

# Parenting Through Illness



**UC DAVIS**  
**HEALTH**

**COMPREHENSIVE  
CANCER CENTER**

# Introduction

Being a parent is a big job, and it's even harder when you are facing a serious illness. This guide offers tips to help your family cope during this time. You know your child best. You can use the ideas in this booklet along with your own experience to find what works for you.

## Definitions

**Parent:** Any adult who takes care of a child.

**Child:** Anyone 17 years old or younger.

**Illness:** All the ways a health condition changes your life.

**Coping:** Ways to handle and lower stress.

**Typically developing:** How kids usually learn and change as they get older.

**Temperament:** The way a child usually acts and reacts to things.



# Development & Coping Considerations

## Child Development:

How kids grow and learn is important when you are planning how to help them during a parent's illness. The information below shows how kids usually act at different ages. If your child has special needs, it is a good idea to talk to an expert who knows about those specific needs.

### Birth to 2 Years Old (Babies and Toddlers)

- **What they understand:** They learn by playing and using their senses. They don't understand what an illness is, but they may feel scared when they are away from their family.
- **Signs of stress:** They might have trouble eating or sleeping if their daily routine changes. They may be hard to calm down because they miss you.
- **How to help:**
  - Give them reassuring attention like hugs and sitting together.
  - Try to keep their daily schedule (like nap time and meal time) the same every day.

### 3 to 5 Years Old (Preschoolers)

- **What they understand:** They are active and ask a lot of questions. They might mix up make-believe with real life. They may not understand the illness, but they notice when things change at home.
- **Signs of stress:** They might think they caused the illness by doing something "bad." You might see more temper tantrums, nightmares, or "clingy" behavior. They might also act like a younger baby again.
- **How to help:**
  - Use the real name of the illness (like "Cancer").
  - Remind them often: "**You did not cause this**" and "You cannot catch this like a cold."
  - Explain things simply. For example: "The medicine will make my hair fall out."
  - Let them play and express feelings through art, music, or "big energy" activities to get their frustration out.

## 6 to 11 Years Old (Elementary School)

- **What they understand:** Kids this age are curious and want to learn how things work. They can understand more about what an illness is and how it affects the body.
- **Signs of stress:** They may feel worried or sad, or their body might feel sick (like a stomachache). You might see them acting out at school, pulling away from friends, or breaking rules to see what they can get away with.
- **How to help:**
  - Be honest: Give them more details as they get older. Using pictures can help explain things.
  - Answer questions: It is normal for them to ask the same questions over and over.
  - Talk about feelings: Encourage them to share how they feel through art, music, or sports.
  - Keep rules: Stick to your usual house rules and boundaries so they feel safe.
  - Find a group: Look for support groups where they can meet other kids going through something similar.

## 12 Years and Older (Teens)

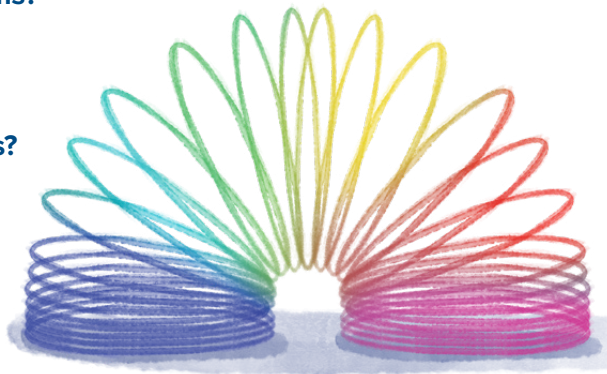
- **What they understand:** Teens have advanced thinking skills. They care a lot about their friends and how they look to others. They can understand more details about the body and may start thinking about the meaning of life and death
- **Signs of stress:** You might see big mood swings, like sleeping a lot or acting very upset. They might pull away from the family, have trouble with schoolwork, or stop following rules.
- **How to help:**
  - Give the full story: Tell them the whole truth about the illness.
  - Support their friendships: Understand that they might want to spend more time with friends than at home. This is how they cope.
  - Encourage activity: Help them find ways to be active or creative to let out their stress.
  - Watch for "red flags": Keep an eye out for dangerous behavior, like using drugs or alcohol, and get professional help if needed.
  - Respect their space: As long as they aren't hurting themselves or others, try to be patient with their behavior.

