

## Points to Consider



**....dealing with children and young people's questions and thoughts about a family cancer diagnosis.**

*Having worked in teaching for nearly 40 years, and been a cancer patient myself, I have some experience of talking to children about a cancer diagnosis. I hope that my thoughts are not too obvious, they may well be ideas that you've already considered. The youngster's first thought is often about how it will affect them and their lives, so do try to be as unemotional and as practical as possible.*

- ❖ **Above all, try to be as up-beat and honest as you can.**
- ❖ **Children will mainly ask questions if they're ready to hear the answers, so try to be guided by them.**
- ❖ **A good starting point is to ask them if they have any questions about your illness. They may have heard that a cancer diagnosis means you will die. Tell them that many more people live than die from cancer and that treatment is getting better all the time. It's important to give them a hopeful picture, especially if this is the first time you've talked about the situation.**
- ❖ **Tell them you're not planning on going anywhere.**
- ❖ **Please tell your child's teacher what is going on. There will be a wealth of support from the staff in school. They will have experience and training to help your child to cope with an unsettling time. Children will often talk to someone who is not so closely involved in the situation at home. It's a balance for them.**
- ❖ **If you're having chemo, tell them that the chemo will be killing the bad cancer cells, but it is such strong stuff that it may also make you feel ill for a time.**
- ❖ **Chemo will also sometimes make you lose your hair. That can be really difficult for youngsters to deal with. Tell them, in advance, that it's likely to happen and try to keep the issue as light-hearted as possible when talking about it. Reassure them that your hair will grow back. Why not involve them, if possible, in choosing a wig or headscarves. Make the process a bit of fun by letting them try on the wig. It will be more familiar then.**
- ❖ **Reassure them about practicalities such as their food, bedtimes, being with friends, attendance at school, clubs etc.**

- ❖ **Keep to normal routines as much as possible**
- ❖ **If you have a wider family or close friends, try to get them to help your child by taking them out, including them in your wider family member's outings or treats. Try to make experiences as good as you can for them.**
- ❖ **Try to plan good experiences, treats and opportunities for you and your child to have some good time together. A simple walk in the open air or shared baking session can allow them to relax enough to talk. It doesn't have to be Disneyland Florida!**
- ❖ **Don't stress about what isn't too urgent or important. It's important to treat yourself and your family with the gentleness and kindness you'd show to a good friend.**
- ❖ **With very young children, a glove puppet can be a good idea, with you operating it. Children will often talk to the puppet who might say things like "How are you feeling about Mummy's/ Gran's treatment?" or "Is there anything that's a bit scary right now?" or "What sort of stuff are you thinking about?" It's surprising how youngsters will forget about the adult and talk to the puppet.**
- ❖ **However, they sometimes ask strange or difficult questions. Don't laugh at these, it's obviously a thought they have. A child in my class of ten year olds asked me, when I went back to work, if cancer can be 'catching'. Another child asked me if my husband had left me. (I have no idea where that idea came from) It was hard not to smile, but I answered honestly that he'd been a really good help, especially when he burned the Christmas dinner!**
- ❖ **It's OK to have a bit of a laugh and a joke (see above)....they need to see you're still the same person you've always been.**
- ❖ **If you are having a bad time and your treatment is not working, please let the local hospice or Macmillan team help you. The support from Havens or Little Havens for children finding life tough, is excellent. They have so much experience.**
- ❖ **In my experience, children can cope with more than we give them credit for.**
- ❖ **Above all, reassure them that, whatever happens, you and your wider family and friends will be there for them. Always ready to talk and give a hug.**
- ❖ **Never underestimate the value of those hugs.**

**All the best to you and yours.**



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