

# Breaking the News



## Acknowledgements

*Simple Talk for Tough Times*  
is dedicated to the extraordinary  
courage, determination and hope  
of the families we serve.

This material was written by Marcia Carlson, MSW, oncology outreach coordinator at Mercy and Unity Hospitals. It was edited by Sandy Herral and John Dailey, and illustrated by Todd Zerger of BrainstormOverload.com. The book is published by Allina Hospitals & Clinics with special thanks to Creative Services of Allina Hospitals & Clinics.

Allina Hospitals & Clinics is a not-for-profit system of hospitals, clinics and other health care services, providing care throughout Minnesota and western Wisconsin. Allina owns and operates 11 hospitals, more than 90 clinics, and health care services, including cancer care services at:

- the Virginia Piper Cancer Institute – Abbott Northwestern Hospital
- the Virginia Piper Cancer Institute – Unity Hospital
- Mercy Hospital
- Buffalo Hospital
- Cambridge Medical Center
- New Ulm Medical Center
- River Falls Area Hospital
- St. Francis Regional Medical Center
- United Hospital
- various Allina Medical Clinic locations.



## Breaking the News

### Preparing Yourself

“We are always communicating, even when we do not speak.”

~ Virginia Satir

Read through this section and then locate the accompanying pages for different age groups. On those pages you will find more specific ideas for what to say, what to do and what to observe with your children. There are also resources for each age group in the *Ideas and Resources* section.

### Setting the Stage

- Take time to understand and accept your diagnosis. Talk with your peers, especially your partner, if you have one. Think through and even name your own feelings. Know that your thoughts and feelings will change with time and working through them will be an ongoing process. Take your time, but keep in mind that your children are already sensing something is wrong and need your explanation and reassurance.
- Recognize the size of the “elephant.” As hard as it can be for you to get your own arms around your cancer diagnosis, it can be even more challenging for your children. Some parts of the message are bigger and harder to describe than others. So, you do not have to talk about everything at one time.

“Pace yourself. An elephant can be swallowed only one bite at a time.”

~ Anonymous

- Pay attention to your children’s attention spans. Recognize that children have varying attention spans, and so do you. There will be times that are better than others to talk to your children about what cancer means to your family. Use the metaphor of the elephant if it helps. Do not worry if children tune out after just a few minutes, but do ask them what they are feeling when they do.
- Choose times to talk when your children are more open or ready to talk. There will never be a perfect time. It helps to plan times to talk when your children are not too hungry, tired or preoccupied with their own issues with friends or school. If you are married or



have someone else involved with the children, it is good to do this together. Sometimes you have to “make a date” with your children.

- Be as natural as possible. Talk with your children, not at them. Use familiar language.
- Tell the truth as you know it. Children need to know that you can be trusted to tell the truth. If something is not clear yet to you, tell them you will let them know as soon as you know.

### Talking About Cancer

- Share your feelings, but focus on your children's feelings more than your own.
- Put two of the most common fears of children at ease: Tell them, “You cannot catch cancer and you did not do anything to cause it.”
- Use the real name of your cancer.
- Ask your children what they already know about cancer. Do not be afraid of talking over their heads. Give them credit. They understand more than we realize.
- Tell them your best understanding of what will happen and when. Children need to have anchors, even dates and times, if possible. Making a calendar with medical appointments noted can be helpful.
- Children want life to be predictable. Let them know that some things may change and how that might look. Reassure them of the things that will not change and that they will always be cared for.
- Encourage questions, but realize you may not know the answers to all of their questions. You can say, “I don't know but I will find out for both/all of us.” Follow your children's lead as to how much they want to know.
- Allow yourself and your children to express emotions. Hug each other, cry, be angry, or express frustration together. Your role is to show that it is alright to say and feel emotions. Don't be afraid to ask for their hugs, too.



- Let your child know that you believe in his inner strength and resilience.
- Do not hesitate to call on the expert resources available to help you, including your physician, hospital social workers, counselors at school and in the community, clergy and others.