

Having that First Conversation

How do I tell my child that I have cancer?

When you hear that you have cancer, you may be understandably upset. Your own coping makes talking about your diagnosis and treatment plan more difficult. So, before you talk to your child about it, we recommend you voice those thoughts and concerns.

Ask yourself: what does this cancer mean to me? What do I know and not know now, and how do I feel about that? Adjusting to a diagnosis takes time, and is complicated by uncertainty. By thinking through your own feelings, you'll know what about your cancer makes it difficult for you to have this conversation.

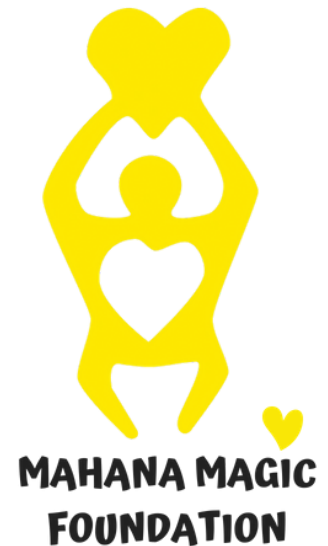
Prepare yourself by thinking about what you hope to convey to your children through your words and actions. It's perfectly understandable if you find this difficult. Talking to your children about your cancer may be one of the hardest things you've ever had to do. However, when parents give their children a chance to share their worries, they often feel a sense of relief and are able to move forward as a family in dealing with their situation.

Now, it's time to think of how to talk to your child. When you think about talking to kids – and, in particular, your child – what do you anticipate happening? You may find it helpful to write down your most important points so you're able to pay attention to your kids and their reactions.

Important to know/consider when preparing for this conversation is:

• You don't need to follow a script

Talk as naturally as possible, and invite your children to ask questions early on. You could encourage them to tell you what they already know, what they would like to know, and how they think your illness will affect them and the family. Remind them that it's okay to ask you questions, and that you'll do your best to answer. As a result, you show them it is possible to talk together about hard issues.



Anticipate how you might respond to your children as you talk together. It's okay to be emotional; this is tough stuff. You may find that when you do include them in your situation, your kids feel closer to you and have a better understanding of their own thoughts and feelings.

- **Your child's age and developmental understanding**

Do you have a 5 year old who understands something (but not a lot) about how the body works? Or, a 10 year old who has been taught more about illness and recovery? The amount of detail you give in that first conversation will depend on these factors.

What they think it means will depend on how it is presented by you. Because of that, don't avoid the word and use it in your first conversation if your child is old enough to understand.

- **Whether or not your child has heard the word "cancer" and/or learned about certain cancer treatments - or has some familiarity with hospitals**

Did a person in your family have cancer before or go to the hospital? Consider how your child may interpret what you say. You may want to anticipate them – or just be attentive to signs that they're thinking about that past experience and ask them about it. Something like:

"I see you looking down, what's on your mind?"

- **Has your child had to cope with a life challenge before? How did your child deal with it?**

Whether or not this challenge was about illness, it may help you anticipate how they could react to this. It doesn't mean you shouldn't share. Generally speaking, your child(ren) will fare better in the long-term if they feel in-the-know and secure that mom or dad will tell them important information.

- **Your child being upset doesn't mean YOU have caused them pain.**

Upset feelings are a normal and natural reaction to news of cancer. One of your greatest gifts you can give your child at this point is the gift of "normalizing" difficult feelings, thoughts and worries.

And, we'll say it again...

- **You know your child best.**

Remember that you are the expert here and you know best how to help your child begin to navigate your cancer journey.