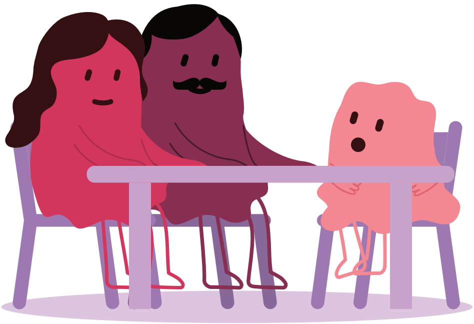
How to Talk to Kids About Cancer Recurrence

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/kidsrecurrence****.*



When a parent's cancer comes back, it can feel overwhelming for the entire family, especially children. Yet this conversation often builds on the foundation you've already established with your child: what they already know, remember, and how they've been supported along the way.

Review what they already know

Say: "It's been a while since we talked about this, but remember how I had cancer cells in my breast that were removed with treatment?"

Grounding the conversation in familiar language can help the child feel more comfortable with the conversation.

Provide a warning and share the update

Say: "I have something important to share."

Then share the information clearly and simply.

Say: "The cancer cells are in my body again, and I will need more treatment to get rid of them." Avoid long explanations at first. You can always add more detail once you see how your child responds.

Pause and follow your child's lead

It's natural to want to fill silence and share everything at once. But pausing gives your child time to catch up with the information and respond in a way that is natural or automatic for them.

Remember that there is no "right" response. Give them space so you can respond to their questions, fears, and needs, rather than what you think they might be feeling or needing.

Explain and clarify what recurrence means

Say: "Recurrence (or relapse) means the cancer went away or got better and has come back. It doesn't mean anyone did anything wrong. It just means the body needs more help, like treatment or medicine again."

Then normalize uncertainty.

Say: "Sometimes people get better and never need treatment again. Other times, the cancer cells come back even after a period of feeling well. Doctors monitor the body through regular check-ups so that they can notice changes early and decide when and what additional support or treatment is needed."

Prepare them for what comes next

If you're still waiting for answers, say: "I don't have all of the information yet, but I'm going to have some follow-up appointments to make a plan with my doctors. As soon as I know more, I will tell you."

If you are starting a new treatment, say: "I am going to start a new medicine soon. I'll go to the clinic where they will [describe the treatment]. I'm not sure how it will make me feel. It might cause some side effects like feeling tired and nauseous. We'll figure it out together."

Provide ongoing emotional support

Say: "It's okay to feel nervous. I feel nervous sometimes, too."

Even when your instinct is to fix their hurt or make it go away, support often looks like validation.

Say: "When I feel nervous, I try to take deep breaths or do something that brings me a little joy. What helps you?"

Then practice coping strategies together.

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