## How Your Child Handles Stress:

When thinking about how your child will react to your illness, it helps to think about their temperament and how they usually handle change. Here are some questions to consider:

- **How do they handle new things?** Think about how they act when a new babysitter comes over or on the first day of school.
- **How do they solve problems?**  
Can they quickly come up with a "Plan B" when things go wrong?
- **Do they talk about feelings?**  
Does your child naturally tell you when they are sad, mad, or happy?

**The Good News:** Parents often worry more than they need to. Kids are resilient. They usually do well as long as their daily routine stays mostly the same and they have continued support available.



Take a moment to answer these questions for yourself:

- **How would they react** if they knew more about your health?
- **What is hard to talk about?** Are there questions you feel nervous to answer?
- **Are you worried about their routine?** Do you think the news will make them stop doing their usual activities?
- **Does talking make it feel "too real"?** Does sharing the news make the illness feel more serious to you?

## How Kids Handle Tough News

Every child handles stress differently. Knowing how your child reacts can help you figure out the best way to support them. Here are four common ways kids cope:

### The "Worst-Case" Thinker (Catastrophizer)

- **How they act:** They imagine the worst possible things happening. They might repeat scary ideas and have a hard time calming down.
- **How to help:** Keep talking to them and give them ways to share their fears. Sometimes they are confused or have heard scary stories from others. You might also want to look into a counselor or play therapist.

### The Information Seeker (Sensitizer)

- **How they act:** They ask lots of questions. Learning the facts helps them feel more in control and less afraid.
- **How to help:** Have regular family meetings to talk about what is happening. Check in often to make sure they understand the information you are sharing.

### The "Small-Dose" Taker (Minimizer)

- **How they act:** They only take in a little bit of information at a time. They might act like things aren't a big deal so they don't get overwhelmed. They will come to you with questions when they are ready.
- **How to help:** Share the main facts without giving too many details. Let them lead the conversation and give them info in small pieces.

### The Avoider (Denier)

- **How they act:** They only take in a little bit of information at a time. They might act like things aren't a big deal so they don't get overwhelmed. They will come to you with questions when they are ready.
- **How to help:** Give them very basic facts in tiny amounts so they stay informed without feeling flooded. A counselor or therapist can also be a great safe place for them to talk.

# Communication and Connections

## Talking and Connecting with Your Family

When a parent is sick, kids need to feel like they are part of the team. To help them feel supported, it is important to:

- Include them in family talks about the illness.
- Give them ways to show their feelings (like through art or music).
- Help them meet other kids who are going through something similar.

## Talking Together as a Family

Talking openly helps kids share their feelings and get the help they need. If they are left out, they might feel alone and confused.

It is usually best to wait until doctors know exactly what is wrong before telling your kids. However, if the illness is already changing how you act or what you can do, it is okay to tell them that the doctors are still "checking things out" to find more information.

Since you know your child best, use these tips to help start the conversation:

- **Timing:** Make sure you understand the basic medical facts yourself first. This will help you answer their questions. Pick a time of day when your kids can go play or do something familiar right after you talk. This helps them process the news in a healthy way.
- **Environment:** Ask another adult you trust to be there with you. Find a quiet place where you won't be interrupted. It can also help to have things for your kids to do with their hands, like fidget toys or crayons and paper, while you talk.



