

Breaking the News



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6 – 9 Years

“Tell me I’m clever. Tell me I’m kind. Tell me I’m talented.
Tell me I’m cute. Tell me I’m sensitive, graceful and wise.
Tell me I’m perfect – but tell me the truth.”

~ Shel Silverstein

Developmental Factors

Industry and Competence

These are the ages when children are interested in real things and are less engrossed in fantasy. Following rules is important, and children will often make up elaborate rules for games.

Children’s attention spans increase. They stick more with a task and enjoy working at things. Doing things right is important. Working and playing together is more prevalent. Children in this age group like to master things and feel competent.

This is also a social stage when children can feel inadequate, especially if they feel different in terms of themselves or changes in their family. The neighborhood and school are becoming important, and family is a little less the authority.



What to Say

- Since children at this age are now thinking more logically, you can explain cancer in a more straightforward way. Use some of the real words and help them pronounce them. For example, “I have colon cancer. The colon is the part of your body that carries waste from our food out of the body. Cancer is a disease of the cells of our bodies. The cells grow faster than normal and a tumor was formed in my colon and had to be removed. Now we are trying to stop the cells from growing again by using medicines called chemotherapy.”
- Tell your children the schedules you will be keeping for treatment, and who will be caring for them during those times.

- Continually reinforce to your children that they cannot catch cancer nor did they do anything to cause it:
- Show-and-tell is an important way for children to share with classmates in school. A picture or story about the cancer might help them deal realistically with the cancer and normalize their family. For the older end of this age group, writing a report about cancer or reading a book about cancer and reporting on the book might help.
- Tell your child what to expect, "I may be a little sick after the chemotherapy. My stomach may feel upset and I may not feel like eating. I may get tired more easily than before, but taking naps will help me to feel better."
- If your child is feeling fearful or anxious about your illness when you are apart, you might say, "If you feel like you need to talk to someone at school when you get scared, let us know and we will ask someone to help you."
- Children may become self-conscious if a parent is noticeably sick, has lost hair or if life at home is different. Talk these feelings through and be sensitive to them.
- Children at this age often understand that death is real. A discussion about death may be necessary as children often think of death as caused by an external force not something internal. See more about this in the *Facing Uncertainties* section.

What to Do

- Communicate with your child's school. Make sure they know what is going on at home and will provide a person for your child to talk with and a place to get away when it is needed.
- Try to simplify after-school schedules. Talk with your child about which activity is a favorite and which may be temporarily put on hold, if needed. It is better for your child to be present at one favorite activity regularly than to irregularly attend several.
- Address your child's curiosity about where you get your chemotherapy or radiation treatments. Explain what he will see, and arrange a visit with staff. Allow him to ask questions while you are there and be sure to ask what the experience was like afterward.
- Draw pictures together or write a story or poem about the experience of cancer in your family.

- Recognize that anger is part of resistance to the changes. Encourage your child to express her anger by pounding on some clay, having a pillow fight, painting with bright colors, etc. For some, anger is hard to express directly, so using clay, paint or pounding pillows can be very healthy and satisfying for both or all of you. (One father related throwing ice cubes with his son into the bathtub while it was empty.) Be creative!
- Talk with your child about her fears and sadness, since anger can often drown out these other emotions. Ask, "You were pretty angry when you were throwing those pillows, weren't you? Are you scared or sad, too?"
- Acknowledge and accept your child's disappointment in your inability to attend his school or community activities.
- Look at pictures of the human body. and point out where the cancer is. See the *Ideas and Resources* section.
- Take time to snuggle, and look at photographs together. Do not worry if your child's need for attachment is stronger now or if your child is afraid to get close. Talking about the feelings often allows the real needs to surface.
- Take a trip to the library or the hospital's resource center to find some books about cancer.
- Encourage your child to lie still and imagine bubbles dissolving the cancer or some other images she is able to comprehend. Use imagery and relaxing music to help them calm down.
- Keep certain expectations clear, such as, "My job is to get better from my cancer. Yours is to go to school and keep working and playing as you have before." Children may not want to go to school for fear something may happen to you. Reassure them that you will be alright while they are in school.
- Limit time spent socializing with well-wishers during family time (after school to bedtime). Your child wants your valuable attention during family-only times.



What to Observe

Changes in behavior for children, adolescents and adults during stressful times are normal. These changes may include regression or returning to less mature behaviors. Some behaviors which may occur include:

- Thumb-sucking
- Bedwetting
- Sleeplessness
- Withdrawal / isolation
- Acting out
- Irrational fears
- Obsessive-compulsive or ritualistic behaviors
- Psychosomatic complaints
- Tics (localized and habitual twitching, especially in the face)
- Destructive behaviors
- Over-eating or not eating
- Acting like the parent (needing to be Mom or the “man of the house”)
- Psychosomatic complaints



It is important to pay attention to any behavior that is out of character for your child, especially if the behavior appears more intense or frequent, or if you intuitively sense that something is wrong. This is the time to consult a professional such as your physician or pediatrician, a child development specialist, or counselor.

