How Do You Explain Cancer to Your Children?

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Explaining Cancer to a Child: How to Help Them Understand

A cancer diagnosis has a profound impact on the entire family and explaining cancer to kids can be difficult and scary, as children often find themselves faced with questions and fear.

While this time can be a challenging one for yourself, understanding how to explain what's going on to the children in your life and help them to cope will make the process much easier on everyone, and help your family to build a strong support group and relationship with you.

Before You Start Explaining Cancer to a Child

The groundwork for success comes before the conversation occurs. Without planning and preparation, there is little chance for the explanation to go well. Because of this, you must complete certain tasks before the conversation.

Gain the Information

How can you explain something that you do not understand yourself? Everybody is acquainted with the concept of cancer, but who really knows what it means, how it forms, and how treatment works?

To gain helpful material early on, your doctor will be a preferred source. Ask questions and request material you can take with you. The shock of the diagnosis will make your memory vulnerable, so write down the information to reduce the reliance on your recall.

Know Your Status

Ideally, you will tell your children about your condition soon after your diagnosis. The timing requires a balance because waiting too long makes the process more uncomfortable, while communicating too soon will not allow you the moment to acknowledge your own feelings.

Set Your Goal

What do you want this conversation to accomplish? It seems obvious that you would want to explain your condition to your children in a way that makes them aware of your cancer and improves their comfort with an uncomfortable situation. Clearly setting this goal will keep you from diverting down another path.

Starting the Process Early

While the last thing you may want to do is tell your child about your cancer diagnosis, experts say it's important to tell them what's going on with you in the beginning and then to continue informing them as time goes by.

Cancer will have a huge impact on your child, but the more involved and informed they feel, the less of a negative impact it will have.

Here are a few tips for sharing this information:

Manage the Setting

The time and the place of the conversation will set the tone for the words the follow. Work to limit distractions by turning off the TV and putting phones down.

The fourth quarter of the big game is not an ideal time to process complex information. Your location should be quiet, comfortable, calm, and private.

Know Your Audience

Discussing something with a 30-year-old child will be done differently than with a three-year-old child. You must take their individual traits, age, developmental levels, and temperament into consideration.

Is your child easily upset or does she shut down and ignore stressors? Each person responds best to a varied level of communication, so identify which is best for your child.

If you wish to speak to speak in a group, find the middle ground between your kids; but if they are too different, separate conversations might be the best decision for them.

Keep It Assertive

Assertive communication involves clear, honest, and direct expression of your thoughts and feelings. Assertive communication respects your needs as much as the needs of your audience.

Provide the facts of your cancer as well as your subjective feelings. Brevity is an asset in assertive communication because too much information can blur your message.

You do not need to have all the answers during this conversation, and you don't need to keep the tone light or overly positive. You just need to provide an authentic window into your fears, struggles, concerns, and hopes.

React and Respond

Remember, this is a conversation, not a lecture. That means your children are expected to participate in ways other than listening. You can foster interaction on their part by asking many questions, listening to their feedback, and responding in an honest, encouraging way.

After the Conversation

You might be breathing a huge sigh of relief after the conversation is over, but don't think your task is complete. What happens after the conversation can affect how your child responds and their level of comfort.

To improve outcomes, follow-up often by asking more questions and giving more information about your symptoms and your feelings.

During this phase of the explanation, it will be easy to simply go through the motions rather than really committing to the wellbeing of your child. If you ask, "Are you doing okay?" daily, your child will realize you are not actually interested in their response, and they will stop being honest.

Keeping them actively engaged in the process at an age-appropriate level will aid increase their understanding and minimize your stress.

There is no perfect way to explain your cancer diagnosis to your children. Working to prepare, providing information assertively, and following up will be a way to increase your efficacy.

Although saying nothing is easy, it will not be best for them or for you. Cancer affects everyone. Do what you can to lessen the negative influence.