



What to Say to Children When a Loved One Has Cancer



Each child is touched in some way when a parent, grandparent or other loved one develops cancer. It's important to tailor what you say to a child based on his or her age and ability to communicate. How you approach a child, grandchild, niece or nephew will go a long way toward easing his or her stress.



Children at Home

Babies who are stressed may act upset, and eat and sleep poorly. They need trusted caregivers; a parent is best. The fewer caregivers, the better.

Toddlers show stress by misbehaving and reverting to earlier behaviors. They want instant gratification and resist change. Give them the chance to make some choices and they will feel more in control.

Preschoolers who are under stress may develop eating problems or nightmares. They can be disobedient or too well-behaved, or can adopt baby-like ways. Talk to them about what is happening and who will care for them, using simple language. Set them straight if they think their bad behavior or thoughts somehow caused the cancer. Encourage them to play-act future events with dolls or toys. This can channel their imaginations in a healthy way.

You can choose the right words to say when children ask tough questions.

“That doesn’t look like my Mommy...Where is her hair?”

*“Mommy is sick, and the medicine she needs is making her hair fall out.
That means it’s working and helping Mommy get better.”*

School-age Children

Between kindergarten and 6th grade, children can react to stress with anger, worry or sadness. They mimic the adults around them, so some children hide their feelings or try to explain them away.

At school, family illness can make children feel isolated or awkward. Some children develop vague symptoms that can hang on if parents pay too much attention to them. They may worry that cancer is contagious or fantasize about damage to their own bodies from disease.

The best approach for children this age is to encourage them to ask questions. Let them help with important decisions. Reassure them that they are healthy.

Promote activities with friends, who can offer support and give them an emotional outlet.

Ask a family friend or relative to be there when you can't be, and let your child know.

"I wish you could see me play in my game today, Dad."

"I feel sad about that, too. While you're playing, I'll rest up. Later on, we can watch the video your Uncle Joe will be taking."

Teenagers

When teenagers are under stress, expect drastic mood swings. They may act hostile and rebellious or aloof and indifferent. Although teens turn first to friends for support, serious family illness can strain friendships.

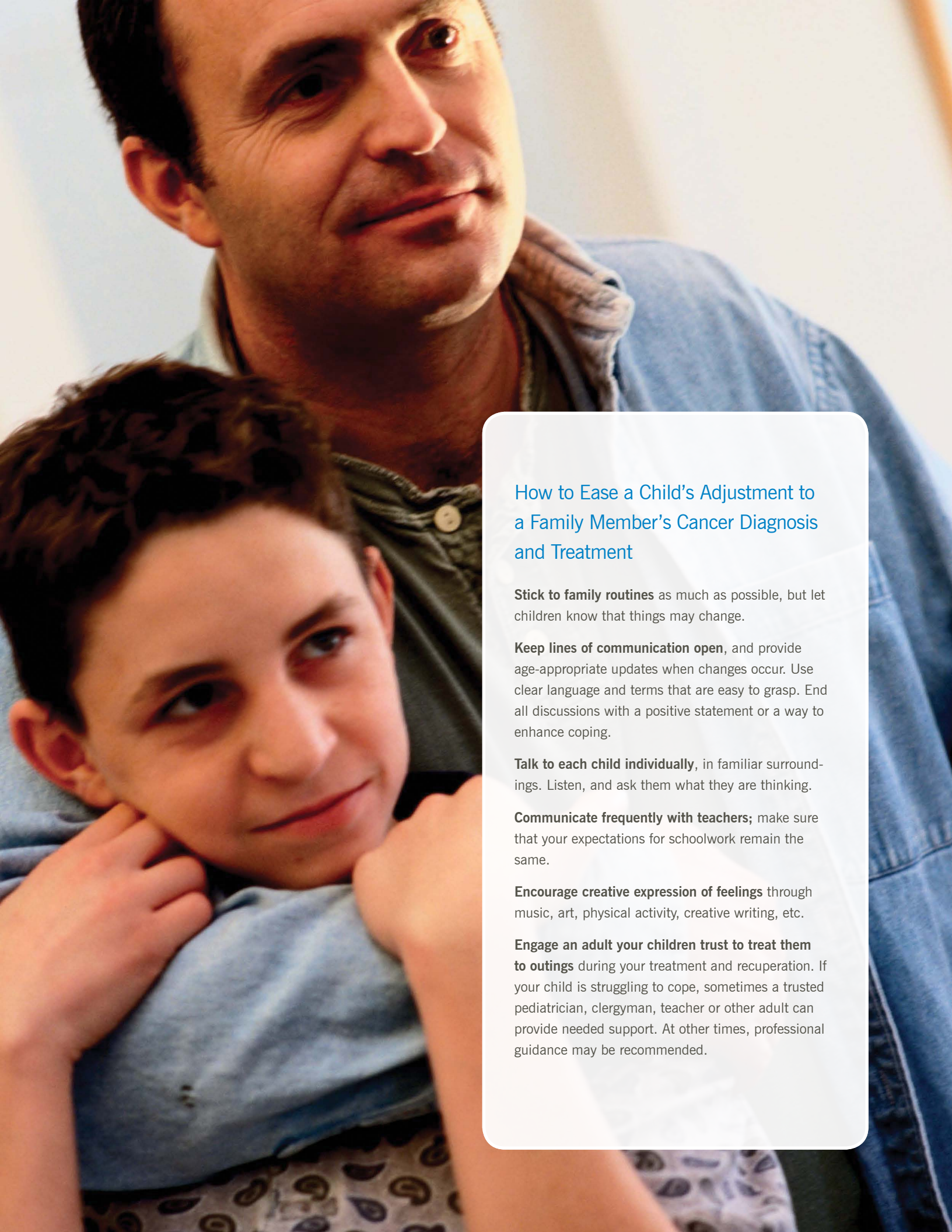
Speak candidly and directly to teens, and you will earn their trust. Keep teenagers engaged in the family by sharing information and letting them help with key decisions, but respect their privacy. Remind your teenager that it's OK to express unpleasant feelings, and that it's not disloyal to have fun. Give teens the opportunity to learn more about cancer and its treatment, if they wish.

