



# Helping Families Cope with Parental Cancer


University of Houston-Clear Lake  
Crisis Intervention- Spring 2009

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By age 15, more than a million children in the United States will lose a parent to terminal illness.

A child's reaction to the diagnosis is dependent on how the parent and other adults are handling the crisis.

(Mahoney, 2005; American Cancer Society, 2000)



# The Basics of Talking to Your Kids

**Who?** You should tell your kids. If not, a close relative.

**When?** As soon as possible. Give a bit of information at a time.

**Where?** In a place that children are more likely to talk to you.

**Why?** Children can sense something is wrong and cancer affects the emotions of the whole family.

**How?** As a group or individually. Practice what you will say, anticipate potential questions. Age appropriate language.

**What and How much....**

(Macmillan Cancer Support, 2009)



# Parent Tips for Talking about Their Diagnosis

- Give accurate, age-appropriate information.
- Explain treatment plan and how it will affect their lives.
- Answer questions as accurately as possible.
- Reassure your children.
- Let them know that they can count on their support system.
- Allow children to participate in your care.

(CancerCare, 2008)



# Parent Tips for Talking about Their Diagnosis

- Encourage children to express their feelings.
- Reassure children that they will be cared for.
- To the extent possible, make communicating with your children a priority.
- Show your children a lot of love and affection.
- Correct any misinformation that they have.
- Try to not make any promises you might not be able to keep.

# Understanding Serious Illness by Age (School Age 5-8)

## Developmental Level

- Self-centered, dependent on parent
- Understand past, present, future
- Starting to understand how their body works and the meaning of serious illness
- May have heard of cancer, may equate with death
- Able to express feelings but overwhelmed with depth
- May ask a lot of questions.
- Often return quickly to play when they have heard enough. Need of keeping the routine normal.

## Helping Them Cope

- Need gentle honesty, otherwise will use imagination. Use age appropriate language.
- Use dolls or pictures.
- Ask frequently if child has questions
- Have child explain back to you what is happening to the sick parent-ensures comprehension.
- Reassure that they will be cared for.
- Show your feelings to encourage them to share theirs.
- Keep hospital visits brief.
- Reassure them that they are healthy themselves and that the parent's illness is not their fault.

(Stanford Cancer Center, 2008)

# Understanding Serious Illness by Age (Pre-Teen 9-12)

## Developmental Level

- Beginning to focus more on friends than family; want to spend more time with non-ill parent.
- Absorb information quickly; want to know how things work.
- Think logically most of time; beginning to develop abstract reasoning
- Conscious of social acceptance; want to be part of the norm
- Meaning of illness is centered on its impact on them
- Know what cancer is and that there are different types.
- May worry that they are also ill.

## Helping Them Cope

- Encourage them to spend time with friends.
- Do not overload with additional responsibilities that they feel obligated to do.
- Do not let them take on the role of parent.
- Show affection; be a model of proper ways of handling emotions.
- Monitor internet research.
- Provide specific information.
- Keep school personnel informed.
- Offer to speak with friends and friends' parents about the situation.

(Stanford Cancer Center, 2008)

# Understanding Serious Illness by Age (Teen 13-18)

## Developmental Level

- Want to be self-reliant
- Go to friends for advice
- Self-centered, think about future a lot
- Moody, self-conscious
- Understand significance of cancer; understand symptoms, reasons for symptoms, death possibility
- Conflict between independence and wanting to be with sick parent.
- Concerned about parent's pain and suffering.
- Worry about parent but afraid to show emotions.

## Helping Them Cope

- Usually cope better than younger children.
- Torn between wanting to be with friends and be with parent
- Encourage normal activities as much as possible.
- Friends = support
- Avoid adult roles for teen; allow for them to help in decision-making
- Reassure them that they are healthy and are not at fault for illness.

(Stanford Cancer Center, 2008)

# What Can School Counselors Do?

- Listen to the children when they need to talk.
- Provide creative outlets for emotions:
  - Pounding clay
  - Drawing pictures
  - Creating scrapbooks
  - Writing letters
- Support the family and their decisions
  - Provide access to resources
  - Discuss custody plans

(Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, 2008)

# Standby Guardianship

- **Definition:** The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105–89) includes a recommendation that all states pass standby guardianship legislation:

It is the sense of Congress that the States should have in effect laws and procedures that permit any parent who is chronically ill or near death, without surrendering parental rights, to designate a standby guardian for the parent's minor children, whose authority would take effect upon: 1) the death of the parent; 2) the mental incapacity of the parent; or 3) the physical debilitation and the consent of the parent. (Sec.403) [**Texas incorporates portions of the recommendation.**]

