



Talking to Children about a Life-Threatening Illness

When someone in the family has a life-threatening illness it can be difficult talking with children about the many changes. Many adults want to shield children from the truth in order to protect them from hurt. If children are not informed, they may feel isolated, alone, and not important enough to be included. If there is a serious illness in the family, children can sense anxiety and tension around them. They may often think that they have caused something bad to happen.

The information that follows offers tips that you may find helpful when talking to children. Please adapt these suggestions to suit individual family needs and communication styles.

When deciding whether or not to talk with children about life threatening illness, consider the following:

- Children can usually tell when something is wrong.
- They may fear or imagine scenarios that may not match the actual situation.
- Children may find out details from someone else or overhear conversations and misinterpret the information.
- Telling children may offer families an opportunity for sharing openly, memory making, increasing positive coping, preparing and planning.
- Coping with serious illness in the family can be a time for children to learn more about difficult feelings and how to express them.

Where to begin?

- Talk with the child in a setting that is comfortable to them such as their room, the kitchen, the car, etc.
- Try to begin the conversation early enough in the day so that the child can have time to think about what was said and come back with questions.
- Allow enough time so that you can listen without feeling rushed.
- If possible, avoid talking with the child before a major event like school, a party, a field trip, etc.

Helpful strategies for talking with your child:

- Find out what the child already knows. Chances are they already know something is wrong. Questions that are helpful to ask include: "Is there anything that has happened here in the past while that you don't understand?", "Do you know why mommy went to the hospital?", "Do you know what kind of sickness daddy has?"
- Explain the illness in simple language. You do not have to give them all the details about treatments, surgeries, etc.

- Tell them what has happened and what may happen next. If the family member is dying, do not offer false assurances to the child.
- Explain changes in routine e.g., Introduce nurses and other professionals that may be providing care in the home.
- Be open to questions and be prepared to answer them honestly and succinctly.
- Tell the children how you are feeling. It is okay to show your pain and cry, children will look to you as a role model.
- Don't be afraid to say "I don't know".
- Don't push children to talk if they are not ready.

What Next?

- Try to maintain the child's routine as much as possible. Let them have time to themselves (eg. when relatives visit) and continue with activities.
- Maintain discipline and rules as are normal for the family. Children need to have boundaries and know that rules haven't changed.
- Extra hugs, kisses, and time together often go further than words. Assure the child that they will always be supported and loved throughout this time.
- Let them know who will help to care for them, drive to hockey practices, etc.
- Allow the child to react in their own style. Some children may react immediately, while others may need some time to process the information.
- Children learn through repetition and will ask you to retell the 'story' over and over again. If this is more than you can bear, look to other family or friends who may be able to help.
- Allow time for your child to play. Children use play to work through what they have learned.

Children can learn and grow from being around illness by:

- Gaining greater independence from being asked to help around the house.
- Developing a stronger sense of responsibility.
- Learning from watching others coping with difficult situations.