

Helping Your Child Cope

FEELINGS

After talking with your child about cancer and treatment, talk with your child about feelings. Children with cancer may feel angry, guilty, sad, lonely, and scared, but many times they will also feel happy. Assure your child that any feelings they have are normal. Young children often benefit from learning names for their feelings.

Be honest with your child about your feelings. Children can sense when something is bothering you. Sharing your feelings with your child tells them that it is okay to feel upset or angry.

Cancer creates many changes and challenges for children and their families. As a parent or caregiver you may be asking:

- What does my child know about cancer?
- How will my child feel about the treatment?
- How can I support my child?

Children of different ages understand and react differently to cancer and its treatment. Your child's personality, normal coping style, support system, treatment plan, as well as age or developmental level will affect how your child copes with cancer.

When children are faced with stress, their normal behaviors may change. They often become more dependent on adults, or they may act younger than their age (baby talk, wetting pants after being potty trained, tantrums, etc.). Your child may not know how to handle the many feelings that have been caused by the cancer diagnosis.

You are a very important part of your child's life for many different reasons. You know what your child has experienced in the past and how your child usually handles stress. You can help the health care team to better understand your child. You and the health care team can work together to find new ways to help your child cope with cancer and treatment.

The following section describes common responses to stress for children of different ages. The section also contains specific suggestions for how to help children in each age group cope.



Infants (birth – 12 months)

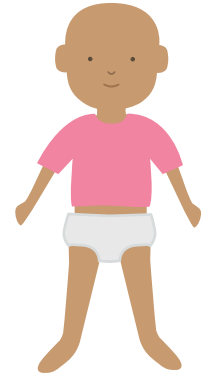
Infants look to their parents/caregivers to meet their needs. They rely on adults for food, comfort, play, and care. Infants learn about the world around them through their senses (i.e., they can sense new smells, colors, tastes). They trust in people and things that are familiar. Infants have no concept of the meaning of cancer or its implications. They do respond to new people and to the environment around them.

ISSUES	WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR INFANT
Separation from familiar people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Be with your infant as much as possible. · Leave a piece of clothing with your smell on it if you need to leave. · Rock or hold your infant when in the hospital. · Have familiar people care for your infant. · Limit the number of people and voices in the room.
Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Let your infant explore toys with their hands and mouth. (Check for small pieces that may be choking hazards, and clean toys regularly to prevent infections.) · Use gentle touch and massage to comfort your infant. · Talk to and play games, like peek-a-boo, with your infant as you would at home. · Provide music for stimulation or to soothe your baby.
Sense of Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Keep your infant's crib safe by keeping railings up in the locked position. · Ask that any procedures be done in the treatment room. · If your child needs to have a painful procedure done (such as drawing blood from the finger or arm) this should not be attempted while your infant is asleep. Wake your infant first and provide comfort for them during the procedure. · Continue familiar feeding, bedtime, and bath-time routines, like rocking, touching, and singing.

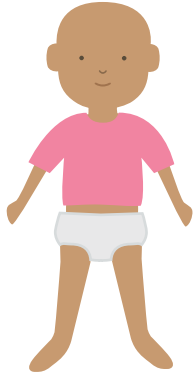
Your child life specialist, social worker, or other health care team members can provide you with additional suggestions.

Toddlers (1 year – 3 years)

Toddlers are beginning to want to do more on their own. Your toddler’s favorite words may be “me do” or “no.” Growing toddlers need to be able to do some things by themselves to promote a sense of control. Toddlers show you how they feel by their actions because they do not have the words to describe their feelings. They have a hard time understanding how the body works. Toddlers tend to think that they make things happen. They can create their own false ideas about how they got sick and what is happening to them (for example, they may be thinking “I hurt because I was bad”).



ISSUES	WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR TODDLER
Fear of separation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Be with your toddler as much as possible. · When you leave, tell your toddler where you are going and when you will be back. · When you are gone, leave something of yours, like a picture or a piece of clothing, for your toddler to keep until you return.
Fear of stranger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Have familiar people care for your toddler. · Provide security objects such as a blanket or stuffed animal.
Loss of control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Let your toddler make choices whenever possible. For example, ask your toddler “Would you like apple juice or orange juice?” · Do not offer a choice when no choice exists. Instead of asking “Are you ready for your medicine?” say “It’s time for your medicine. Would you like juice or water to drink after you take it?” · Give your toddler a job to do, such as “Hold this BAND-AID®.” · Let your toddler play and be in control of the game or activity.
Loss of normal routine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Try to keep eating, sleeping, and bathing routines as normal as possible. · Let your toddler play with favorite toys.



Toddlers (1 year – 3 years, continued)

ISSUES	WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR TODDLER
Behavior changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Give your toddler safe ways to express anger and other feelings, such as modeling clay, painting, or building blocks.· Tell your toddler that it is all right to feel mad or sad.· Spend time with your toddler and offer reassurance.· Set limits with your toddler and discipline when needed.
Fear of treatment, medicine, tests, vital signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Assure your toddler that they did nothing wrong.· Keep security objects, such as blankets, pacifiers, or a favorite toy nearby.· Tell your toddler what will happen just before the treatment or procedure.· Use simple words, pictures, or books to tell them what will happen.

Your child life specialist, social worker, or other health care team members can provide you with additional suggestions.

