

Talking to Children when Someone has a Serious Illness

Step 1: Prepare yourself

- **Thinking about talking to children may feel very difficult**
- It's completely understandable to want to protect them from this news
- **If there is another adult at home with you, share the news with them first, so you can talk to the children together**
- Write out a simple list of what has been happening e.g. [Name] had pain and the doctors organised some tests. You can use this to support your conversations with the children.

Step 2: Prepare information

- **Take a minute to think about what each of the children know about what has been happening. What's been their understanding and experience of illness and death so far?**
- Children may be aware of phone calls or changes to their day-to-day routine. This means it will be helpful for them to know what's going on, so they are not left worrying alone about what is happening.

Step 3: Prepare environment

- **Think about when and where you want to talk to the children**
- If children have a special toy or comforter, have this to hand.

Step 4: Starting off

- **Asking children to stop what they are doing and come and sit down will prepare them for the conversation to come**
- Try and speak as slowly as you can and pause between sentences. People often speak quickly when they are upset and nervous.

Step 5: Explain the diagnosis

- **Talk VERY slowly and honestly**
- After you have told the children the diagnosis, wait for a few seconds to allow them to take in what you have said
- **Ask them what they know and understand about the illness**
- Correct any false beliefs about the illness e.g. you can't catch cancer from hugging
- **Wait until you feel the children are ready for more information**
- Be aware that distress can make it harder for them to take in information.

Step 6: Coping with children's reactions to the diagnosis

- It's OK to talk with children about how upsetting and/or worrying this news is for everybody.
- **Sharing your feelings can be helpful, but children might find it frightening to see you completely overwhelmed with distress.**
- It is useful if you name your emotion, for example explain that you are feeling sad and that you are crying because you can feel better after a good cry.
- **Younger children may focus much more on the practical aspects of how the situation will change their day to day life; 'who will play football with me?' They might not show an immediate reaction to the news (e.g. wanting to go and play) but this doesn't necessarily mean they didn't hear the news or that they're only thinking about themselves.**
- Some children may need more cuddles, complain of bad dreams, tummy or headaches in the days/weeks following the news.

1. Take a minute, breathe as slowly and deeply as you can
2. Try to keep your focus on what you want the children to know about their loved one's illness
3. Even very young children (under 2 years) often already know something is happening and need an explanation for what they can see and hear around them.

It's helpful to look at the leaflet by the British Psychological Society

[Click here to open the link to the leaflet](#)

It's not long and explains what children understand about illness at different ages and levels of maturity

Depending on the age of the children, decide whether you want to tell them together, or whether very young children can be distracted with the TV or a toy/game while you talk to older siblings first.

"Can you come here and sit with me for a minute? I need to talk to you."

"Today we went to the hospital because [Name] hasn't been feeling well. Shall I tell you a bit more about what the doctors told us?"

"The doctors did some tests to try and find the problem and they told us [Name] is ill because they have an illness called [illness]."

"Have you heard of [illness]?"

"Why don't you tell me what you know about [illness]?"

"The doctors and nurses are giving [Name] some medicine/surgery to treat the [illness]. We hope this will make them feel better but it may make them feel [common side effects e.g. tired, sick]."

Children can have many different reactions to the news. Here are suggested examples for how you can respond:

If crying or angry:

"I know this might be worrying and a lot to take in."

If they are very quiet:

"I know it's hard to believe this is happening."

"I know this might be sad to think about, but it's better that we share our feelings and talk about our worries, rather than struggling with it alone."

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Step 7: Preparing for common questions

- It can be helpful to think about how you will answer common questions children may ask.
- **You need to think about the age of the children and what they will be able to understand. Think about what they know and understand already.**
- Ask if they would like more information or have questions about what has happened.
- **Don't worry if you don't have all of the answers; it's ok to say that you don't know. Think together who you could ask or where you can look to get the answers.**

Step 8: Finishing the conversation

- Reassure them they will not have to manage this alone and that you will keep them up to date with any changes.
- **Remind them of other special people in their family as well as their friends, all of whom love and care for them.**
- It is really helpful for children to have somebody to talk to outside of the family. Being able to share their feelings without worrying about upsetting you is important.
- **Remind them that's its ok to still have fun and carry on with their normal activities and routine.**
- Keep checking in with children about their feelings and questions about the illness.

Step 9: Signposting

- Children will use the internet to find out more about the illness. It has both very good and poor information so it is better to signpost them to reliable sources.
- **Keep the children's school, college, University informed so they understand how to support them.**
- It is very important that you look after yourself. Contact a friend or relative to talk about how you are feeling.
- **Connect with other people, groups and organisations that can help support you and your family.**

Useful websites and resources

General: [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)
[healthtalk.org](https://www.healthtalk.org)
patient.healthinote.com

Heart: [pumpingmarvellous.org](https://www.pumpingmarvellous.org)
[bhf.org.uk](https://www.bhf.org.uk)

Stroke: [stroke.org.uk](https://www.stroke.org.uk)

Children often want to know what caused the illness and are worried that it was because of something they thought, said or did.

Children may ask if you or they are going to die, and whether they will catch [illness].

"All living things die but usually when they are very old. Getting ill doesn't always mean you are going to die."

"It is important to repeat that "[Name] has [Illness] and is being cared for by the medical team and that it was nobody's fault [Name] is ill".

"I know this has been a difficult conversation. There has been a lot to take in; is there anything you want to ask or don't understand?"

"The doctors and nurses are trying very hard to make [Name] better."

"I know this feels a lot right now. What I do know for sure is that I love you very much. We will get through this together, whatever the future holds."

"Who else might be a good person for you to talk to?"

"Do you want to think about whether you'd like me to tell your friends, or is that something you want to do?"

Cancer: [macmillan.org.uk](https://www.macmillan.org.uk)

Diabetes: [diabetes.co.uk](https://www.diabetes.co.uk)

Lung: [blf.org.uk](https://www.blf.org.uk)

Brain Injury: [headway.org.uk](https://www.headway.org.uk)

Arthritis: [versusarthritis.org](https://www.versusarthritis.org)

Gastrointestinal: [gutscharity.org.uk](https://www.gutscharity.org.uk)