



# Seriously Ill Loved One

According to national statistics, by age 15, more than a million children in the United States will lose a parent to terminal illness.

Supporting Your Child

# Telling Your Child About a Serious Illness

When someone a child cares about has a serious illness, the child hurts, too.

## Tell Them the Truth

First and foremost, tell your children the truth. If children aren't told the truth, their imaginations are likely to conjure up even worse scenarios and they can't express how they are feeling. If children can't trust what you tell them when the news is scary, they'll question whether you're telling the truth when there is good news. It may be helpful to talk with older children first and then give them the choice in helping explain things to younger children. You can be honest and be hopeful. With a cancer diagnosis you might say, "Some people do die from cancer, but most people get better."

## How to Tell Them

You don't have to have all the answers. You don't even have to talk about everything. Children will process things in small chunks of information, be prepared to discuss the same topics over and over.

Use the name of the disease. Many children will hear it somewhere. If children hear family members explain the diagnosis, it can help them to feel included and trusting. Encourage children to ask questions. Older children may even want to ask questions of medical staff.

Parents may be surprised that children can cope with the news pretty well. Kids already know something is up, so they may feel relief because they are assured you and they are close. It is normal for a child to request to "go play" soon after hearing difficult information. This does not mean that he/she did not understand.



The very youngest of children, from **infancy up to around three years old**, cannot understand what it means to die, but they still feel the loss. For this age, focus on providing safety, comfort, and love. Use simple terms to explain death.

**Preschool children** may act out their emotions. Some kids become withdrawn. Others may become angry or destructive, or have mood swings. Children might have stomach aches or not feel good. Again, provide support and love. Encourage your child to talk about his or her feelings. At this age, children may begin to draw pictures about their emotions.

**School age children** have a better understanding of death. You want to be as honest as you can. If you have a belief in the afterlife, your child may find it comforting to think that the loved one who is dying or has died will be, or is in heaven. If the idea of life after death is not something you believe in, it's fine to say that we just don't know what happens after we die. Help them find comfort in remembering their friend or loved one.

**Teenagers** may react in both childish and adult ways. If your teen processes things verbally, he or she may need to discuss the death over and over again. Listen to them without judgment. Others may withdraw to their rooms, play loud music, or become unusually angry. As with younger kids, encourage them to verbalize what they're feeling.

## Stick to the Rules

Parents aren't doing their children any favors if all the normal rules of behavior go out the window. If the rules change too much, the children are frightened and they may act out more due to the desire for structure and consistency.

## Prepare for the Tough Questions

Experts agree the tough questions are going to come. You need to communicate that you're there to talk about whatever and whenever they want. And they'll be ready at the oddest times—in the car, at the store, or even while you're on the phone. Rehearse some answers to questions that may come your way.

Children experience stress and fear at significant moments, like when they get up in the morning and everyone is in a rush to get ready for the day ahead. While adults act sad when they are depressed, children can become agitated which may actually be signs of fear or sadness.

Children don't need to be told, "there's nothing to worry about," or "everything will be just fine," when that's not the case. Be sure children understand that they did not cause the illness in any way and that it is not contagious (if this is true).



# Help Your Children Understand

Here is an approach that helps a parent understand a child's underlying concerns. For example, if the child asks whether the parent will die, it's possible the child is fearful of being left alone or of having to move. Other recommendations include:

- Expressing interest in the child's daily activities.
- Maintaining daily routines.
- Carving out protected family time.
- Giving medical updates in factual, age-appropriate terms.
- Allow children to find ways to help and be included in new family routines related to the illness experience. However, be careful not to put too much additional responsibility on children.
- Taking time to think out answers.
- Not forcing a reluctant child to share more than is bearable.
- If possible, allow your children to interact with other children who may be facing similar life experiences. It helps them to know they are not alone.

These types of efforts make children feel included, valued, and cared for, and parents often feel relieved that they can help them cope.



The signs and symptoms of traumatic stress are often present, but overlooked, as attention is focused on the ill person. At other times, a child may not exhibit any signs of stress and may appear to be coping well, when in fact the fears and conflicting emotions are just beneath the surface.

As a parent, you want to protect your children from difficult feelings and experiences. It can feel awful to watch your child grieve someone he or she loved. As someone to whom your child looks up to, you have the ability to gently guide them through this experience. Allow yourself to express your emotions in front of your children. It supports that it is alright to feel different ways.

If you are grieving yourself, consider reaching out to others for support, for both you and your children. Often children slip into the role of emotional caregiver; this role reversal can be detrimental to a child's well-being. And if, at any time, you're concerned about your child's grief, seek help from a therapist or counselor. They can advise you on what is normal and what may need to be looked at more closely.

Inform schools about what is going on in the family, as it may impact children's school performance.



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Material adapted from *Telling Your Kids About A Serious Illness* by Pat Curry, *Supporting Kids with a Terminally Ill Parent* by Diana Mahoney, [www.wondersandworries.org](http://www.wondersandworries.org), and material from Jenise Harmon, MSW, LISW.