# Talking and Connecting with Your Family (continued)

## The First Talk (of many)

When you sit down to talk with your children, remember that every child is different. Here is how to plan a meeting that works for everyone:

### The Meeting Setup:

- **Talk to kids separately:** If children have large age gaps between them, it might be better to talk to them one-on-one.
- **Keep it short:** Kids can only focus for a little while. If they seem bored or upset, stop talking and go play or do an activity like drawing.
- **Think about their age:**
  - **Little kids** have short attention spans and mostly care about what is happening right now.
  - **Older kids** can handle more details and might worry about the future.
  - **Kids with special needs** will do best with a plan made just for their learning style.

### What to Say:

- **Start with the basics:** Use the name of the illness. Make sure they know they **did not cause it** and they **cannot catch it** like a cold (if this is the case).
- **Ask what they know:** Find out what they have already heard or noticed.
- **Explain it simply:** Use easy words and focus on what is happening today and in the near future.
- **Talk about changes:** Explain if their daily routine (like who picks them up from school) will change.
- **Ask questions:** Throughout the talk, ask things like, "Does that make sense?" to see if they understand.

### What to Expect:

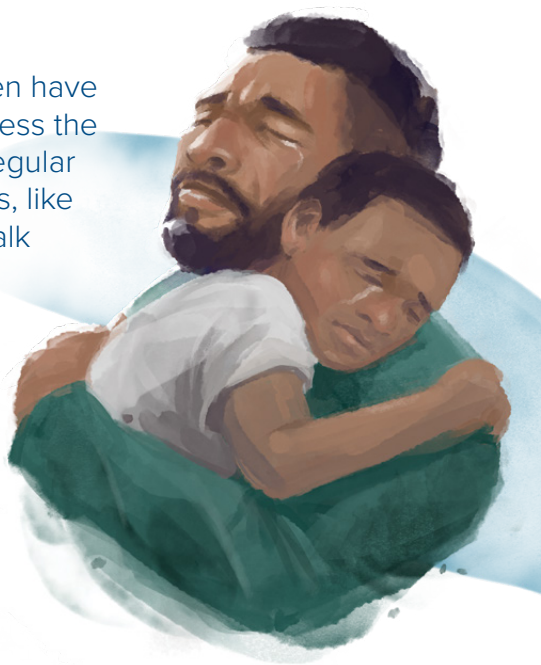
Do not be surprised if a child wants to quickly switch gears from the conversation. Playing or engaging in other outlets is how kids handle big feelings. They might not have much to say at first, and that is okay. These outlet will help them cope.

## What to Expect (continued):

You will likely need to repeat information many times. Kids often have the same questions as they process the news. It is a good idea to have regular family meetings and use activities, like games or art, to help everyone talk more easily.

### What if...

- **Everyone gets emotional:** It is okay to cry or show your feelings. When you show your emotions, it teaches your children that their feelings are normal, too. If things get too overwhelming, it is fine to take a break and finish the talk later.
- **You don't know the answer:** You don't have to answer every big question right away. If you are stuck, try saying:
  - "That is a great question. Let me think about that and talk to my doctor. I will get back to you soon."
  - "Can you tell me more about what you are wondering? Are you asking how Dad got sick?"
- **Your child doesn't want to talk:** If your child is usually quiet, they might not want to speak much about the illness. For kids who prefer not to talk out loud, try using a **shared notebook** or **emails** to check in. Just make sure you still offer them a quiet space to talk whenever they feel ready.



## Teaching Kids About Your Illness

Learning the facts about an illness can help kids feel less worried. Being sick or getting treatment can change how you act or what you are able to do as a parent. Explaining these changes to your children helps them understand what is happening and how they can help.

Common symptoms might include feeling very tired, being in pain, forgetting things, or looking different. When you are feeling these symptoms, try using these three steps to talk to your child:

- 1. Name the problem:** Tell them what is happening and why.

