

Talking to children

when someone close is very ill



Marie Curie
Cancer Care



Talking to children

when someone close is very ill

Telling children about someone in the family with a serious illness early on is helpful because it prevents problems arising and reduces difficulties later. You need to consider daughters and sons, but also grandchildren, nephews and nieces when thinking about children affected by the illness of a close relative.

It is natural to worry about talking to children when someone close to you is seriously ill, but it is important for your child or children to be told when something is wrong. Adults will want to soften the pain and shock of bad news. They may be unsure about who should talk to the children, how much should be said and what and when they should tell them. This leaflet gives some guidelines to try to make a very difficult task less overwhelming.

We want to protect those we love, especially children, from difficult issues that affect them. We cannot protect children from sadness, but we can help them. Sometimes adults think that by not saying anything about someone's illness their children will somehow not be affected. In fact, however much adults try to hide what is happening, children know something is wrong and will often blame themselves unless things are properly explained to them. For example, a child may secretly worry that if only he or she hadn't been naughty, or had tidied their bedroom as asked, their mother would not be so ill. This can make a child feel very lonely and afraid, particularly if everyone else's silence stops them from being able to ask questions. Sometimes well-intentioned family members decide not to explain what is happening to children because they are considered to be too young.



Generally children are helped by feeling included and valued. Children also need to be able to believe and trust adults. For example, if Mum has cancer for which there is no more curative treatment, but she is more mobile following radiotherapy, Dad may be tempted to say that Mum is better. But it may be very confusing for the child when Mum's illness gets worse. Children need to be given an accurate picture of what is happening so that they can believe what adults tell them later on. Children who are not told enough may later feel angry that they were excluded.



Who should tell my children?

Children need to feel secure and to have a relationship of trust and involvement with a close relative or carer. It is therefore probably better if the difficult and upsetting news is given by the person who will be continuing to care for the child so that the child feels there is someone close they can confide in and who will be there for them. If this is too difficult then someone else (perhaps from your local hospice) may be able to support you and help you with this.

When should I tell my children?

Children are helped by adults who are honest and direct in their communication with them. It is usually best to let children know what is happening as soon as the information seems definite. When parents try to delay telling the news, a 'good' time may never arrive and it becomes increasingly difficult to explain why you have waited. Adults may underestimate how much children have already picked up. Children are often very sensitive to tensions and unease in their family situation. They may comment on changes in the person's condition and this could give you an opportunity to explain more about the illness. Giving children time to prepare for what is happening now and what is likely to happen in the future minimises unnecessary anxiety and distress. It is also ok for children not to want to ask questions - don't worry if they appear uninterested.

Telling your child's teacher

Let your child's teacher or the head teacher of the school know what is happening and ask them to let you know how your child is coping. Teachers can be very supportive if they are kept in touch.

Where should I start?

Sit down quietly with your child at their level so that you feel close. It may be difficult to know how to begin. One way may be to talk about what the doctors have told you. 'The doctors have said that Mum is very ill and that they will make sure she is comfortable and not in pain, but the doctors cannot make her better'.

Visiting someone who is very ill

If the person becomes less well and is in a hospice or hospital it is likely to be important to take children to visit so that they can say the things they want to their relative. A visit will enable them to say thank you, or I love you or goodbye. If children don't want to visit they may want to make a picture or card, tape a message, or write a letter or poem to be given to their relative instead.

It is not usually helpful to exclude children at this stage although children may not wish to stay very long or they may feel awkward or be bored. Depending on the age of your children it may be helpful to take something for them to do while visiting.

Some illnesses and treatments change the way people look. They may lose or put on a lot of weight. Their hair may fall out. They may be very sick or tired or be connected to tubes or machines. If this is the case it is important to tell children in advance and to reassure the child that although the person may look different they are the same person.



Telling a child that someone they love is going to die

This is obviously very hard and you may feel like finding reasons for not telling children or not telling them yet. You cannot avoid their distress and you know they will not want to hear what you have to say. But it does help to prepare them so that when the person dies it does not come as a complete shock. Also, children will usually pick up the anxiety and distress of adults around them who may be trying very hard to hide their feelings in front of them. For example, they often overhear telephone conversations or worry about why adults are upset. If they are given appropriate explanations they are likely to be less troubled. Parents may worry about whether they will be able to find the right words.

