

Should You Tell Your Children You Have Cancer?

The news of a new cancer diagnosis can be devastating. While many questions and concerns can run through your mind, a common question we get asked is, “Should we tell the children?” The simple answer: Yes. There are many benefits to having an open and honest communication with your children when first diagnosed, and we hope the following information helps you feel more prepared in navigating these conversations.

Preparation for What Is to Come

Every family member is affected by a cancer diagnosis, and each person will cope with this information differently. When you tell your children about your cancer diagnosis, it gives them the opportunity to prepare for a potentially life-altering event. A cancer experience can bring about many changes physically and in your family’s day-to-day life. Whether treatment brings about a physical change, difference in energy level, or increased time away from home, preparing children of all ages about each change to come can help them prepare and cope more positively overall. Additionally, talking to them early on builds trust and helps them feel included in your medical experience.

Get more specific information on [talking to children about cancer](#).

Maintaining a Trusting Relationship

Children are very intuitive and can sense when things are different. Even if they are not old enough to cognitively understand your new diagnosis, they can sense *something* is wrong. Additionally, when children are not communicated with about a loved one’s cancer experience, their imaginations can take over and they may create their own explanation of what is happening. They may also seek out inaccurate information from others, or the internet, and this information is often be more frightening than reality. By being proactive and starting conversations now, you are able to maintain control over *what your child* knows about your diagnosis and *when* they receive information about your cancer experience.

Opportunities for Additional Support

Proactive communication can also bring about the opportunity to incorporate others into your support system. Those who play a significant role in your children’s day-to-day lives (i.e., relatives, neighbors, a teacher, school counselor, coaches, parents’ of your children’s friends, spiritual leaders, members of your healthcare team) can help by serving as a support for you and/or your children throughout your

experience. They can not only serve as a safe place for your child to ask questions or talk about how they are feeling, but can also be an additional person watching for any physical, behavioral, and/or emotional changes in your children.

Make sure to let them know about your cancer diagnosis and treatment plan if you would like to use them as a source of support. Communicate specific language you are using with your children, so they can keep this consistent in their conversations as well.

Inclusion in Your Medical Experience

Communicating about your diagnosis and treatment plans with your children is one of many ways you can incorporate them into your cancer experience. Other ways include allowing them to participate in your care in an age-appropriate ways. Tasks such as bring you a drink, book, or blanket can help them feel more connected to you during a time of disconnect. Your children may want to go with you to a doctor appointment or visit you in the hospital. They may even want the opportunity to ask your medical team questions about your cancer experience. We encourage honoring this request, while also preparing them in a developmentally appropriate way and confirming with medical staff that this is okay.