

Age Appropriate Communication

Children up to 6 years	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Younger children are egocentric ■ Reinforce that they are not being blamed for the illness ■ Help them to understand that their behaviour will have no influence on the outcome ■ Reassure them that they will always be safe and cared for ■ Explore their understanding of the illness and/or death ■ Dispel guilt by correcting misconceptions and reassuring the child that nothing they did caused the illness or death, including their behaviour (e.g. don't tell them to 'be good' so that the parent can be well) ■ Provide concrete descriptions of death: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ their body does not work anymore ■ they can't see, hear, or feel anything ■ their heart stopped pumping and they have stopped breathing ■ Be patient in repeating that the deceased will not come back. 	<p>Talking about initial diagnosis</p> <p><i>I am sick with something called cancer. I'm going to be visiting the doctor a lot and taking medicine to get better. Some days, Mrs Smith will bring you to preschool instead of me.</i></p> <p>Talking about the end of active treatment</p> <p><i>You probably remember that I have tried several different kinds of medicine to get better from cancer. None of them have been able to keep the cancer from getting worse. I just found out from my doctors that there aren't any more medicines to even try that could make my cancer better. Now the medicine I take will be to make sure I don't have too many aches and pains.</i></p>
Children between 6–12 years	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Children in this age group can be concerned that they won't be accepted by their friends and peers and for some, being different for any reason can be distressing. ■ Children in this age group need: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Relevant information aimed specifically to their level of understanding ■ To maintain relationships with their peers ■ To continue to participate in affirming activities including sport, clubs or social activities ■ Ongoing opportunities to talk about comments from their peers and how these comments make them feel. ■ Provide a simple explanation of the diagnosis and treatment options ■ Dispel misconceptions regarding causes of illness or death, as well as contagion ■ Provide clear and accurate information about causes of death ■ Help put guilt and other concerns in perspective by thinking together about the entire relationship rather than only the recent past. 	<p>Talking about initial diagnosis</p> <p><i>You might remember that I've had a few doctors' appointments in the past couple of weeks, and that sometimes you've gone to a friend's house after school since I haven't been home. The doctors have been trying to understand why I have (whatever symptom may have initiated the process). They just told me that I have something called (breast, colon, etc.) cancer. I am feeling sad, and wish I didn't have it, but there are treatments that my doctors expect will (cure, contain) the cancer. I'm going to do everything I can to get better. You will probably have questions and feelings about this and I want us to talk about them together as they come up.</i></p> <p><i>Mum's cancer had spread to so many places in her body, and there just weren't any medicines that helped anymore.</i></p>

Children 12 years and up

- Adolescents are particularly vulnerable when a parent is seriously ill and any background tension is likely to be exacerbated
- Acknowledge and discuss changed family roles
- Maintain social relationships
- Access specific and relevant information about dying and death
- Facilitate opportunities to talk openly about the illness with their parents
- Provide information about the illness and treatment options
- Dispel misconceptions regarding causes of illness or death, as well as contagion
- Provide clear and accurate information about causes of death

Remember that adolescents may seek information from other sources, such as the internet. Encourage them to check the accuracy of this information with their parents.

Talking about a change in treatment

My doctors told me recently that the medicine I've been taking/treatment I've been getting isn't working to shrink the cancer. It turns out the cancer has spread, or metastasized. I'm upset about that because I had hoped this treatment would really help. But, my doctor has suggested a new kind of medicine that I'm hopeful will work better.

Talking about the end of active treatment

You know I have tried quite a few different treatments for cancer—radiation, several chemotherapy medicines, surgery, more chemotherapy—and none of them worked as well as we hoped. The cancer has continued to spread (or grow). My doctors just told me that we have run out of treatments that might even slow down the cancer. I will still go see them, but the medicine they will be giving me is just to make sure I am comfortable and not in too much pain.