

The Kids Need to Know



MELISSA AND ABBEY SPEAR

When talking to children about cancer, experts say honesty is always the best place to begin.

It's important to use words and concepts appropriate to the child's age and maturity level.

When Melissa Spear learned last year that she had breast cancer, she struggled with what to say to her 11-year-old daughter Abbey.

"I was nervous. I was numbed out. I was breaking down every five minutes," recalls Spear, 33, of Old Orchard Beach. "Abbey's a worrier, and I didn't want her to worry."

For Spear and other parents facing serious illness, talking with children adds anxiety to an already distressing situation. After processing the diagnosis themselves, parents often feel caught between wanting to tell their children the truth and wanting to protect them from the pain.

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"Whether it's death, divorce, or disease, there's always a desire to shield our kids from trauma," says Christine Bennett, M.D., a pediatrician and a consultant for the Center for Grieving Children in Portland. "We're afraid bad news will bother them. But they're smart, and they're going to be more bothered if they feel alienated from what's going on." Bennett adds that honesty establishes trust, which is important as the family continues to cope with cancer.

The key is to be honest without being overwhelming.

Bennett says it's important to use words and concepts appropriate to the child's age and maturity level. Younger children, for example, can be told in simple, concrete terms that Mommy has cancer and the doctors are helping her get better. Older children can handle more specific descriptions about how tumors form and how chemotherapy works.

At any age, experts say, children should be repeatedly reassured of your love and your acknowledgement that their lives and routines will be affected. Younger children will need to be prepared for the fact that the parent might feel tired or sick at times, and unable to play. Older children might need to spend more time caring for younger siblings.

"In some families it may be necessary for the children to help more with chores, and they often receive less attention because of cancer treatments or doctor's appointments. If they don't understand why this is happening, they might feel as if they are being punished," states the American Cancer Society's *Talking With Children About Cancer*. The document is available online at cancer.org or by calling 1-800-ACS-2345.

Parents can help by understanding that reactions like withdrawing, regressing, or acting out are normal. Creating a safe environment for children to ask questions, express feelings, and voice concerns is a good idea. And parents shouldn't hesitate to show their own vulnerability.

"It's all right for your children to see your fears and your tears," says Carol Sylvester, who runs the Center for Grieving Children's Tender Living Care Program (TLC) for families facing serious illness.

"You might end up with your teenager crying in your lap. That's human," she says. "If you don't open the door to that humanness, you're keeping everyone else cut off. This is about connection."

Equally important for maintaining that connection, Sylvester says, is offering your children the chance to be involved in certain aspects of your treatment. Some families have a hair-cutting ceremony at home, for example, so it's not as big of a shock when long hair falls out during chemotherapy. Melissa Spear took Abbey shopping and let her help pick out a wig. They both got hats in similar styles.

Spear found that involving her daughter also helped facilitate regular conversations about breast cancer. That communication became especially important when Abbey

began picking up scary information at school. "She would come home telling me how her friend's aunt or grandmother died of cancer," Spear says. "I would remind her of the people we know who survived cancer."

Fear of a parent dying is one of the most common reactions to learning about cancer, experts say. And while that fear may never go away, parents can help by reassuring the child that they're doing everything possible to recover.

"You can say, 'I'm taking good care of myself and working really hard to get better, and the doctors are working really hard to help me get better,'" Sylvester advises. "And let them know a lot of people do get all better from cancer."

The key, she says, is to hold hope along with the fear, because both can bring families closer.

"In the midst of the journey of illness, there are opportunities for great richness and communication. There can be a life-affirming feeling that we're all connected. We're all in this together." ★

Child Support

The Center for Grieving Children's Tender Living Care program supports families facing serious illness from the point of diagnosis. They offer peer support groups and activities for children ages 3-18 and their families. They also provide phone support and hand-outs on how to talk with children about cancer.

The Center's new book, *A Family's Journey: a Handbook for Living with Illness and Finding Hope*, includes personal stories, advice, and projects to help families explore their feelings. For more information, contact Carol Sylvester at carol@cgcmaine.org or 775-5216 or visit cgcmaine.org.

Helpful Books

Ann Spelz
The Year My Mother Was Bald
(Magination Press)

Judith Vigna
When Eric's Mom Fought Cancer
(Albert Whitman & Company)

Abigail and Adrienne Ackerman,
Our Mom Has Cancer
(American Cancer Society)

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