

Helping Children Understand the Diagnosis of Cancer

AGE GROUP	CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF ILLNESS	CHILDREN'S POSSIBLE REACTIONS	PARENT'S POSSIBLE RESPONSES
Newborns/ Infants/Toddlers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They have little awareness of illness. • Infants are aware of feelings parents show including anxiety. • They are aware of periods of separation from parents. • They can get upset when the presence of a physical and loving parent is missing. • Toddlers may react to physical changes in parent or presence of side effects (e.g., vomiting). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fussy and cranky • crying • clinging • change in sleeping or eating habits • colic • slight skin rash • toddlers: tantrums, more negativity • returns to thumb sucking, bedwetting, baby talk, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide consistent caretaking by maintaining baby's schedule. • Ask family members and friends to help with household tasks and care. • Give plenty of physical contact (patting, hugging, holding). • Observe play for clues to their adjustment. • Provide daily contact to help them feel secure. • Express your feelings and fears with others. • Use relaxation tapes, music or baby massage.
Preschoolers (3 – 5 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They have a beginning level of understanding about illness. • Children may believe that they caused the illness (e.g., by being angry with parents, thinking bad thoughts). This is an example of magical thinking. • Children consider themselves the center of the universe. They are egocentric and think everything is related to them. • Children may think they can catch the same thing. • Illness may be seen as punishment for being bad. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • thumb sucking • fear of the dark, monsters, animals, darkness, strangers, and the unknown • nightmares • sleepwalking, sleeptalking • bedwetting • stuttering • baby talk • hyperactivity • apathy • fear of separation from significant others (especially at bedtime or going to preschool) • aggression (e.g., hitting, biting) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about the illness with pictures, dolls, or stuffed animals. Read a picture book about the illness. • Read a story about nightmares or other problems (e.g., <i>There's A Nightmare in My Closet</i>). • Explain what they can expect; describe how things may change regarding routines, activities, and schedules. • Reassure them that they will be taken care of and will not be forgotten. • Provide brief and simple explanations. Repeat explanations when necessary. • Encourage them to have fun. • Show emotion with some caution. • Assure them that they have not caused the illness by their behavior or thoughts. • Paraphrase for children what their behavior might mean. • Continue usual discipline and limit setting. Provide outlets for aggression that are positive. • Be sure children get physical activity to use up excess energy and anxiety. • Assure them they cannot catch the illness.

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<p>School Age Children (6 – 12 years)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are able to understand more complex explanations of cancer diagnosis. Can understand what cancer cells are. • They still may feel responsible for causing illness because of bad behavior. • Nine years old and older understand that parent can die. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • irritable • sad, crying • anxiety, guilt, jealousy • physical complaints: headaches, stomachaches • separation anxiety at time of going to school or away to camp • hostile reactions toward sick parent, like yelling or fighting • poor concentration, daydreaming, lack of attention • poor grades • withdrawal • difficulty adapting to change • fear of performance, punishment, or new situations • sensitivity to shame and embarrassment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use books to explain illness, treatment, and potential outcome (e.g., <i>Our Mom Has Cancer</i>). • Assure them that they did not cause the illness by their behaviors or thoughts. • Reassure them about their care and schedule. • Tell them the other parent is healthy. • Let them know how they can help. Take time to listen and let them know you care about their feelings. • Address issue of parent dying even if children do not bring up topic. • See also suggestions for preschool age children.
<p>Teenagers (13 – 18 years)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are capable of abstract thinking; can think about things they have not experienced themselves. • Able to begin thinking more like adults. • Able to understand that people are fragile. • Able to understand complex relationships between events. • Able to understand reasons for symptoms. • More likely to deny fear and worry in order to avoid discussion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • want to be more independent and treated like adults • anger and rebellion • may criticize how parents handle illness situation • depression • anxiety • worry about being different • poor judgment • withdrawal • apathy • physical symptoms: stomachaches, headaches, rashes • more likely to turn feelings inward (so parents are less likely to see reactions). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage them to talk about their feelings, but realize they may find it easier to confide in friends. • Provide plenty of physical and verbal expressions of love. • Talk about role changes in family. • Provide privacy as needed. • Encourage them to maintain activities and peer relationships. • If problems are noted, provide opportunities for counseling. • Set appropriate limits. • Don't rely on them to take on too many added responsibilities. • Provide resources for learning more about the disease and getting support. • See also suggestions for school-age children.