How Do I Tell My Child that I Have a Serious Illness?

Many parents worry about how to tell their child about their illness and knowing what is the right thing to say. We know that sharing information can help your child to cope, start to adjust and feel more safe and secure. As their parent, you may already be thinking about what feels right to tell them and when. Talking to your child can help them feel included, and gives them the opportunity to ask questions and tell you about any worries that they may have.
How can you use this toolkit?
This toolkit is designed to help you think about how to talk to your child. There are no rights and wrongs but the toolkit includes some tips and ideas that might help you. At the end of the toolkit there are links to further information if you wish to explore this area in more detail and gain more support to do so.

General principles of the topic to consider
Telling your children about your illness is a process; it is likely that the initial conversation will serve as a starting point for you and your child to discuss more information and address questions or concerns following this.

There is no ‘right’ way of discussing this information with your children, you are the expert on your child and what works best for your family. This information is a starting point for you to plan how to have these discussions with your children and others as appropriate.

As these discussions progress, so can your encouragement of your child to share their thoughts, feelings and questions about what you have told them. Asking open ended questions, such as “how do you feel about...?” or “what do you think about...?” can be a good way of encouraging a discussion.
Top Tips and Strategies

Here are some techniques to help you tell your child if you have a serious illness:

1. Decide what you feel important to tell your child and why. You may want to rehearse what you want to say. Try to be consistent with what’s said between parents/other adults sharing the news with your child.

2. Choose a time when you’re feeling fairly calm and use a setting which is familiar and comfortable for you all, where you won’t be interrupted. Try to tell all siblings together if you can.

3. Start by asking the child what they understand about what has been happening. This helps you to identify and correct any misunderstandings that they may have and gently bring them up to date with the situation.

4. Try to give information to match your child’s age and ability. Young children especially will likely have a short attention span and so will not be able to absorb lots of information at one time. Let your child know that they are able to react and say how they feel. By seeing the sharing of this information as a process, revisit the discussion with your child when they are ready to know more and/or ask you questions or discuss their feelings regarding this.

5. Parents can worry about getting upset in front of their child - be reassured that although it can be a little upsetting for children to see their parents distressed, seeing them show feeling, and having that moment pass can be helpful.

6. Use simple language to help ensure that your children understand what they’re being told. Demonstrate with age appropriate discussion, media e.g. pictures or toys for younger children.

7. Give your child the opportunity to ask questions and be aware that these may arise at other times following your conversation. Try to give clear answers; if you are unsure, it’s better to say “I don’t know, but I’ll try to find out” than to guess or lie.

8. Assure your child that no matter what happens, they will be safe and loved. Encourage your child and family to focus on their normal activities and continue to do things which they enjoy.

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