- **In Texas:**

- File the court with an application for appointment of a guardian.
- File the court with a written declaration and any self-proving affidavit.
- The court approves the declaration with a hearing and appoints the designated person as guardian.
- Upon the triggering event, the court shall appoint the person designated in the will or declaration to serve as guardian of the minor. (Triggering event = incapacity or death of parent)

(National Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Center, 2003)



# Resource Books for Parents

Blum, D. (n.d.). Helping children when a family member has cancer. Retrieved February 18, 2009 from [http://www.cancer.org/pdf/booklets/ccc\\_helping\\_children.pdf](http://www.cancer.org/pdf/booklets/ccc_helping_children.pdf)

Bruss, K. V., Fincannon, J. L., Heiney, S., Hermann, J. F. (2001). Cancer in the family: Helping children cope with a parent's illness. American Cancer Society.

Hamilton, J. (2001). When a parent is sick: Helping parents explain serious illness to children. Pottersfield Press.

Harpham, W.S. (2004). When a parent has cancer: A guide to caring for your children  
Perennial Currents.

(Stanford Cancer Center, 2008)



# Resource Books for Parents

Russell, N. (2001). *Can I still kiss you? Answering your children's questions about cancer.*

Health Communications.

Stern, T. and Sekeres, M. (2003). *Facing cancer: A complete guide for people with*

*cancer, their families and caregivers*

Van Dernoot, P. (2002). *Helping children cope with your cancer: A guide for parents and*

*families.* Hatherleigh Press.

(Stanford Cancer Center, 2008)



# Resource Books for Children

Heegaard, M. (1992). When someone has a very serious illness: Children learn to cope with loss and change. Woodland Press MN.

Heiney, S. (1998). Quest: A journal for the teenager whose parent has cancer. South Carolina Cancer Center of the Palmetto Health Alliance, Columbia, SC.

Martin, C. (2001). The rainbow feelings of cancer: A book for children who have a loved one with cancer. Hohm Press.

McCue, K. (1996). How to help children through a parent's serious illness. St. Martin's Griffin.



# Resource Books for Children

Parkinson, C. (1991). My mommy has cancer. Solace Publishing, Incorporated.

Pennebacker, R. (2000). Both Sides Now. A novel about a teen coping with mom's breast cancer. Henry Holt and Co. (BYR).

Schmidt, R.(2003). Coloring books: My book about cancer.

# Teen Specific Resource

- *When Your Parent Has Cancer: A Guide for Teens* by the National Cancer Institute
- Available from [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov) or 1-800-4-CANCER

## Topics include:

- You've just learned that your parent has cancer
- Learning about cancer
- Cancer treatment
- What your parent may be feeling
- Changes in your family
- Taking care of yourself
- Finding support
- You and your friends
- How you can help your parent
- After treatment
- The road ahead
- Learning more on your own
- Monitoring tests
- Cancer team members
- Glossary



# Resource Videos

Kids Tell Kids: What it's like when a family member has cancer. (Cancervive: 1998).

Talking about your cancer: A parent's guide to helping children cope. (Fox Chase Cancer Center: 1996).

We can cope: When a parent has cancer. (Inflexxion: 2002). [Parent, teen, child versions].

(Stanford Cancer Center, 2008)

# Local Support Groups/ Counseling

- Cancer Patients & Families, Wednesdays 4:00pm at The Jesse H. Jones Rotary House, 1600 Holcombe.
- CLIMB (Children's Lives Include Moments of Bravery), 6-week support group, at Mays Clinic Building, ACB2.1041. Contact: Marisa at 713-792-6826
- CCI- [www.cancercounseling.info](http://www.cancercounseling.info), up to 6 free sessions, in Pearland, Clear Lake, Galveston County
- [www.cancercareforkids.org](http://www.cancercareforkids.org), services include counseling, education, financial assistance. 1-800-813-HOPE

# References

- American Cancer Society. (2000). Talking to children about cancer. Retrieved on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009 from [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).
- CancerCare, Inc. (2008). Helping children understand cancer: Talking your kids about your diagnosis. Retrieved on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009 from [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org).
- Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh. (2008). Helping children cope with death. Retrieved on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009 from <http://www.chp.edu/CHP/Helping+Children+Cope+with+Death>.
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- National Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Center. (2003, May). Summary of standby guardianship statutes by state. Retrieved on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009 from [aia.berkeley.edu](http://aia.berkeley.edu).
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