

# Talking to children

Deciding what to tell children about cancer is difficult. It can be hard to know what to tell them, and you may be worried about upsetting them. You might feel you are helping to protect children by not telling them. But children often know when something serious is affecting their family. Not knowing what is happening can make them feel more frightened and unsure. By telling them, it can help them feel less anxious and less worried that you are hiding things from them.

Talking to children about the cancer can help them understand what is going on and prepare them for any changes. It may also help with some of your own anxiety too. For example, not telling them about hospital appointments may cause extra stress.

How much you tell children will depend on their age and how mature they are. Younger children may not understand, but they will be aware of changes to their routine. Teenagers or young people usually understand, but may find it hard to talk about. Or they may ask you questions about the diagnosis and what it means for family life. They may also need more time to work through their feelings.

Teenagers may have to, or want to, take on more responsibilities to help – perhaps cooking meals or looking after younger children. This can be hard at a time when they may want more freedom and independence. Sometimes teenagers may find it hard to talk about a cancer diagnosis. You can encourage them to talk to someone they trust, who can support and listen to them. This might be a grandparent, family friend, teacher or counsellor. They may also find support online.

You will know the best way of talking to the child or teenager. Being open and honest is usually best. You will know how they might react and what support they may need.

## Tips for talking to children and teenagers

- You will probably need time to cope with your own feelings before you talk to children.
- If you have more than one child, it is best to tell them together if you can.
- You could start by asking them what they already know. They may know more than you think.
- Use words they will understand. Choose a time and a place when they are most likely to listen, and where you will not be interrupted.
- It is best to start by giving small amounts of information, and slowly telling them more.
- Try asking questions that encourage them to express what they are thinking.
- If you cannot answer all their questions, it is fine to say you do not know. Tell them you will try to find out.
- It may help to tell teachers, nursery staff or other parents about the situation. With teenagers, it is usually best to talk to them first. You may want to ask the teachers to tell you if a child shows any signs of worrying behavior.
- Talk to your GP or specialist nurse if you need help with childcare. Accept offers of help from family and friends if you need it.
- If you are worried about how a child is coping, ask your doctor or nurse about support for them from counselling or psychological services.

**Local resources:**

Resource	Contact details

**National resources:**

Resource	Contact details
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Riprap</li> <li>• Maggie's centres</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://www.riprap.org.uk">www.riprap.org.uk</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://www.maggiescentres.org.uk">www.maggiescentres.org.uk</a> Tel: 0300 123 1801</li> </ul>

**Further information**

[www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/talking-about-cancer/talking-to-children](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/talking-about-cancer/talking-to-children)

Our booklets and leaflets are available to order free on [be.macmillan.org.uk](http://be.macmillan.org.uk)

- Talking to children and teenagers when an adult has cancer
- Talking about cancer

**More information and support**

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm, or visit [macmillan.org.uk](http://macmillan.org.uk)

Deaf or hard of hearing? Call using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app. Speak another language? Telephone interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use.

We produce information in a range of formats and languages. To order these visit [macmillan.org.uk/otherformats](http://macmillan.org.uk/otherformats) or call our support line.