

A large, abstract graphic on the left side of the page, composed of several thick, curved purple lines that resemble a stylized smile or a series of concentric arcs.

Talking and listening to children when someone close to them is dying

Rehabilitation and Support

A guide for patients and carers

Contents

What if I get upset when I am talking?.....	1
Where should I tell the children?	1
How do I start the conversation?.....	2
How do I tell them that someone is dying?	2
How to explain what dying means?	2
How might my children react?	3
Should children be allowed to visit?	4
Resources	5



This leaflet is designed to give you some advice, together with details of how to access further information and support. (We use children rather than child below but realise there may only be one child involved.)

Talking and listening to children to explain that a close relative is very ill and nearing death can be daunting, especially if you are struggling to accept the news yourself. However, it is important to help children to understand what is happening. How you do this will depend on their age, maturity and previous experiences and the relationship to the dying person – be they a parent, grandparent, great grandparent or other close relation. But keeping them informed may help them in the long term.

What if I get upset when I am talking?

Do not worry if you become tearful and upset, it shows your children that it is ok to cry. (It may even give them an opportunity to show you some comfort, say, with a cuddle.) If you feel overwhelmed by your feelings, it may be helpful to enlist the support of another family member or friend, or a member of staff.

Where should I tell the children?

Sometimes, you may have no choice but to tell the children at the hospice or hospital. If so, ask the staff if there is a quiet room or

area where you can speak privately. It may be helpful if another adult is available who can support you all. If you are at home, choose a familiar and quiet area of your home where you can give your children your full attention without distractions. Avoid bedtime if possible.

How do I start the conversation?

Start with asking what your children already know or have been told e.g., “You know that mummy has been very ill over the past few weeks...” or “You remember we talked about granddad’s cancer...”. Ask them how much they understand what is happening to their loved one.

How do I tell them that someone is dying?

Be honest and keep explanations brief and to the point. Give small pieces of information and check out your children’s understanding. Try to avoid using words or phrases which may be frightening to your child e.g. “Mummy is going to sleep forever.” Also, it is better to say, “We don’t know” than to give details which may be uncertain e.g. how much time is left.

How to explain what dying means?

As stated above, children’s understanding of what they are told and how they react will depend on their age, maturity and previous experiences. It may be helpful to access age-specific information as detailed at the end of this leaflet. As a general rule, it is



important to stress that death occurs when a person's body stops working. You may wish to talk in the context of your religious or spiritual beliefs.

How might my children react?

Firstly you know your children better than any of us, so you will know how they might react in a stressful/sad situation.

Children develop at different rates, but as a guide.

Very young children (under 5) may not understand what is happening. But even very young children can pick up emotions and tensions. They may become more clingy.

Children may be distressed at one moment and then quickly change and just want to play and engage in other activities. This does not mean that they have necessarily misunderstood what they have been told. Young children's emotions are still developing and they may not be able to manage difficult emotions for more than a few minutes. It may be that a child may become distressed at another time or ask questions at an unexpected time. This is normal.

Teenagers are in that in between stage where sometimes their emotions can be quite adult, but as they are not yet adults they can still at times be quite childlike in their reactions. They may feel they want to spend time with friends as much as family. They may find it hard to express how they feel, even though they do understand what is happening.

At whatever age, children need reassurance that having different feelings is ok.

Should children be allowed to visit?

Ideally, ask children if they would like to visit. If they are hesitant or unsure, explain what a visit involves. Give them alternatives e.g. sending a message, letter, picture or message on social media, and let them choose. Stress that it is perfectly okay not to want to visit. If they wish to visit, prepare them for what they will see. For example, “Mummy is a lot sleepier now and cannot talk to you but she can hear you and will know that you are there” or “Granddad’s breathing sounds quite noisy but it doesn’t mean that he is in pain” More generally, mention things such as if the relative has lost some weight, if their skin colour has changed and if any drips or tubes will be visible.

Try to encourage your children to ask questions and talk about how they are feeling. Reassure them that you will be there to support them.

This is a very difficult emotional time for you. Try to remember that the support and reassurance that you give to your children now will help them to adjust to cope in the months and years to come. Also if you have more than 1 child it can be helpful to remind them to be supportive and kind to each other. They may react quite differently from each other and they need to know that is ok.



Resources

Child Bereavement UK

www.childbereavementuk.org

Rip Rap

Resource for teenagers with parents who have cancer.

www.riprap.org.uk/about

Hope Support

For young people who have family members experiencing life threatening illness.

www.hopesupport.org.uk/about

Macmillan Support

www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/diagnosis/talking-about-cancer/understanding-children-and-teenagers-reactions

Winstons Wish

www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/supporting-a-bereaved-child

How we produce our information

All of our leaflets are produced by staff at The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre and this information is not sponsored or influenced in any way. Every effort is made to ensure that the information included in this leaflet is accurate and complete and we hope that it will add to any professional advice you have had. All our leaflets are evidence based where appropriate and they are regularly reviewed and updated. If you are concerned about your health in any way, you should consult your healthcare team.

We rely on a number of sources to gather evidence for our information. All of our information is in line with accepted national or international guidelines where possible. Where no guidelines exist, we rely on other reliable sources such as systematic reviews, published clinical trials data or a consensus review of experts. We also use medical textbooks, journals and government publications.

References for this leaflet can be obtained by telephoning 0151 556 5570.

If you need this leaflet in large print, Braille, audio or different language, please call 0151 556 5570.

If you have a comment, concern, compliment or complaint, please call 0151 556 5203.

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