

HELPING CHILDREN ADJUST TO A CANCER DIAGNOSIS

- **Don't try to protect the children from the grief and distress** of a cancer illness in someone they are close to.
- **Provide simple, accurate, age-appropriate information** at all stages of the cancer illness.
- **Don't assume** that young children do not know about cancer.
- Reassure children **that nothing they did caused the cancer** and that they cannot 'catch' the cancer.
- **Explain in simple terms** the changes that children may expect to see in the appearance of the patient such as surgical scars, stomas, prostheses, hair loss, weight loss or indwelling catheters (e.g. portacath).
- **Normalise expressions of emotional distress** (children and others) in the context of coping with the upheaval.
- **Expect temporary emotional distress**; be tolerant of behavioural changes such as 'acting out' or regression to an earlier stage of development.
- **Reassure children of your ongoing love**, support and care no matter what the outcome for the person with cancer.
- **Encourage children to draw pictures** or write letters or cards for the person who is unwell.
- **Continue to communicate openly and honestly**, even when the news is bad – if the cancer recurs or the end of life is imminent.
- If the patient is receiving care at home during the final stages of life, **actively involve children in care tasks** to maintain emotional connections.

Extracted from: Hobbs, Kim, 'Supporting Families and Carers' in Hodgkinson, Dr Katharine; Gilchrist, Dr Jemma (eds), *Psychosocial Care of Cancer Patients: A Health Professional's Guide to What to Say and Do*, Ausmed Publications (2008, Melbourne), 160.

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