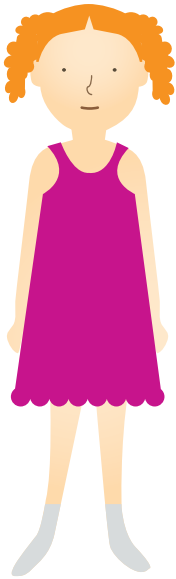
Preschoolers (3 years – 5 years)

Preschoolers take pride in being able to do things for themselves. They often say: “I can do it.” Preschoolers are learning more words to tell you what they think and feel. However, they often use their play to tell you these same things. They may view the hospital and treatment as punishment for something they did wrong. They often get confused by adult words and make up reasons for the things that happen.



ISSUES	WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR PRESCHOOLER
Magical thinking (Made-up reasons for what happens)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Tell your preschooler what will happen a little before the treatment. · Don't use terms that may confuse your preschooler; for example, a CAT Scan has nothing to do with a cat. · Use simple words, pictures, or books to tell your preschooler about what will happen.
Fear of harm to their body and the unknown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Let your preschooler play with toy medical kits and safe medical supplies, such as a blood pressure cuff.
Loss of control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Allow your preschooler to make choices whenever you can. For example, ask your preschooler “Would you like apple juice or orange juice?” · Do not offer choices when choices do not exist. Instead of asking “Are you ready for your medicine?” say “It's time for your medicine. Would you like juice or water to drink after you take it?” · Give your preschooler a job to do, such as “Hold this BAND-AID®.”
Loss of normal routine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Praise your preschooler for doing things independently, such as dressing, brushing teeth, and feeding.
Behavior changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Give your preschooler time to adjust to new changes. · Use play to help your preschooler show feelings.

Your child life specialist, social worker, or other health care team members can provide you with additional suggestions.



School Age Children (6 years – 12 years)

School-age children take pride in being able to do most things by themselves. They usually enjoy school because it helps them to learn and master new things. Their friends are becoming more important influences. School-age children are able to understand cause and effect and have a better sense of time. They have more words to describe their bodies, thoughts, and feelings. School-age children can also understand more of how their bodies work. However, they still may be confused by medical words.

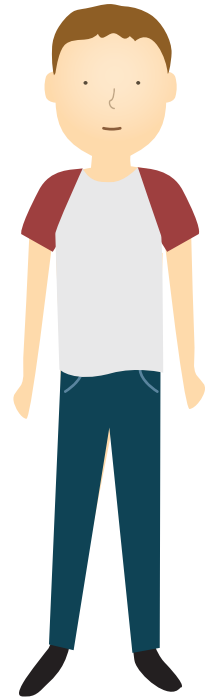
ISSUES	WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR SCHOOL-AGED CHILD
Loss of control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Allow your school-aged child to make choices whenever practical/possible. · Do not offer choices when no choices exist. · Give your school-aged child a job to do. · Let your school-aged child practice things that are new and scary. · Let your school-aged child go to school or do schoolwork and activities whenever possible. · Provide games, play, and activities.
Being away from friends and school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Encourage your school-aged child to stay in touch with their friends via email, phone calls, cards, and letters. · Let friends visit when your school-aged child feels well enough (following the recommended guidelines).
Fear of harm to the body and unknown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Use simplified explanations, pictures, or books to tell your school-aged child what will happen. · Tell your school-aged child what will happen a few days before the treatment, if possible. · Let your school-aged child play with safe medical supplies, such as a blood pressure cuff.

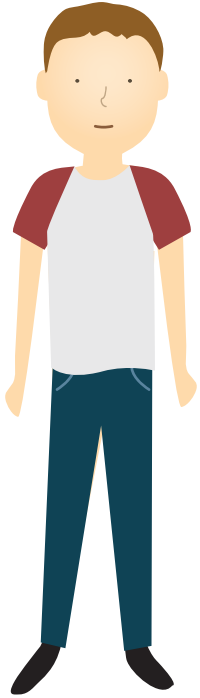
Your child life specialist, social worker, or other health care team members can provide you with additional suggestions.

Teens (13 years – 18 years)

Teens are beginning to see themselves as individuals in the world. They are striving to be independent from the adults around them. As teens strive to think and act for themselves, their peers become even more important. Teens want to be like their friends and are concerned with how they are viewed by others. Illness and treatment cause teens to be different from their peers when they are trying very hard to be the same. Teens are able to understand cause and effect, and can also see things from many points of view.

ISSUES	WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR TEEN
Loss of control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Allow your teen to make choices whenever you can.
Loss of independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Let your teen be active as possible in social and school activities. · Encourage your teen to become involved in their treatment plan. When possible, include them when talking to the health care team about the plan. · Encourage your teen to do their own self-care as much as possible, such as bathing, dressing, grooming, and eating.
Body image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Give your teen chances to talk about physical and emotional changes. · Tell your teen that having feelings about illness and treatment is normal.
Self-esteem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Point out things that your teen does well. · Allow your teen to do things that make them feel good about themselves.
Loss of privacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Respect that teens may need to do some things by themselves when possible, such as using the bathroom, making phone calls, or reading and sending email. · Offer your teen private time.





Teens (13 years – 18 years, continued)

ISSUES	WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR TEEN
Separation from peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Encourage time with peers.· Allow friends to visit or call in the hospital or at home (following the recommended guidelines).
Concern for the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Answer questions openly and honestly.· Help your teen plan for the future.· Encourage your teen to keep doing normal things whenever possible, such as attending school.
Behavior changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Give your teen safe ways to express feelings, especially anger. Helpful activities may include talking, going for a walk, or writing.· Assure your teen that all feelings are normal, including guilt, fear, and sadness.

Your child life specialist, social worker, or other health care team members can provide you with additional suggestions.