

doucettetherapy

Talking with Children and Teens **About a Parent's Serious Illness**



doucettetherapy

When a parent is diagnosed with cancer or another serious illness, many parents wonder:

"What should we tell the kids?"

They may also wonder when and how to have such a difficult conversation.

It is natural to want to protect children from overwhelming news. Many caring parents worry that sharing the truth will be too much for children to handle, which can lead to delaying conversations or keeping secrets.

However, children cope best when parents are **honest, clear, and emotionally supportive.**

This guide will help you understand why honesty matters and how to approach these conversations with care and confidence.

Be Honest (and Don't Wait Too Long)

When possible, it is best to tell children soon after a diagnosis, once you have a basic understanding of what is happening.

Many parents feel the urge to wait, until they have more clarity or certainty. This is understandable. However, waiting can make things harder for children.

Why not wait?

- Children are perceptive and often pick up on changes in mood or behaviour, which can increase anxiety
- They may overhear information or learn about it from someone else
- Hearing the news directly from a parent helps children feel safe and included
- Delaying can sometimes lead to hurt or loss of trust

Remember: When children don't have information, they often fill in the gaps with their imagination. They may assume something worse than reality. Honesty helps children feel safer.

Choose the Right Time and Place

When possible, choose a time that allows for **a calm, focused conversation.**

- Avoid late at night when children are tired
- Choose a time when you are not rushed
- Aim for a moment when your child can fully connect with you and feel supported

Many families find it helpful to:

- Talk at home, where children feel safe
- Plan a comforting activity afterward (e.g., watching a movie, spending time together)
- Go for a walk or pair the conversation with some other calm activity



Use Clear and Factual Language

Children benefit from clear, direct, and accurate information

- Use the actual name of the illness (e.g., “cancer”)
- Explain what it means in an age-appropriate way
- Avoid vague language like “sick,” which can be confusing

Instead of:

“Mommy is sick and will need to go to the hospital a lot.”

Try:

“Mommy has breast cancer. That means there is a tumour in her breast that needs to be treated. She will have surgery, and the doctors are planning the next steps.”

Clear language helps children:

- Understand what is happening
- Feel more prepared for changes
- Reduce unnecessary fear and confusion

You can begin the conversation with:

“We have something important to talk about. We want to be honest with you and keep you informed.”

Then speak calmly and directly.

Leave Room for Ongoing Conversations

You do not need to say everything at once.

Start with the most important information, and allow space for children to process and come back with questions.

Let your child know:

"You can ask me anything, anytime."

If you don't know an answer, it's okay to say:

"That's a really good question. I don't know yet, but I will find out and come back to you."

Then follow through.

It's also helpful to:

- Check in later that day or in the coming days
- Update children as new information becomes available
- Keep communication open over time
- Ongoing communication helps children feel secure and included, and reduces anxiety.

Anticipate Common Questions and Concerns

Children often worry about how the illness will affect them specifically.

It is normal and to be expected that they will worry about the impact on their life.

You may want to address questions like:

- “Will things change at home?”
- “Who will take care of me?”

Children may also:

- Wonder if they caused the illness
- Feel guilty or confused

Offer clear reassurance:

- “Nothing you did caused this.”



Age-Specific Considerations

Young children

- Need simple, repeated explanations
- May move quickly back to play (this is normal)
- Worries may show up later (such as bedtime)

School-aged children

- Focus on routines and practical changes
- Benefit from knowing what to expect

Teens

- May ask deeper, more detailed questions
- Want honest and direct answers
- Benefit from feeling included in discussions



There Is No Need for Perfection

What matters most is your presence, honesty, and connection—not perfect wording.

You can always revisit the conversation and clarify later.

Try to focus on starting the conversation, rather than getting it exactly right.

It can also help to have support:

- A partner or co-parent
- A trusted family member or friend
- You don't have to do this alone.

For more resources and to sign up for my monthly newsletter, go to **[DoucetteTherapy.com](https://www.DoucetteTherapy.com)**

