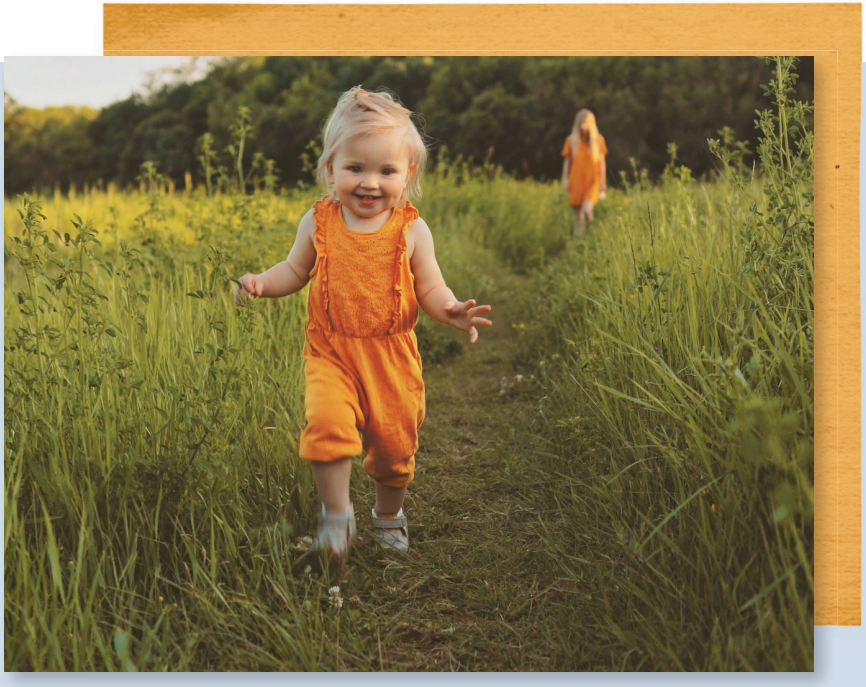


A Guide to Navigating Cancer

with your Kids and Teens

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A cancer diagnosis affects the whole family, and it can be difficult to figure out how to support children when you, your spouse, or someone close to you is diagnosed. But, you and your kids are not alone. This guide is here to help you understand what to say to your child if someone in your family has cancer. We'll also share ways to help everyone cope and stay strong during this hard time, so your family can feel empowered now and for years to come.

We've organized this guide by age groups: 0-3 years, 4-6 years, 7-11 years, and 12 years and up. This way, whether you have a baby or a teenager, you'll know what to expect. We'll help you learn how to start talking about cancer with your child and explain how children of different ages think about it. You'll also find out how kids usually react to stress at different ages and discover fun play activities you can do together to help them cope and build resilience. Plus, we have added a common terms section to help define certain words that you can use with your kids to help them understand.

Why is learning coping skills important during a parent's cancer diagnosis?

When kids face challenges or stress, big or small, they cope in different ways based on their individual personalities, unique experiences, and surroundings. Some kids can manage tough situations on their own, while others might need extra help from people they trust. No matter how they cope, it's important for kids and teens to learn how to handle stress and big emotions. This will help them cope with whatever life throws their way as they grow. Research shows that kids who are good at recognizing their feelings, expressing them, and using coping skills are more resilient and handle challenges better as they get older. This guide is here to help you and your family build these important skills while coping with cancer.



How does stress from cancer affect a child or teen?

Cancer can be really stressful, and we know that stress can affect people both emotionally and physically, both during a stressful event and later. It's important to remember that stress might look different in kids than in adults. Kids might act differently when they're stressed because they don't always have the words or tools to explain how they feel or to understand what stress means. As parents, it's important to notice when your child is feeling stressed, especially during tough times, and to see how they cope with that stress.

In this guide, we'll explain how kids of different ages usually respond to stress and suggest activities that can help them feel better. It's normal for kids to change how they cope with stress as they grow up, and that's okay! Using this guide will help you support your child no matter their age or how they are coping, so they can learn to handle stress better.

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Guidance for your infant and toddler



Even though babies and toddlers don't really understand what cancer is, they can feel changes happening around them. They learn and grow by exploring their environment, and their caregivers play a big role in helping them feel safe and loved through their interactions and routines.

When a parent or caregiver is diagnosed with something serious like cancer, it can change their daily routine. Appointments and treatments can take time and attention away from them. Sometimes, other caregivers might step in to help, which can be tough for the child if they're not used to that person.

Parents might also feel guilty during this time, and that's a normal feeling when so much is changing in your life. It's important to remember that it's okay to feel this way!