Trouble may surface with friendships; teens appreciate straightforward, low-key communication.

"I know you want me at home more now. But I want to spend time with my friends, too."

"I understand how important your friends are to you. Let's figure out how you can spend some time with them. How are things going with you and your friends?"





How to Ease a Child's Adjustment to a Family Member's Cancer Diagnosis and Treatment

Stick to family routines as much as possible, but let children know that things may change.

Keep lines of communication open, and provide age-appropriate updates when changes occur. Use clear language and terms that are easy to grasp. End all discussions with a positive statement or a way to enhance coping.

Talk to each child individually, in familiar surroundings. Listen, and ask them what they are thinking.

Communicate frequently with teachers; make sure that your expectations for schoolwork remain the same.

Encourage creative expression of feelings through music, art, physical activity, creative writing, etc.

Engage an adult your children trust to treat them to outings during your treatment and recuperation. If your child is struggling to cope, sometimes a trusted pediatrician, clergyman, teacher or other adult can provide needed support. At other times, professional guidance may be recommended.

How a Child May React to Illness in the Family

	Normal behavior	Signs of stress
Infancy (Newborn-18 months)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Builds trusting relationships Likes consistent routines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upset, fearful behavior Problems eating or sleeping
Toddlerhood (18 months-3 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looks for parental guidance Needs some opportunities to exert control Shows a minimal concept of time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Angry, acting-out behavior Loss of skills such as toileting, dressing self
Preschool (3-5 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Needs simple explanations for new or unexpected situations Enjoys play about real-life events Wants help identifying feelings Exhibits anxiety about future events Often engages in fantasy thinking Starts to experience feelings of guilt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sleeping or eating disturbances Being “too good,” quiet or withdrawn Playing the “sick” role Clinging, baby-like behavior
School age (6-12 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wants accurate information Needs reassurance about his/her own health Benefits from clear rules and expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worry and sadness Anger Complaints of physical illness School problems Isolation
Adolescence (13-18 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wants privacy and respect Appreciates complete information and involvement in family decisions Needs reminders that showing feelings is normal Places a premium on peer relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unusual degree of hostility and defiance Extreme mood swings Withdrawn and significantly unresponsive Trouble with friends



Suggested Resources

Cleveland Clinic oncology social workers and pediatric psychologists provide counseling, support and advocacy for families dealing with cancer and other serious illnesses.