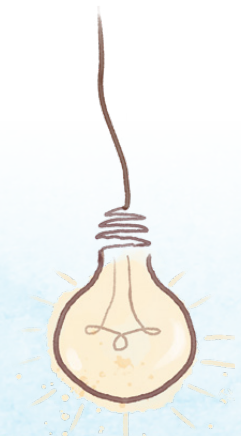
*Example:* "The medicine I'm taking is making me feel very tired today."

- 2. Explain it in a way they understand:** Use a simple story to show how it affects your body.

*Example:* "My energy is like a car's gas tank. When I feel good, my tank is full and I can do a lot. Right now, my tank is almost empty, so I don't have enough energy to play outside today."

- 3. Make a plan together:** Tell them how they can help when you are feeling bad.

*Example:* "When I am this tired, I need a little extra help. Can you finish your homework today without me reminding you? If you get stuck, we can ask Dad for help when he gets home."



## Making a Plan for Fun Together

Even on days when you feel sick or tired, you can still find ways to spend time with your child. It is a great idea to make a list of "low-energy" activities together, so everyone feels included.

- **Create a "Tired Day" List:** Ask your child, "What are some things we can do together when I need to rest?"
- **Keep it Simple:** You could read a book together, watch a movie, or just sit and talk after school.
- **The Main Goal:** The most important thing is simply being together. Even if you can't be very active some days, you can still feel close and connected.



## Working with the School

Schools can be a big help when a family is dealing with an illness. They often have counselors or teachers who can support your child. Here is how to work with them:

### Pick a "Point Person":

- **Decide Together:** Talk with your child to choose one adult at school they trust. This could be a favorite teacher, the principal, the school nurse, or a counselor.
- **Share Updates:** Tell this person what is going on at home so they understand why your child might be acting differently or need extra support.
- **Get Feedback:** Your point person can let you know if your child is having a hard time focusing in class or if they seem sad, so you can help them at home.



## What to Share with the School

When you talk to your child's school, it helps to give them a few key facts. This way, they know how to support your child during the day. Consider sharing:

- **The Basics:** The name of the illness and how the treatment might affect your family.
- **Family Words:** Tell them which words you use at home (like "chemo" or "cancer") so they can use the same language.
- **How Your Child is Doing:** Share what your child knows and how they are acting lately.
- **The Plan:** Decide how often you will check in with the school (like once a week by email).
- **Privacy:** Let your point person know if it's okay to tell other teachers or if they should keep it private.

## Helping Your Child at School

- **Schoolwork:** Stress can make it hard to focus on schoolwork. Talk to the teacher about adjusting the workload if things get tough.
- **Secret Signals:** The child and teacher may want to create a "secret signal" so the child can let the teacher know if they need a break or a trip to the counselor without telling the whole class.
- **Practice What to Say:** Help your child practice answers for if/when friends ask questions. Examples:
  - "Thanks for asking, but I don't want to talk about it today."
  - "My dad is taking medicine that makes his hair fall out, but it will grow back."
- **The Coping Kit:** Put together a small "coping kit" for your child to keep in their backpack or desk. It could have family photos, a fidget toy, or a comfort item to help them feel safe when they are away from home.

## When to Get Extra Help

It is normal to wonder if your child is doing okay or if they need more support. To help you decide, ask yourself these questions:

- **Has their behavior changed?** Think about how they acted before you got sick. If they were already a bit challenging or shy, that probably won't change now.
- **Are they still doing their "normal" things?** Can they still handle school, see friends, and be part of the family? It is normal for one of these areas to be a little bumpy, but they should still be able to participate.
- **Are their old ways of coping failing?** Are the things that used to make them feel better (like playing or talking) not working anymore?
- **Are they acting out to feel in control?** Look for things like constant rule-breaking or doing the same thing over and over.

If your child's behavior is not settling into a "new normal" after a few weeks, or if it is getting worse, it is time to talk to a professional. Your child's **pediatrician** (regular doctor) is a great person to help you start this process.

