

How to Explain That Someone Isn't Going to Get Better

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/howtoexplain.



When a parent or loved one's cancer isn't going to get better and they are facing a terminal diagnosis, the conversation can feel even scarier and harder for parents and caregivers. While death is part of this conversation, talking to kids about death can, and should, also include talking about life, comfort, and connection. Below are steps and statements you can use to provide comfort, reassurance, and support.

Assess what your child already understands

Ask: "What do you understand about what's happening with Mom's cancer?"

This gives you an opportunity to clarify misconceptions, fill in gaps, or gently build on what they're already thinking or worrying about.

Give a warning

Say: "I have something important to talk about."

A brief warning helps children to emotionally prepare and signals that this is an important, serious, or perhaps upsetting conversation.

Build on previous conversations

Ask: "Remember when we talked about how the medicine was trying to get rid of the cancer cells?" Then offer a simple, honest explanation.

Say: "The doctors have told us that the medicine isn't working anymore, and there isn't another treatment available that can make the cancer go away or get better." Then pause to answer any questions the child may have and comfort them in the way they need.

Explain what dying actually means

Say: "Because there are no other medicines to help the cancer, that means that grandma will die from her cancer. Dying means her body will stop working and she won't be able to keep living."

Clear, direct language based on the child's developmental stage helps them understand and trust the information they're being given versus trying to make sense of it on their own.

Shift the focus of care

Say: "We know she will get more sick and weaker, but we don't know how quickly that will happen. We're starting with a new care team called hospice whose job is to help her be as comfortable as possible, either at home or in a care facility."

This reassures children that their loved one will continue to be cared for and supported and that family and friends can focus on their time together.

Quality time and memory-making

Say: "We can focus on enjoying our time together and making memories. What would you like to do together?"

Maintaining aspects of normal daily life such as school, activities, and routine can be comforting to children, while still making space for meaningful moments together.

Revisit the conversation as needed

When someone isn't going to get better, there is a lot for children to process. Invite questions and remind them that this conversation doesn't have to happen all at once. Above all, let your child know that you will continue to talk, listen, and be there every step of the way.