

Tips for a Talking with Children about a Loved One's Illness



Sometimes we wonder how and when we should talk with children and youth about illness. We may feel overwhelmed ourselves, and we may want to protect children from the challenges associated with illness. However, children and youth can sense when something is wrong, and they are better able to cope with situations when they know what is happening, feel connected with others, and feel free to ask questions.

Here are some tips to consider:

- Be honest with kids, use the name of the disease, and provide accurate information that meets the child's developmental level. Children appreciate feeling included, and they appreciate knowing that they can trust you.
- You may want to ask children what they know about the situation. By doing this, you may discover that they have concerns that you didn't anticipate, and you can address these from the beginning.
- Give them time and space to process the information. Many kids need information in bits and pieces, and they will let you know when they want to learn more and need to talk about things.
- Recognize that it is okay not to have all the answers. Sometimes we can say that we just don't know. Other times we can assure children that we will provide more information as it becomes available.
- Help children know what to expect, whether this relates to a visit to the hospital, the progression of an illness, or changes related to a loved one's ability and moods.
- Assure children that they did not do anything to cause an illness and that it is not contagious.
- Encourage children to express their feelings, and don't be afraid to express your own emotions in front of them. Children need to know that they may have a variety of feelings and that there are healthy and acceptable ways to express them.
- Reassure children that they are loved no matter what and that they will be taken care of.
- Keep routines as normal as possible, which encourages a sense of security. If routines need to change due to an illness, help children participate in new ones.
- Help children find people to talk to, whether another adult, a counselor, or (for older children) peers who are going through similar experiences.
- Be prepared to discuss difficult topics such as death. Use clear, specific terms, and avoid euphemisms such as "passing away" or "sleeping forever."
- Check in with children as situations change, and notice changes in eating, sleeping, aggressiveness, or withdrawal.
- Spend quality time together, and remind them that you love them.

Sources:

www.wondersandworries.org

www.virtualhospice.ca

www.cancer.net *The Unbroken Circle: A Toolkit for Congregations Around Illness, End of Life, and Grief*