## Taking Care of You



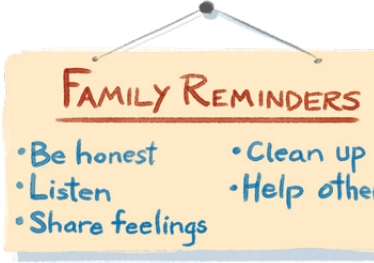
Parenting is much harder when life feels out of balance. The following strategies may help you feel more grounded:

- **Self-Care is a Must:** Finding time to take a walk, write in a journal, or just rest is very important.
- **The "Oxygen Mask" Rule:** Remember what they say on airplanes: you have to put on your own oxygen mask first before you can help anyone else. Taking care of your own needs helps you stay calm and ready to support your child.



## Keeping Things Normal

Routines help everyone feel safe because they make life feel predictable. Here are some ways to keep your family on track:

- **Make a Family Calendar:** This is the easiest way to keep everyone organized. Put all your plans and any changes on the calendar so the kids always know what to expect next.
- **Keep the Rules the Same:** When a parent is sick, it's easy for house rules to get blurry. If kids start breaking rules to see what they can get away with, things can get stressful. Try posting **visual reminders** (like a list of chores or house rules) on the walls. This helps the kids and any other adults who are helping out know exactly what is expected.
- **Give Kids a Job:** Letting kids help out in small ways can make them feel important and in control. Ask them for ideas! They could help with easy chores around the house or making an art wall.
- **Keep Playing:** Encourage your kids to keep seeing their friends and doing their usual activities. Playing and being creative are the best ways for kids to "recharge" their batteries.

## Helping Children Visit the Hospital

When a parent is in the hospital, it can be hard to decide if a child should visit. First, check if the hospital allows kids to come. Then, think about these questions:

- How long will the parent be there?
- How is the child handling being away from the parent?
- How old is the child and how do they usually react to new places?

If the stay is short and the child is doing okay, they might not need to visit. You can still stay connected by:

- Making phone or video calls.
- Writing or drawing pictures in a shared notebook that is passed back and forth between home and hospital.
- Having the child make art to hang in the hospital room.

## If You Decide for a Child to Visit:

Prepare your child by talking about what they will **see, hear, and smell**. If you can, show them a picture of the room and the parent before they go.

## During the Visit:

- Tell them how long you will stay.
- Give them a plan for what to do. For example: "Mom needs to rest, but you can sit on the bed and read to her."
- Bring things to do, like books, art, or play items.

## After the Visit:

Check in to see how they feel. You can ask:

- "What was one thing that surprised you?"
- "What was the best part of the visit?"

If your child is upset, no need to force them to talk. It is okay if they want to be quiet. Let them focus on something they are looking forward to, and you can talk about the visit later when they are ready.



## Advanced Illness Considerations

Sometimes, an illness reaches a point where medicine (or other medical interventions) can no longer help a person live longer. This is a very painful situation. The best way to protect your relationship with your child during this time is to continue being honest.

### When to Talk About It:

If you have been open with your kids from the start, they will already understand the basics. Telling them as soon as things change gives them time to decide how they want to spend their time with you. It also lets them begin to process their sadness while they have your support.

### How to Start the Conversation:

- **Ask what they see:** "What do you think is happening with my illness right now?"
- **Tell the story:** "Remember how we hoped the medicine would get rid of the cancer? Well, it isn't working, and the sickness is spreading. This is very sad, but there are no more medicines or treatments that can help me get better."
- **Explain what will happen next:** "My body is going to start slowing down. Eventually, I am going to die. The doctors will give me medicine to make sure I'm not in pain, but that medicine might make me very sleepy."
- **Be clear about death:** Use simple words so they aren't confused. "When my body stops working and I die, my heart will stop beating and my lungs won't need air. I won't be able to see, eat, or feel anything anymore."



### Make a Plan Together:

This is a lot of heavy information to think about. Tell your child, "We will take this one day at a time. Let's start by making a list of things we want to do together while we can."

