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Talking with Children

Discussing your diagnosis and treatment with young children or teenagers—whether they're your children or grandchildren—presents a special concern regarding their reaction. To a large degree, how a child responds to a cancer diagnosis will depend on how you and the other adults in your family handle the crisis. It's OK if children see you cry—it's one way they learn emotions are a part of life.

Communicate openly with children in a way that is appropriate for their age, and keep the lines of communication open if they have questions as treatment progresses. It's important to explain that cancer isn't contagious and it's no one's fault, especially theirs. Children are likely to be fearful if they don't know what's going on, and may arrive at their own conclusions on the topic of why you are more tired than usual or are not around as much. It's important to explain what's happening and to give them an opportunity to help and feel involved.

For young children, it may help to maintain as much normalcy and routine as possible to make children feel stable and secure. Often when children notice a lot of time and attention is spent on a sick parent or sibling, they begin to feel they don't matter or are not as loved, and resentment may build. Children who have a good understanding of a family member's illness and the challenges they face have been shown to handle the disruption better. Overall, the majority of children cope well as long as the family responds to and anticipates their needs and questions.