

Help for Difficult Conversations

Helping children understand difficult news can be challenging. Caregivers often want to protect their children and choose not to share information for fear of how a child might respond. As child life specialists working with kids facing life-threatening illnesses — either their own or a loved one's — we have experience choosing words that help kids understand what is going on and what the news means for the future.

This information sheet gives tips for helping you start conversations to help your child anticipate and cope with difficult news.

General tips for conversations with children anticipating a loss

- Be honest and use clear language (see examples of words that can help and hurt).
- Be comfortable with your own emotions, as your child will look to you for an example. If you hide your emotions, your child will think he or she also needs to hide emotion or not show feelings. If you hide your tears, your child will think he or she cannot cry about the news.
- If it seems like your child wants to talk, but doesn't, you may want to prompt a conversation by asking questions. For example, you might ask, "I wonder if there is anything you've been scared of?"
- It is okay for you to answer a question with "I don't know."

- Answer the question that is asked and try not to anticipate or give more information than is needed at the time. For instance, if your child asks, "Will I feel pain during surgery?," it is okay to answer simply, "The doctors give you a special medicine that makes your whole body fall asleep for the surgery. So you will not feel anything while you are asleep."
- Try to be ready for your child's questions and practice answering them.
- Make a plan to deal with fears, such as being alone, being in pain, or missing out on the future.
- Silence is okay.
- If you feel like you've answered something wrong or reacted poorly, try again with a more calm or honest response.

Helping children understand their own illness

Words that can help

- **Sharing information:**
"This is what I know right now."
- **Giving your thoughts on how medicine may or may not work well:**
"The chemotherapy will hopefully hurt the cancer cells, but sometimes chemotherapy doesn't work."

(continued)

- **Helping your child understand that options have been tried:**

“The doctors and nurses tried very hard, but the medicine just isn’t working anymore.”

- **Sharing specific diagnosis information:**

“The tumors are getting bigger.”

“The blood is too sick.”

- **Anticipating fears:**

“We will have pain medicine for you and can give you that at home”

- **Helping them begin to cope:**

“It makes me really sad.”

Words that can hurt

- **Making promises:**

“The chemotherapy will make you feel better.”

“You will be fine.”

“You aren’t going to die.”

- **Controlling how he or she reacts:**

“Don’t cry.”

“Be brave.”

After having these difficult conversations, your child will likely have more questions and need opportunities to understand and cope with his or her own death. Please ask a child life specialist or other health professional if you have questions or concerns about helping your child cope with his or her own death.

Helping children understand a loved one’s health

Words that can help

- **Gathering information:**

“What do you remember about Grandma’s sickness?”

- **Sharing specific information about what caused the illness:**

“This is no one’s fault. You did nothing to cause your friend’s sick blood.”

- **Giving your thoughts on how medicine may or may not work well:**

“The doctors will do everything they can to help her body heal, but she may be too sick to get better.”

- **Sharing specific diagnosis information:**

“Grandma cannot get enough oxygen to her lungs, so she needs a tube in her nose to help her breathe.”

- **Anticipating relationship changes with the person who is sick:**

“Your brother may not be able to play with you because he may not have the energy.”

- **Modeling coping:**

“You may see me crying or sad, and it is okay to be sad.”

Words that can hurt

- **Using confusing language:**

“Your mother is going to pass away.”

“She will be with the angels.”

- **Promising:**

“I promise they will get better.”

- **Controlling how he or she reacts to the news:**

“Don’t cry.”

“Be a big girl/boy.”

After having these difficult conversations, your child will likely have more questions and need opportunities to understand and cope with the anticipated loss of a loved one. The following may help him or her feel some amount of control during tough times:

- If planning to have your children visit a loved one in the hospital, prepare them for what they will see, hear, and smell at the hospital.
- Give ideas for how your children can say goodbye to a loved one, such as writing a letter to the person.
- Give your children the opportunity to be involved in funeral planning, if appropriate for their ages.

During these difficult times, be sure to have your support system in place. This way you can take time for yourself so you can provide safe, healing opportunities for your children.

Your child life specialist can recommend or provide books that can be helpful. For more information about talking to your child about loss, contact Child Life Services at (615) 936-4575.