Typical stress responses for your infant and toddler

Infants and toddlers can show their stress in many different ways. However, the most common stress responses include:

- Increased clinginess/attachment to caregivers
- Increased fussiness throughout the day, but especially during transitions and at bedtime
- Changes in sleep patterns (increased or decreased amounts of sleep)
- Changes in their appetite
- More easily overwhelmed or upset

How to support coping and resilience for your infant or toddler

Try to stick to a routine. Infants and toddlers do best with routines. They might not understand time or complicated ideas, but having a regular schedule helps them know what to expect, which is good for their bodies. Routines also give them comfort and help them adjust to changes around them. As their caregiver, you've probably worked hard to create and keep a routine that meets your child's needs while fitting in with your own schedule.

When someone in the family is diagnosed with cancer, your child's routine might change. You'll need more time for doctor's appointments and medical care, which can make things feel different at home. Even if your young child doesn't understand what "cancer" means, they can still sense that something is not quite right with their routine or environment. Being able to stick to a routine, even a new one, is helpful in supporting your young child.

Additional activities that support coping and resilience in your infant or toddler:

- Have one-on-one parent or caregiver time.
- Establish another consistent caregiver (grandparent, aunt/uncle, close family friend) to help maintain a routine in the care of your child.
- Maintain as much of a routine as possible (consistent schedule, consistent daily activities, consistent eating times, and/or consistent bedtime routine). If the timing of a care task changes, try to maintain how you complete the care task.
- Use scented items that remind infants of their direct caregivers.
- Record a caregiver's voice singing and/or reading books.
- Add pictures of loved ones to your child's bedroom or in a consistent view of your child.
- Help with calming your young child when they are feeling sad.
- Hug your child.
- Sing to your child or with your child.
- Give infant massages.
- Participate in active movement activities for toddlers that make them move their bodies.



"Make time for play"

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Guidance for your 4-6 year old

Talking about your diagnosis with your child

Consider what questions your child may have:

- What is something that has changed since mommy/daddy has been sick?
- What happens when someone is sick?
- What does it mean when someone is sick?
- How does mommy/daddy being sick make you feel?
- What do you want to know about mommy's/daddy's sickness?

Typical Stress responses:

Young children may have difficulty understanding and/or recognizing their own stress. They often have trouble finding the words to label their stress or understanding what is causing their stress.

Because of this, your child may experience increased frustration, temper tantrums, inconsolable crying, and regressive behaviors (e.g. thumb sucking, bed-wetting, night terrors) when they are stressed. Your child may ask for help more and become more dependent on their caregivers for daily tasks. You may also notice differences in sleep patterns, such as later bedtimes, difficulty falling asleep or separating at bedtime, increased bed wetting, and/or increased nightmares. This is all **normal**.

Step 1: Consider Their Thinking

At this age, kids often use "magical thinking" to make sense of things they don't really understand. They might believe that something they did caused your cancer diagnosis. For example, they could think that because the sun was really bright when you were outside with them, that made you sick. Or they might believe that since a friend in their class was sick, that means you are sick too. It's important to talk to them about these misunderstandings and explain that cancer is not anyone's fault. It's just a sickness that can happen sometimes!

Step 2: Let Them Know What's Coming Next

It's okay to tell your child that cancer is making your body sick. Explain that you are getting medicine to help you get better, but sometimes that medicine can also make you feel unwell. Kids might notice side effects from the medicine, like hair loss or tiredness.

Before any big changes, like going to the hospital or having a long appointment, prepare your child the day before or the morning of. Also, talk to them about any physical changes they might see, like scars or hair loss. Giving your child some time to prepare will help them handle these changes more easily.

Step 3: Be Aware of Typical Reactions

You might see your child wanting to stay close to you more often, acting like they're younger (like wanting a pacifier), or having sudden outbursts. These behaviors are normal for preschoolers when they are feeling stressed. By understanding why they act this way, you can better tell when your child might need extra support or help coping.
Asking your child, "How are you feeling today?" can help you check in on their emotions and how they're reacting to changes and new information.

Guidance for your 4-6 year old

How can you support your preschool-age or early-school aged child?

A steady routine can really help your child feel comfortable. It also helps them know what to expect each day. You can also support your child in understanding their emotions by sharing your own feelings and how they change. When you talk about your emotions, you show your child how to handle their own feelings and what those emotions might look like.

To help your preschooler recognize their feelings, try labeling different emotions, asking them how they feel, and giving examples of various emotions.



Whenever you can, set aside time to do a fun activity together that your child chooses. Whether it's playing outside, having ice cream for dinner, or reading books, this special time will help strengthen your bond and make your child feel more secure. Plus, your child will enjoy having a say in planning a special activity with you!



