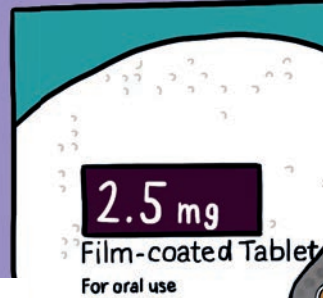


TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN

WORKSHOP GUIDE

Kids are little detectives with amazing imaginations. Not telling them or giving them partial or incorrect information can be more worrying than the truth.



PREPARATION

Preparation is key. Write a script and rehearse that in front of a mirror or to a friend or partner.

HOW

Think of it as a jigsaw puzzle.

New pieces of info are added when appropriate. Keep it simple and straightforward. Even older children can get overwhelmed by lots of details.

The key aims are to reassure them, give them security, and provide a space for them to ask questions. Using the word cancer right at the beginning is best because it is likely they will hear it somehow. Find out what your child knows about cancer.

Be truthful. That doesn't mean going into every detail. If the illness is serious, you should say so. Teenagers like the truth delivered in a non-patronising way, and not sugar coated.

Give your children time to take the information in - silences can be good. Ask them to repeat what you have said, so you can pick up any misunderstandings.

Encourage them to ask questions. Don't be surprised if they pop up at odd times (whilst shopping, going to school, before bed).

Don't worry if you can't answer them all. Tell that you don't know the answer, but you will find out and get back to them - make sure you do.

Children can often believe they have caused the cancer by behaving badly or thinking bad thoughts, and they might think cancer is contagious. So tell them, you can't catch cancer, and nothing they did, thought or said caused the cancer.

WHEN

Try and choose a calm time of the day that allows your child to process what you have said - not before school or bedtime.

Holding hands, be physically close with them, sitting on the floor at their eye level, or sitting next to each other on the sofa for minimal eye contact.

If you have more than one child, try to tell them at the same time



WHAT

Tell your child what you currently know about your upcoming treatment. Try not to predict the future, e.g. 'I'll be all better by the summer holidays'.

Make it age appropriate (see 'What should I say resource' for help).

Let them know what changes you might experience, both mentally and physically.

Losing hair can be a big shock so tell them in advance.

Look to limiting the fear of the unknown. For example, ask your CNS to borrow a port (if you are to have one fitted) and bring it home for them pin to their teddy.



RESOURCES

Have resources to hand – 'Kid's Guide to Cancer' app, websites, books, a worry box, note pad, play dough, soft toy. Not only can they be an object to fiddle with and look at, making the conversation feels less loaded, they can help with understanding, or just be a comfort.

REACTIONS

Don't hide your own feelings. If you are sad or worried, say so. You want your child to know that it's okay for them to feel that way.



Be prepared for any reaction. Reactions may be delayed or vary from day to day. Talk about the doctors and nurses and other people who are helping you get better.

Talk about how this will affect their daily lives. "You will still go to school" "You will still have football practice on Wednesday" "Ava's Mum will take you to school when I can't"

OPEN DISCUSSIONS

Nearly every child will either ask or think the question 'Are you going to die?'.

So rather than brush it off, you can say something like "You may have heard that something people die of cancer, but most people who have cancer live. I am doing everything I can to help my body get better".

COMMUNICATING

If one method doesn't seem to work, try another, or use multiple ones:

Post it notes, family notepad on kitchen table, chalkboard/whiteboard, weekly family discussions around the table, going to favourite café to talk once a week, WhatsApp messaging, talking in the car.



CHECK IN CHATS

Ask about whether the new family rules/plan worries them or is confusing?

Ask if they feel they hear too much, too little or the right amount about your cancer treatment?

Ask if friends or other grownups have spoken to them about your cancer care?

Ask what their friends might not "get" about having a parent with cancer, e.g. "What is the stupidest thing anyone has said to you about my cancer diagnosis or treatment?"



If you are struggling, contact Maggie's for free psychological support.