

Visit www.LLS.org/Parenting for more information about parenting during a cancer diagnosis.

Baby/Toddler (0 to 3 years)

- Children this young do not have an understanding of illness or cancer. However, they are aware of changes to routines and the feelings of people around them.
- Children may feel separation anxiety and need physical and verbal reassurance.
- You may notice changes in appetite, sleeping patterns or tantrums in response to the changes in their environment.

Preschool/Kindergarten (4 to 6 years)

- Children in this age-group may have an understanding of illness but not understand the implications of a serious illness, such as cancer. It may be especially confusing to the child if the person diagnosed does not look or act sick.
- Reassure the child that no one did anything to cause the cancer, neither the child nor the person with cancer.
- As with younger children, a preschooler or kindergarten child may experience separation anxiety so reassure the child and give advanced warning either if you or the cancer patient will be away.
- You may see signs of regression in a child's behavior, such as thumb sucking, bed wetting or tantrums.
- A child may use play to process the information, play-acting doctor/patient scenarios, for example.
- If the cancer treatment will result in any changes to the child's daily routine, explain it to them ahead of time so that the child knows what to expect. Inform the child's teacher so that he or she can also understand changes in routine.
- Explain, in advance, any physical changes that your child might notice about the cancer patient, such as hair loss, scars or unfamiliar medical equipment.

Elementary/Middle School (7 to 12 years)

- Children in this age-group may have a good understanding of serious illness, but not specifically cancer.
- The child may hear things about cancer from school, friends, TV or have found information on the Internet. Ask your child what he or she already knows about cancer. If you encounter any misunderstandings, correct them using straightforward, clear statements such as "You can't catch cancer from another person" and "No one did something wrong to cause the cancer diagnosis."
- Explain that "cancer" is a broad term that covers many different types of cancer. It may be helpful to talk to the child about the specific diagnosis of his or her loved one.
- Younger children in this age-group may also show signs of regression or separation anxiety.
- If the cancer treatment will result in any changes to the child's daily routine, explain the changes ahead of time so that the child knows what to expect.
- Explain, in advance, any physical and emotional changes that your child may notice in the loved one as a result of treatment.
- Children may feel uncomfortable around a person they love who has a cancer diagnosis, or they may feel embarrassed when others outside the family know about the diagnosis.
- Children in this age-group may worry but hide their feelings. Try to check in with the child and keep an eye out for signs of depression, such as ongoing feelings of sadness, loss of interest in activities, trouble focusing, problems sleeping, angry outbursts, or issues in school.
- Inform your child's teacher of the diagnosis. Reach out to your child's school counselor or pediatrician for help if you notice troubling changes in mood or behavior.

High School/Teenagers (13 to 18 years)

- Teenagers most likely have a good understanding of cancer, but you may still need to correct some misunderstanding heard at school, from friends, on TV, or information they found on the Internet. It may be helpful to explain the cancer patient's specific diagnosis instead of just using the word "cancer."
- Having a loved one with cancer may lead teenagers to think more seriously about death and the meaning of life.
- Older teenagers may want to help with caregiving duties. Allow teens to help, as appropriate, but do not lay too much responsibility on their shoulders.
- Teenagers may show anger or frustration but not be willing to share their feelings as people in this age group are often looking to gain a sense of independence.
- Teenagers may also act out or engage in risky behaviors, such as drinking, drug use, or sex.
- Watch for the signs of depression.
- Inform your child's teacher of the diagnosis. Reach out to your child's school counselor or pediatrician for help if you notice troubling changes in mood or behavior.