Activities to promote coping and resilience in your 4-6 year old

This age group thrives on activities that they can lead, activities that they can complete with you or independently, and activities that feel like a personal challenge they have fulfilled. Try one of the following activities to support your 4-6 year old:

- Blow bubbles.
- Play outside in small groups.
- Participate in role playing and/or dramatic play.
- Play with puppets.
- Dance.
- Get creative with arts and crafts.
- Read with them.
- Ask them to help choose care tasks when changing routines.

Key Takeaways: Allow for Play

At first, your child might not have many questions about your diagnosis, and that's okay. Letting them play can help them express how they feel. Playing with their favorite toys gives them a chance to work through their emotions and feel more in control of their world.

Encourage them to ask questions whenever they want, especially at the beginning. You can check in with them regularly to see if they have more questions or need to talk.

Guidance for your 7-11 year old

Talking about your diagnosis with your child

Consider what questions your child may have:

What is cancer?

Your child might already know that you are sick, or you may have talked a bit about your diagnosis with them. But they might still have trouble understanding what "cancer" really means. Cancer is a complicated idea, so it's important to check in with your child to see what they understand, what questions they have, and if they have any misunderstandings.

How do you feel about me (the parent) being sick?

Some children may feel upset, sad, angry, or even guilty when a parent is sick. These feelings are normal during this tough time. Your child might show different emotions as they try to understand your diagnosis and treatment changes. You can help your child process these feelings by sharing how you feel now, how you felt before, and what might make you feel more upset. This can help them understand their own emotions better.

What do you want to know about cancer?

This open-ended question is a great way to learn how your child wants to be told information and how much information they want to know.

Do you want to talk to anyone else about me being sick?

Your child might find it helpful to talk to another trusted adult about your diagnosis. This could be a close family member, a family friend, or someone at their school. It's a good idea to share whatever details you're comfortable with about your diagnosis and treatment with other adults in your child's life. Teachers, sports coaches, and religious or activity leaders spend time with your child during the week, and they might notice changes that show your child is struggling. These adults can also help support your child by using positive strategies to cope, which can be really helpful alongside what you're doing at home.

Typical Stress responses:

As adults, we understand that stress can affect both our bodies and our minds. However, children may not fully grasp this idea. You might need to help your child see that their stress can change how they feel emotionally and physically, like causing headaches, stomachaches, or changes in their breathing.

Kids can also feel worried about future events, like your upcoming surgery or possible side effects from treatment. They might show their stress by becoming withdrawn, angry, or more anxious. Often, they try to hide their worries so they don't seem different from their friends.

Sometimes, kids might even feel guilty, thinking they did something wrong to cause your illness. You can reassure them that they are safe, they didn't cause this to happen, and that you are there to help them understand what's going on and how they feel.



Guidance for your 7-11 year old

Step 1: Consider The Body

To help your child understand cancer, you can talk about how the body works. Explain that humans have "cells" inside them, and there are many different types of cells, each with its own job. For example, some cells help your eyes see, some help your nose smell, and some help your heart beat. This way, your child can start to see how everything in the body works together.

Step 2: Explain What Cancer Is

Explain that cancer is a kind of cell that should not be in a body. When cancer cells are in a specific place in the body, it makes that part of the body sick.



Step 3: Explain Your Treatment Plan

Your treatment plan might involve different steps like surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation. When talking to your child about these steps, use simple words to explain what will happen and what they might notice afterward.

For example, when you explain surgery, start by asking your child what they see on your body before the surgery. Once they share, you can discuss what it might look like after, like scars, a big bandage, or changes to a body part. If a body part is being changed or removed, explain what that part does (like how eyes help you see) and how the surgery might affect its job.

You can also share how you might feel after the surgery or treatments, such as needing more rest or having less energy while your body heals.



Activities to promote coping and resilience in your 7-11 year old

- Draw, paint, or participate in any creative activity.
- Participate in activities with friends.
- Participate in one-on-one activities with you and/or another trusted adult.
- Practice deep breathing exercises.
- Listen to music, dance to music, and/or play an instrument/sing.
- Let them choose how to spend their free time while maintaining a routine.
- Play with stress balls and fidget toys.
- Write in a gratitude journal.

Key Takeaways:

Be honest and open in conversations. Honesty creates a solid foundation for trust during stressful situations. Being honest with your child will create a space for your child to openly share their emotions, express their thoughts, and ask any questions that they may have.

Talking about your diagnosis with your child

Consider what questions your child may have:

- What do they know about your diagnosis?
- What have they learned/read about cancer in school?
- How do they feel about you (the parent) being sick?
- As a parent, how can you help them cope with this information?
- How can your teen help you?
- How does your diagnosis (the parent's) affect them?



