doctors about.”
- “I don’t know right now, but when I do and I’m ready to talk about it I will let you know.”

More Information and Resources

Learn how [Support Services](#) at Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center can help you explain your illness to your children.