

10 Ways to Support Children Through a Parent's Cancer Diagnosis



This resource was adapted from a blog post about ways to support children through a parent's cancer diagnosis. To read the full blog post, visit nbcf.org/ways-to-support

When a parent is diagnosed with cancer, children may feel confused, scared, or unsure how to process what's happening. With care and guidance, you can help them navigate this difficult time in healthy ways. Here are 10 strategies that provide reassurance, stability, and support.

1. Be honest, and tell them enough

Children can usually sense when something serious is happening, so being truthful helps build trust and reduces confusion. Share information at a level they can understand, giving enough details to address their fears without overwhelming them.

2. Help them understand the potential side effects of treatment

Explaining changes they may see—like hair loss, fatigue, or mood shifts—prepares kids for what's coming and lessens shock or fear. Clear communication helps them know these changes are part of treatment, not something they caused.

3. Pay attention to what they say and how they act

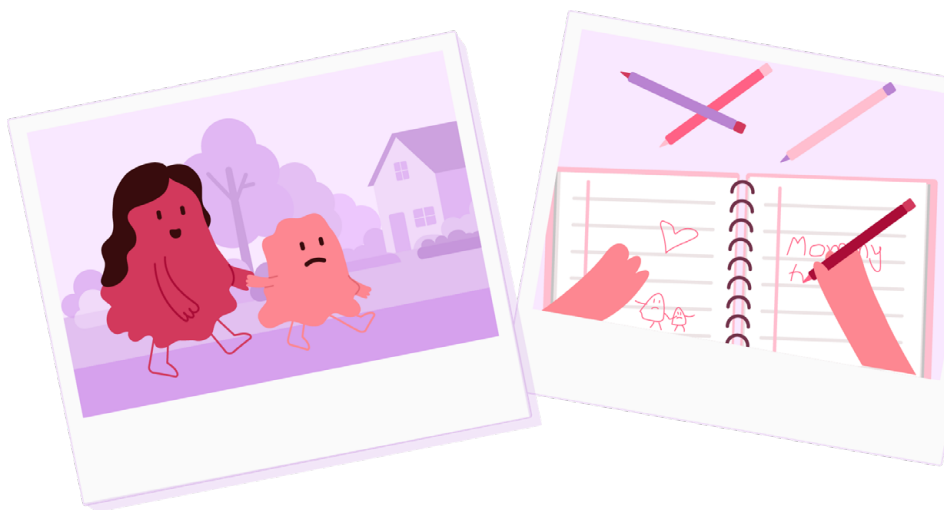
Kids might express worries through behavior more than words. Watching for changes in mood, sleep, or school performance can give clues about how they're coping and when they may need extra help and reassurance.

4. Provide multiple outlets for expressing emotions

Every child processes feelings differently. Some may want to talk, while others may prefer drawing, journaling, or playing. Encouraging different ways of expression helps children release emotions in healthy, constructive ways.

5. Take their feelings seriously

Dismissing or minimizing their worries can make children feel unseen or invalidated. Instead, acknowledging their emotions can help them feel safe to share openly and remind them that their feelings are normal.





6. Teach and practice stress management

Simple techniques such as deep breathing, mindfulness, or physical activity can help kids regulate their emotions during stressful times. Practicing these together as a family shows them they're not alone in handling stress.

7. Balance old and new routines

Maintaining familiar routines, like school, sports, or extracurricular activities, provides children with a sense of stability. At the same time, introducing new routines that accommodate a parent's treatment helps them adapt to changes without feeling lost.

8. Develop a network of support

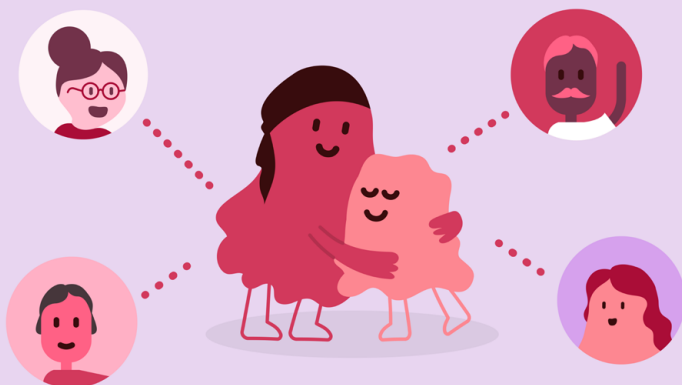
Friends, relatives, teachers, and community groups can provide encouragement and practical help for families. A strong support system ensures children don't feel isolated and reinforces that many people care about them.

9. Recognize when they need extra help

Some children may struggle more deeply than others and show ongoing signs of distress, such as inability to be comforted, difficulty enjoying favorite activities, or withdrawal or isolation. These are signs it might be time to seek out additional help.

10. Connect with professionals

The physical and emotional challenges of cancer can test the limits of parents and children alike. Seeking the support of family counselors, therapists, clergy, or even school counselors can provide families with extra guidance and care to help everyone cope and thrive.



To access more free resources for families facing a cancer diagnosis, visit nbcf.org/parents