Please ask for a list of age-appropriate books, websites and other resources for children and adolescents facing illness in the family.

Books

Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer

cancer.org/publications/22-helping_children_when_a_family_member_has_cancer

Butterfly Kisses and Wishes on Wings

By Ellen McVicker
butterflykissesbook.com (2006)

Can I Still Kiss You?

Answering Your Children's Questions About Cancer
By Neil Russell
Health Communications; Deerfield Beach, Florida (2001)

How to Help Children Through a Parent's Serious Illness

By Kathleen McCue, MA, CCLS, and Ron Bonn
St. Martin's Griffin; New York, New York (1996)

What About Me?

A Booklet for Teenage Children of Cancer Patients

By Linda Leopold Strauss
Cancer Family Care; Cincinnati, Ohio (1986)

When a Parent Has Cancer:

A Guide to Caring for Your Children

By Dr. Wendy Schlessel Harpham
Harper Collins; New York, New York (1997)

Organizations

CancerCare

1.800.813.HOPE (4673)
cancer.org

American Cancer Society

1.800.227.2345
cancer.org

Kids Connected

1.800.899.2866
kidsconnected.org

National Cancer Institute

1.800.422.6237
cancer.gov

SuperSibs!

1.888.417.4704
supersibs.org



Contacting Cleveland Clinic

Still have questions? Call our Cancer Answer Line.

We are here to help you get the cancer information you need. Contact Cleveland Clinic Cancer Answer Line at 216.444.HOPE (4673) or toll-free at 866.223.8100. Oncology clinical nurse specialists and their staff provide information and answer questions about cancer. The Cancer Answer Line operates from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday to Friday.

Ready to schedule an appointment?

If you would like to set up a consultation with a Cleveland Clinic specialist, please call the Cancer Answer Line at 216.444.HOPE (4673) or toll-free at 866.223.8100.

Making Your Care Easier

Support Services

The life-changing events that occur when you or a loved one is diagnosed with cancer are challenging. Cleveland Clinic Cancer Center offers many services and programs to help you navigate those changes while promoting your well-being. Services include the 4th Angel Mentoring Program, educational resources, psycho-social programs, support groups, financial services, free wigs and a variety of wellness programs. For a complete list of programs and locations, visit clevelandclinic.org/cancersupport.

Social work

Social workers at the Cleveland Clinic Cancer Center can help you and your loved ones identify and maximize your strengths in coping with a cancer diagnosis, treatment and followup care. Social workers also assist with employment and financial issues, and referrals to other community resources. Contact the Cancer Answer Line at 216.444.HOPE (4673) or call toll-free at 866.223.8100.

The 4th Angel Mentoring Program

This free program connects patients with a phone mentor who also is a cancer survivor. Matches are made based on diagnosis and age. Mentors who are cancer survivors can provide a unique perspective and type of support. A mentoring program also is available for caregivers. Contact: 216.445.8734 or 1.866.520.3197 or visit 4thangel.org.

Chemocare.com

Available in English and Spanish, this website provides information and videos about chemotherapy and other anticancer drugs, managing side effects, complementary medicine and nutrition.

Medical concierge

If you are traveling from out of state and need any assistance, call the complimentary Medical Concierge at 800.223.2273, ext. 55580, or email medicalconciierge@ccf.org.

MyChart®

Cleveland Clinic MyChart® is a secure, online personal healthcare management tool that connects patients to their medical record. Patients can register for MyChart through their physician's office or by going online to clevelandclinic.org/mychart.



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9500 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44195

Cleveland Clinic Cancer Center provides complete cancer care enhanced by innovative basic, genetic and translational research. It offers the most effective techniques to achieve long-term survival and improve patients' quality of life. The Cancer Center's more than 450 physicians, researchers, nurses and technicians care for thousands of patients each year and provide access to a wide range of clinical trials. Cleveland Clinic Cancer Center unites clinicians and researchers based in Taussig Cancer Institute and in Cleveland Clinic's 26 other clinical and special expertise institutes, as well as cancer specialists at our regional hospitals, health centers, and at Cleveland Clinic Florida. Cleveland Clinic is a nonprofit academic medical center ranked as the No. 2 hospital in the country by *U.S. News & World Report*, where more than 3,500 staff physicians and researchers in 140 specialties collaborate to give every patient the best outcome and experience. clevelandclinic.org

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