



Talking to your child about cancer

This may be one of the most difficult conversations you have ever had with your child. But you will be in this together and being honest upfront is the best way to start. Find an age-appropriate way to talk about the diagnosis and treatment plan.

“Our child's doctor was very adamant about saying that children's cancers are different than adult cancers. Children's cancers are curable. We reminded our child of that over and over when the issue of cancer came up on TV or conversation. That made perfect sense to our child and took away a lot of potential fear.”

“Have your doctor explain to you, so that you understand, exactly what this type of cancer is and then explain it in as simple terms as possible to your child.”

“Tell your kids the truth using age-appropriate words. We told both our sons that Luke had a bump in his tummy that could make him sick so we had to shrink the bump and take it out. We used similar language around what the brociac was for and that Luke would probably get sick and lose his hair from the medicine.”

“It is so important for the parents and child to have a positive attitude. The same goes for siblings. The way we got through the initial shock was to tell our child that he has a form of cancer and he needed to take medicine and go through treatment to get better. We had to make ourselves say that he would get better - and believe it. There is no other option.”

“Our daughter was 3 ½ when she was diagnosed with Leukemia. She was so little, but we wanted to tell her the “truth”- as she could understand it. So we told her she had sick cells in her blood that needed special medicine to get better. This seemed to satisfy her. We are a year into treatment and I find as she gets older, she asks more questions and we are able to build upon the discussion of what Leukemia/Cancer really is all about.”

“Don't be afraid of the question, “why.” It took our daughter a year to ask why. Every family will have their own comfort zone with the answer they give – medical, philosophical, etc. Our family went the medical route—we explained that our 3 ½ year-old's body just “grew” a few cells that didn't work right and needed fixing.”

“Don’t be surprised if your child is overwhelmed in the beginning. Our daughter stopped speaking about five days into her first hospitalization. On one level, we understood – here this tiny girl just had major surgery to implant a catheter, started major chemo, and was in the midst of cancer. But, it scared us that she wouldn’t speak and just lied in bed so sad and withdrawn. Our doctor called it “hospitalitis” and reassured us that when she was discharged, things would improve. Sure enough on the day she was discharged, our little girl - who hadn’t moved out of her hospital bed in almost ten days - immediately started romping around with her big sister. We call that “sibling medicine!”

Some great books to help you get the conversation started:

The Long and Short of it Written by Barbara Meyers and Lydia Criss Mays

A Tale About Hair - follows the parallel stories of two young girls who are having problems with their hair. One wants to grow her hair longer, while the other, who has lost her hair during cancer treatment, would just like to have it back. Their friendship leads them to a new understanding of hair loss and the act of giving, and teaches them about courage, generosity, and pride.

My Cancer Days Written by Courtney Filigenzi

In the story, a young girl uses color to express her full range of emotions as she undergoes cancer treatment. Some days she’s sad, some days she’s happy, and other days she’s scared or angry. The girl comes to realize that these ups and downs are perfectly normal for her situation. The book assures children with cancer that they are not alone, and helps them understand that it’s okay to let out their feelings.

Chemo Girl: Saving the World One Treatment at a Time by Christina Richmond

The 12-year-old author, who was diagnosed with rhabdomyosarcoma in the seventh grade, created a superhero named Chemo Girl to give other children strength in their battles with cancer.

Why, Charlie Brown, Why? by Charles Schultz

A Story About What Happens When a Friend is Very Ill

Henry and the White Wolf by Tim and Tyler Karu

Henry, a sick little hedgehog, must undergo treatment from the White Wolf that makes him feel worse before it makes him well again. Also written for siblings and friends of children with cancer.