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Tackle School Challenges Head-On for Kids with Cancer

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It makes sense that children and teens undergoing pediatric cancer treatment miss some school. There are days when they don't have the energy to keep up with their homework, and days when they can't go to school at all. Sometimes they might make it to class, only to feel listless and unable to concentrate. Existing learning disabilities may not get enough attention, and extra-curricular activities might have to be sidelined.

But there's a lot parents and teachers can do to help children with cancer stay on track and at grade level. Knowing ahead of time what the challenges can be, and having a plan to address them, will help meet the educational needs of children with cancer, according to The National Children's Cancer Society (NCCS), whose Beyond the Cure program offers resources for educators and parents.

"It's understandable that a child who is frequently absent from school will have some difficulties," says Pam Gabris, a registered nurse and coordinator of Beyond the Cure. "Teachers and parents should work together both during and after the child's treatment to help the child succeed in school, alleviate school problems and address learning issues."

Because childhood cancer is rare, most teachers don't have experience with pediatric cancer survivors. Additionally, many are not aware of learning disabilities that can occur as a result of treatment. So it's important for parents to inform their child's teacher that a learning problem may be related to the disease or its treatment.

There are certain factors that increase the risk of educational problems, according to CureSearch for Children's Cancer. Among them are the onset of cancer at a very young age, a history of learning problems prior to diagnosis, numerous or prolonged absences, treatment that results in reduced energy levels or affects hearing or vision, and therapy that includes treatment of the central nervous system.

One good resource for parents is a 504 Plan, recommends the NCCS. It's a legal document that outlines an instructional program for the child from diagnosis through high school.

Most important is communication, reminds Gabris. Parents who remain informative and accessible with teachers and school counselors can help their children overcome the educational challenges that may arise as a result of pediatric cancer.

For more information about educational issues impacting children with cancer, visit thenccs.org or Beyond the Cure at beyondthecure.org/parents_school.