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Parent Communication Critical to Helping Kids Cope with Cancer

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A parent has been told the unthinkable: their child has cancer. After the shock and the emotionally draining discussions about pediatric cancer treatment options, side effects and possible outcomes, there is still a weighty task ahead: the excruciating responsibility of telling their child about his or her disease.

Soft-peddling the news is not a wise option; warn health care providers. While it's every parent's nature to protect their child, children are too intuitive to be deceived about their own illness. According to the National Cancer Institute, health professionals agree that telling children the truth about their illness actually leads to less stress and guilt for the parents, and children who know the truth are more likely to cooperate with treatment. Additionally, communicating openly can bring the family dealing with pediatric cancer closer together.

Deciding how to explain cancer and its consequences to a child, and communication before, during and after treatment, will vary depending on the age of the child and other factors such as the family's cultural and religious beliefs. Experts recommend parents choose a location that is comfortable and nurturing for the child, and include people who make the child feel loved. "The Other Side of the Mountain," a guide for parents of children diagnosed with cancer published by The National Children's Cancer Society ([NCCS](#)), suggests parents even rehearse what they're going to tell their child."

"Being honest and giving your child the right amount of knowledge for their age actually helps them understand their cancer and treatment better, and be less afraid," says Julie Komanetsky, vice president of Patient & Family Services at the NCCS. "It's important that parents answer questions truthfully and in a way that's relevant to their child." No matter what age a child is, parents should reassure them that they did not do anything to cause their cancer.

Open communication shouldn't stop once a child has completed cancer treatment. "Survivorship is a journey that lasts a lifetime," explains the NCCS's Komanetsky. "Parents need to continue their close communication to help their child weather any future hurdles and remain healthy."

The NCCS parent guide, "The Other Side of the Mountain," also provides tips for talking with siblings, teachers and health care providers, and offers help for single parents also. Visit thenccs.org to learn more about childhood cancer issues, or thenccs.org/pubs to get the parent guide.