Typical Stress responses:

You know your teen best. Some teens might take their time to process their thoughts and feelings, while others may be more open and have lots of questions. They can show their stress in different ways. If your teen is feeling very stressed, they might withdraw and keep to themselves, become more impatient or have emotional outbursts, or change their sleeping, eating, or self-care habits. You might also notice changes in how they interact with friends and family. Being aware of these signs can help you support them better.

Step 1: Consider Your Teen's Personality

Some teens may not want a lot of information about the initial cancer diagnosis, and that is okay. Teens may be more focused on how the cancer diagnosis is going to impact them, their daily routine, and the overall future implications of a cancer diagnosis. If you feel that your teen is not ready for a lot of information, you can provide them an opportunity at a later time to talk to you about their worries. You can also check in with them in the coming weeks to discuss more information about the cancer diagnosis and what questions they may have.

Step 2: Discuss the type of cancer and where it is in the body

There are many different kinds of cancer, so it's important to share details about your specific cancer with your teen. Let them know what type of cancer you have, the stage, and which part of your body is affected. It's also good to explain how cancer can affect someone physically and emotionally. This way, your teen can better understand what's happening.

Step 3: Talk about your treatment plan

Explain that treatment can involve several steps and may change based on how your body responds. Your plan might include things like chemotherapy, surgery, radiation, and other types of care. It's helpful to describe what each part of the treatment involves and how it might affect you both physically and emotionally. This way, your teen can have a better understanding of what to expect.

Step 4: Think about how your teen is handling everything

Teens often lean on their friends and relationships during tough times. They can benefit from activities that let them express their feelings and help them discover who they are. Some good ideas for your teen are to keep a daily journal, start new art projects, or share their thoughts on social media. These creative and expressive activities give teens a safe way to share their emotions when they're ready and let them control what information they want to share.

Activities to promote coping and resilience in your teen

- Yoga
- Mindfulness exercises and deep breathing exercises
- Writing
- Exercise/sports
- Providing opportunities for independent coping skills/interests
- Group activities
- Music playing/singing/listening to music
- Talking with a trusted adult. Activities with a trusted adult.
- Reading and journaling
- Support groups and individual support sessions through art, music, or traditional therapy services

Key Takeaways:

Be honest and open when you talk with your teen. Honesty builds trust, especially during stressful times. When you're truthful, it encourages your teen to share their feelings and ask questions. Let them decide how much or how little they want to know about your cancer diagnosis and treatment. This way, they feel comfortable and supported in the conversation.

Conclusion

We know that talking to your child about your cancer diagnosis can be really hard. But having an open and honest conversation can help them understand their own feelings and fears. This can make it easier for them to cope with what's happening. We hope this guide has given you helpful tips for this important discussion. Remember, facing cancer together as a family can make you all feel stronger. You're not alone in this, and it's okay to ask for help or share your feelings. Together, you can get through this difficult time!



Key Terms

Cancer

Cancer occurs when cells in your body become sick, and these cells are called "cancer cells." Cancer cells grow faster than healthy cells, and they can cause somebody to feel hurt or sick when there are a lot of cancer cells in someone's body. If somebody has cancer cells, they can't share their sick cells like a virus or other illness.

Cells

Cells are the building blocks that make up our body. Cells are so small that you cannot see them without a really strong microscope. Cells have all different kinds of jobs to help your body see, feel, hear, move and so much more. Cells work together to keep our bodies strong and healthy.

Chemotherapy

This medicine is used to stop fast growing cells from continuing to grow. It helps stop cancer cells from growing bigger and to help stop new cancer cells from growing. But, this medicine isn't very smart, and it may stop other fast growing cells in someone's body, like hair growing cells. You may see that when someone gets chemotherapy, they may also have trouble growing their hair.

Port

A port is a device placed inside someone's body to help them get their chemotherapy and other strong medicines. You may see a small bump on someone's chest, and that is where their port is inside their body. A person can have a port while they receive their medicines to help get rid of their cancer cells.

Radiation Therapy

This therapy uses different types of strong energy to damage existing cancer cells by preventing them from dividing and spreading, as well as stopping cancer cells from growing.

Surgery

Surgery is when a doctor, or group of doctors, helps a specific part of someone's body with special medical tools and equipment. When someone has surgery, they may have something taken out of their body that is hurting them or that isn't supposed to be there; they may have a part of their body fixed to help their body become healthy again; or they may have a piece of medical equipment added to their body.

Tumor

A tumor is a group of cancer cells that make a small bump on or in someone's body.

> "Being honest with your child will create space for them to openly share their emotions, express their thoughts, and ask any questions they may have."
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The Lonon Foundation is a 501 (C)(3) non profit. Our mission is to help children affected by their parent's or caregiver's cancer diagnosis find comfort, heal, and grow from their shared experiences.

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