

# HELPING THE SIBLINGS OF A CHILD WITH CANCER

A cancer diagnosis has a profound effect on the entire family, especially when it is a child who is diagnosed. Children who have a sibling with cancer have various reactions.



## TIPS TO HELP YOUR CHILD

Siblings of a child with cancer may experience a range of emotions including fear, anger, jealousy, anxiety, sadness and hopelessness related to their sister or brother's diagnosis. They are often faced with changes such as their sibling not being able to play with them as usual and their extracurricular activities getting reduced or eliminated due to parents' time constraints and focus on the child with cancer's medical care.

Here are some tips on understanding how your healthy children may feel after a sibling is diagnosed with cancer and some practical ways to support them:

**Talk it through.** Give your children accurate, age-appropriate information about their sibling's diagnosis as soon as possible. Don't be afraid to use the word cancer. Explain the treatment plan and how it will affect them. Remember that if you don't talk to your kids about cancer, they may come up with their own explanations, which can be even more frightening than the facts. Some children believe something they did, such as get in a fight with their sibling, caused the cancer. Let them know that nothing they did or said can cause cancer.

**Answer questions as accurately as possible.** Keep the lines of communication open by answering questions honestly, taking into account your children's age and prior experience with serious illness in the family. If you don't know an answer to a question, it's okay to say that you don't know and will try to find out. To maintain an honest and trusting relationship, replace statements like "everything will be okay" with "we and the doctors are doing everything we can to help your sister/brother get better."

**Try to maintain normalcy** whenever it is possible. Routine gives children a sense of security and helps them cope with stressful situations.

**Prepare your children.** Explain the treatment plan and prepare your children for physical changes their sibling may experience (for instance, hair loss, fatigue, or weight loss). Talking about appearance changes ahead of time will help reduce fear when these changes happen. Let your children know about changes to their routine in advance (for example, "Daddy will pick you up from school instead of Mommy for a while.")

**Reassure your children.** Let your children know that their needs will continue to be taken care of. While your children know that you love them, they may be feeling vulnerable and need more reassurance than usual. Explain that their sister or brother needs a lot of attention right now but that does not mean you love your child with cancer more than you love them.

**Acknowledge feelings.** Your healthy children may feel guilty, frustrated, angry, sad or selfish for not just feeling happy they are healthy. Let your children know that you understand this is a hard time for them too and that all feelings are acceptable. Feelings are never wrong. If they want to talk about how they are feeling, hear them out. Some children won't want to verbalize how they are feeling. You can be supportive in other ways by helping them find healthy outlets such as writing, music, art or physical activity.

**Identify supports.** Help your children identify people they can talk to such as family members, teachers, their school guidance counselor or members of your faith community for extra support. It may be helpful to ask one of these people to look out for your well child. Pick someone the child knows and trusts and ask them if they can be there to help out if the child needs someone when you are not available.

**It's a team effort.** If your children express interest in being involved in their sibling's care, find ways for them to help out. Giving them age-appropriate tasks such as bringing their sibling a cup of water or an extra blanket can help them feel important and needed. Older children may be able to help out with watching their sibling or helping set up for meals.

**Make time to be with the well children.**

While family and friends are understandably focused on caring for the child with cancer, it's important to spend time with your well children too. Having time alone with you, even in small amounts, will mean a lot and is a concrete way of conveying that they are special to you.

**Support for your family.** You and your children are not alone. To learn about support services such as counseling or support groups, speak to a hospital social worker or call 800-813-HOPE (4673) to speak with a CancerCare oncology social worker.



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