

Guide for Healthcare Professionals: Helping Patients Explain their Illness to Children

Step 1: Identify the children who matter to the patient

- Every family is different, so we cannot make assumptions about a patient's relationships with children based on patient age. Patients can have important relationships with children an auntie or uncle, cousin, parent, neighbour or community leader. It's helpful for children and young people to know about a patient's illness or condition, such as heart or lung disease, diabetes, stroke, cancer, arthritis or GI conditions.
- **Remind the patient that even very young children may notice changes to routines (e.g. different adult at nursery/school pick up) or the behaviour of the adults around them (e.g. more stressed, covert phone calls). They will be looking for an explanation to make sense of these observations.**

Step 2: Reassure patients that children need an explanation

Patients' most common concern is that talking about illness will create upset or worry children. It is helpful to reassure them that research consistently shows that children want and need to know when someone is ill. Patients want to know that talking honestly (about both facts and feelings) is associated with better mental health for children and family functioning.

Step 3: Signpost families to practical guidance

Research shows that patients want to be signposted to reliable sources of information by their healthcare team. Direct your patient to our website:

www.psych.ox.ac.uk/talkingtochildren

The website has family-focused guides and links to disease-specific suggestions for families when talking to children. These could be sent using Accurx or found on Healthinote.

The British Psychological Society have produced a useful guide about what children understand at different ages – link below; this can help families nuance information appropriately.

Download: [What children understand about illness at different ages](#)

Step 4: Check in with your patients

Encourage adults to give children a consistent message about the illness (including the name of the illness) to avoid confusion.

Remind the patient to keep checking in with what the children know and understand; they can ask the children if they would like more information or have any questions about the illness.

If the patient (or another adult) has NOT talked to children about the illness:

- Explore the patient's and other significant adults' views about talking to children. If adults express doubts, explain that children may have already noticed changes to routines or adults' physical and emotional state.
- Suggest it is better to talk to children rather than leaving them to worry alone.
- Identify who else knows about the illness and who the child can talk to within their family, social network or school.

Telling children about a loved one's illness is emotionally challenging. Families do not want to upset or worry children, but children need to be told.

"I was wondering whether you had told the children in your life about your illness?"

"Can you tell me about any important relationships you have with children e.g. grandchildren, nephews or nieces?"

"It's natural for children to feel upset or even angry when they're told the news. But, talking will help them through this difficult time."

"I understand you are worried that telling the children will be upsetting for them. Even very young children need an explanation for what's going on; children have active imaginations and they can think things are worse than the reality"

"It's OK to talk with children about how upsetting or sad this news is for everybody."

Patients often worry about how to answer children's questions about the illness and its implications.

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

Patients may fear how to answer a child asking:

"Are you going to die?" – This could be answered by

"I know that there's a lot for you to take in and it might be hard to think about how you will tell the children. Would it be helpful for me to suggest some websites which take you step by step through these conversations with children?"

Patients often appreciate acknowledgement of their role and relationships with children.

"Have you had a chance to talk to the children in your life about the illness? How did the conversation go?"



Scan this QR code to watch a film which takes you through these 4 steps