## Planning for the End of Life

If given a choice, parents wonder about the best place to be during their final days. This depends on many things, but children usually handle the situation better when they are included in the plan as much as they want to be. Giving a child realistic choices about what happens can help them feel more comfortable.

## Creating Memories and a Legacy

A "legacy" encompasses so much. It includes all the special moments shared throughout life. Creating keepsakes with children can help them remember these times. Some ideas include:

- Making a family photo album together.
- Listing favorite songs, books, or movies.
- Creating art or crafts together.

Including a child in these activities gives them a sense of control during a time when things feel very uncertain. This is a helpful way to support them.

## Funerals and Special Services

Every family has its own way of honoring a person after they die. It is helpful to keep including children in these plans.

- Some children may want to help with the ceremony.
- Others may choose not to attend and prefer to remember their family member in a different way.
- The best path is to explain what to expect and then honor the child's choice.

For more help talking to children about these difficult times, the **UC Davis Bereavement Booklet** is a helpful resource.



## Family Communication Activities

Sometimes it is hard to say things out loud. These activities make it easier for everyone in the family to share their thoughts and feelings.

### The Family Mailbox

- **How to make it:** Use an old shoebox or a large jar. You can even decorate it together with stickers or paint.
- **How it works:** Everyone writes down questions, ideas, or things they are wondering about on small pieces of paper and drops them in.
- **What to do next:** During a family meeting, open the mailbox and talk about the notes together.



### Shared Family Notebook

- **How to make it:** Find a notebook with plenty of space for writing or drawing.
- **How it works:** This is a "group journal." Anyone can write down a feeling, ask a question, or draw a picture for others to see.
- **For younger kids:** Let them use drawings or stickers to show how they feel if they aren't ready to write.

### The Thumb-Ball Game

- **How to make it:** Use a beach ball or any soft ball you can write on with a marker.
- **How it works:** Write "conversation starters" all over the ball, such as:
  - "Something that makes me happy when I'm sad is..."
  - "A family activity I want to do more is..."
  - "One wish I have for our family is..."
  - "A question I have about the illness is..."
- **How to play:** Toss the ball to someone. Whatever sentence their thumb is touching, they have to finish! Keep playing as long as everyone is having fun.



## Family Coping Activities

These activities help the whole family handle stress and find ways to cope together.

### Family Coping Kit

- **How to make it:** Find a basket or a bin to be your official "Coping Kit."
- **What's inside:** Look around your house for things that help you feel better when you are stressed. You might include favorite books, stress balls, bubbles, or fun games.
- **How to use it:** When someone is having a hard day, they can grab something from the kit. Check in as a family every once in a while to see if you want to add new items.



### Favorite Place Collage

- **How to make it:** Find a piece of paper, glue, and some old magazines or markers.
- **What to do:** Think of a place where you feel happy and safe. It could be somewhere you've been, like the beach, or a place you've only dreamed of.
- **The Goal:** Cut out pictures or draw things that remind you of that place. You can each make your own, or the whole family can work on one big poster together.

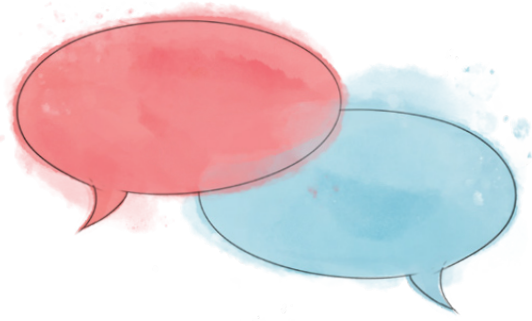
### Family Name Poem

- **How to make it:** Write your last name (or a word that describes your family) in big letters down the side of a piece of paper.
- **What to do:** For each letter of the name, think of a word that describes your family.
  - Example for the word "STRONG":
    - S – Steady
    - T – Together
    - R – Rowdy
    - O – Orderly (sometimes)
    - N – Nice
    - G – Grateful



Steady  
Together  
Rowdy

Orderly (sometimes)  
Nice  
Grateful



## Sample Script: Explaining a New Diagnosis

Talking about a serious illness is hard. These scripts are just guides to help you start. If you are a single parent, try to have another trusted adult there to help you.