Just like adults, children need to know about the illness so that they can spend appropriate quality time with their loved one. They cannot do this if they are unaware of what is going on. If they don't know they are denied the opportunity to get closer or the chance to help more. This is particularly important if the parent or relative subsequently dies.

Remember there may not be any 'right words'. Simple, honest explanations are best. Remember always that it is ok to say 'I don't know'.

Books that might help

Books for young children

A dragon in your heart (1999)

Sophie Leblanc

Jessica Kingsley, £6.95

ISBN 1853027014

This book explains to a five-year old that her mother has cancer. Written by a mother with advanced breast cancer for her own daughter.

Dr Dog (1996)

Babette Cole

Red Fox, £5.99

ISBN 0099650819

Dr Dog spends his life looking after the human members of the family. A good book to explain common illnesses and cures to young children.

The huge bag of worries (2004)

Virginia Ironside

Hodder Children's Books, £5.99

ISBN 0340903171

Wherever Jenny goes her worries follow her in a big blue bag. More worries end up in Jenny's bag and it gets bigger and bigger. She decides it has to go, and she finds help from an unlikely source to get rid of her worries.

Fred (1998)

Posy Simmons

Red Fox, £5.99

ISBN 0099264129

Fred's owners think he is the laziest cat in the world. Only after their cat dies do they discover he has been leading a double life. A good introduction to a funeral and a wake for small children.

Laura's star (2000)

Klaus Baumgart

Little Tiger Press, £5.99

ISBN 1854306960

Laura finds a broken star and takes it home to mend it. She lies in bed telling it all her secrets but when she wakes up in the morning it has gone. She becomes sad and misses the star, but when night comes a magical thing happens and the star returns. Laura learns that sometimes we have to say goodbye to the things we love most.

Love you forever (2001)

Robert Munsch

Red Fox, £5.99

ISBN 009926689X

A mother cradles her newborn son and sings him a lullaby. As the baby grows and becomes a child, then a teenager, an adult, as he leaves home to start his own life the mother waves goodbye.

The mother still sings the song to her child, even as they both grow older, until the mother cannot sing any more and the son sings the song to the mother.



Books for older children

The secret C: straight talking about cancer (2000)

Julie Stokes

Winston's Wish, £3.95

ISBN 0953912302

This book explains cancer, the resulting illness and treatment clearly and sensitively. It covers feelings and behaviours that may arise and how families can overcome some of the difficulties. The book is beautifully illustrated and could be helpful to both children and parents.

The soul bird (2004)

Michal Snunit

Constable and Robinson, £4.99

ISBN 1841198978

The relationship between ourselves and our souls is explained in this gentle and poetic story. May help young adults to explain their feelings, what they are, and how they may pop out without warning.

Two weeks with the Queen (1999)

Morris Gleitzman

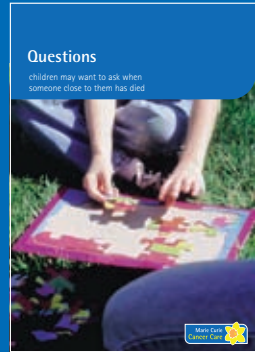
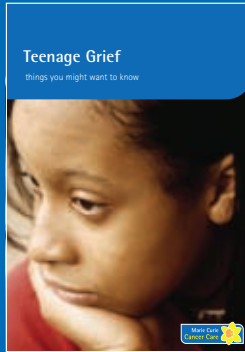
Penguin Books, £4.99

ISBN 014130300X

When Colin's brother Luke becomes seriously ill with leukaemia, Colin decides to ask the Queen if he could borrow her top doctor.

All prices correct at time of printing

Other booklets in this set:



For information about cancer and other conditions,
plus links to websites offering information and support,
visit: www.mariecurie.org.uk/patientsandcarers



Your local Marie Curie Hospice actively promotes quality of life for people with cancer and other illnesses and provides support for their families, completely free.

To become a Marie Curie supporter,
call **0800 716 146**