**The Situation:** *A dad is talking to his 7-year-old about a new diagnosis.*

**Parent:** “Mom and I want to talk to you about something important. I wasn’t feeling well, so I went to see my doctor. The doctor acted like a detective and ordered some tests to find out what was going on. One test used a special camera to take pictures of the inside of my chest.”

**Child:** “Did the test hurt?”

**Parent:** “It didn’t hurt, and the doctors were very kind. The pictures showed that there is something in my chest that shouldn’t be there. Usually, the tiny parts of our body (called cells) help us run and play. But in my chest, a group of unhealthy cells are clumped together and getting in the ways of healthy cells. This clump is called a **tumor**, and the name of the sickness is **cancer**. Have you ever heard that word before?”

**Child:** “No... how did those cells get there?”

**Parent:** “The doctor isn’t sure what caused the tumor, but it is important to know that **nothing you did caused this**. Also, you **cannot catch it** like a cold or a cough. The doctors are going to take great care of me, and I will keep telling you what is happening every step of the way.”

### The "Pop Quiz"

(Checking to see if your child understands)

**Parent:** “Okay, time for a mini pop quiz! How did the cancer cells get into my body?”

**Child:** “It wasn’t anyone’s fault, and the doctor isn’t sure how they got there.”

**Parent:** “Exactly right. Do you have any questions right now? If you think of any later, you can talk to me or Mom at any time. You can also put a note in our family mailbox.”

### Sample Script: When the Illness Changes

(Talking to the same 7-year-old child)

Sharing regular updates helps your child feel included. This script shows how to tell them that the first treatment didn't work as expected.

**Parent:** “Hey, it’s Friday afternoon—our usual time for a family meeting. I wanted to tell you a little more about my cancer treatment. Are you ready to talk now, or do you need a few minutes?”

**Child:** “Let’s talk now, but is it okay if I keep coloring while we talk?”

*(Note: It is actually helpful for kids to color or play with a fidget toy during hard talks—it helps them stay calm.)*

**Parent:** “Of course, keep coloring. Remember when the doctor took more pictures of my chest? They wanted to see if the medicine was getting rid of the cancer cells.”

**Child:** (Still coloring) “Okay..”

**Parent:** “The doctor told me that the cancer cells have started to spread to other parts of my body. This wasn’t the news we wanted to hear. Because of this, the doctor is going to try a different plan that they think will work better. I will start that new treatment next week.”

**Child:** “Why did the cancer spread to other places?”

**Parent:** “I wonder about that too. Sometimes things happen that we just can’t control, and that is really hard. I am trying to stay positive, but I also feel mad, sad, and frustrated. It is okay to have many different feelings right now, especially when we don’t have all the answers. When I feel really upset, I take three deep breaths to calm down. Can we do that together right now?”

[Take three deep breaths together.]

**Parent:** “I will keep telling you what is happening every week. If you have any questions at any time, just let me know. Do you have more questions now, or do you want to take a break and go play outside?”

**Child:** “I’ll race you to the swings!”

*(Note: It is very normal for kids to want information in small pieces. Switching to play helps them handle and process the tough news they just heard.)*

As you move forward, keep talking with your child. Every so often, ask them if the amount of information you are sharing feels like too much/too little or is just right.

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Child life specialists partner with families during a parent's illness to create care plans that meet the developmental needs of each child. Their main goals are to keep the family talking and enhance family coping and connection. These services are available throughout adult units in the hospital and within the Comprehensive Cancer Center.

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