

Helping the Sibling of the Child with Cancer

A cancer diagnosis has a profound effect on the entire family, especially when it is a child who is diagnosed. While you, family and friends are understandably focused on the care of the ill child, your healthy children may feel isolated and believe their needs are being neglected. Activities may be reduced or eliminated (i.e. there is simply no one to take them to soccer practice or a movie). If they complain, they are often told they're being selfish and should be happy that they're healthy. As a result, these children may have feelings of hopelessness, anger, fear and sadness.

It helps to talk to your children about their feelings. Here are some steps you can take to ease your children's anxiety:

- **Tell your children it is not their fault.** Some children will believe they did something wrong and it is their fault that their brother or sister got cancer. They may have called their sibling a bad name or wished they were an only child. *It is important to talk with your children to help them understand they did nothing wrong and they did not cause the cancer.* Talking with children includes listening to them and being sure you understand what they are saying.
- **Give age-appropriate, accurate and honest information about the cancer.** Trying to "protect" your children by shielding information does not work. They can sense that something is wrong and will do everything they can to find out the truth, even if it means letting their imagination fill in the blanks. *Use the word cancer; do not be afraid of it.* Answer all of your children's questions honestly. You don't have to be pessimistic or go into details or statistics about the disease to be honest. You can be realistic while remaining hopeful.
- **Prepare the well children for changes in the ill child's appearance.** Cancer treatment can affect the ill child's appearance, including hair loss and weight loss or gain. These changes can be frightening for the other children. *Talking about possible changes in appearance ahead of time will reduce the fear and allow the well children to be more accepting.*
- **Ask the well children to help and be involved in the ill child's care.** Allowing a child to help is a wonderful way of letting the child feel important, but keep the tasks age-appropriate. For a young child, getting a glass of water may be enough. The older the child is the more he/she can do for the family.
- **Make time to be with the well children.** *As a parent, it is important to make time to be with all your children and to let them know that they are still special to you.* You can explain that the ill child needs a lot of attention right now but that does not mean you love the ill child more than you love them. You can also ask a neighbor, relative, or school professional to be a special friend to the well child. Pick someone the child knows, and trusts, and ask that person to be there if the child needs someone when you are not available.

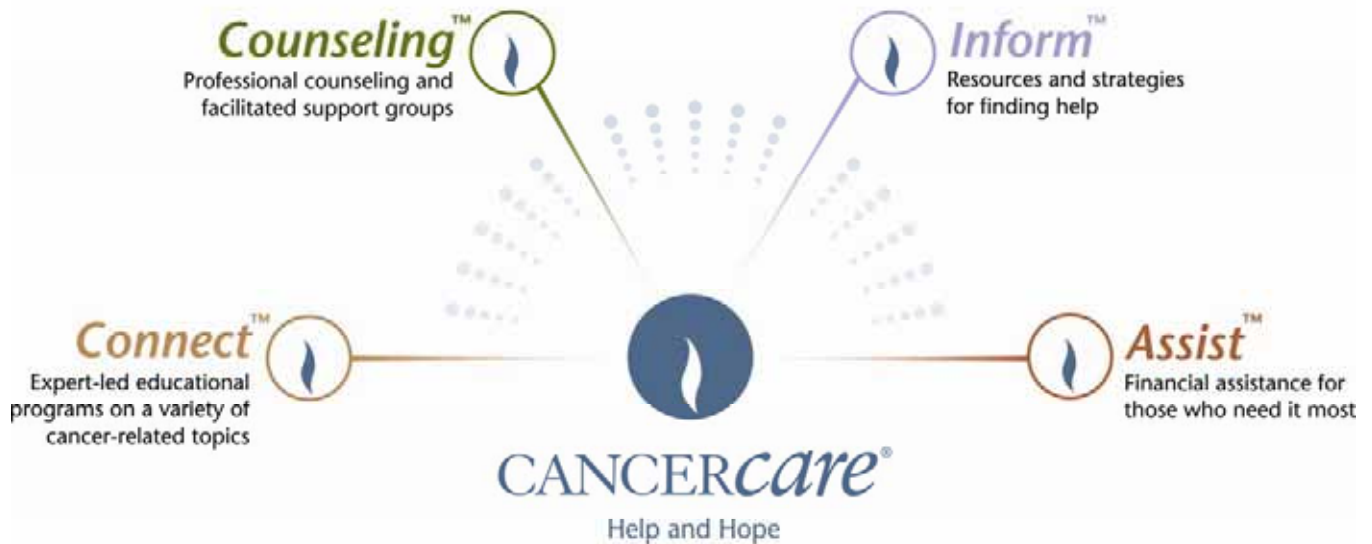
Conclusion

Children have many different reactions when they learn a sibling has cancer. They can be afraid, confused, guilty, angry, or even envious. Let them know that feelings are never wrong. Whatever they are feeling it is ok and normal. It is even normal to feel one way one day and another way the next. Tell them you have a wide range of feelings too. As a parent, you may not always be prepared for every situation and sometimes, may not know what to say. This is a normal reaction to your children and the many overwhelming feelings and issues that are affecting you.

CancerCare for Kids™ Can Help

CancerCare for Kids™ has a staff of professional oncology social workers that can help your family deal with a cancer diagnosis. Our social workers understand the complex needs of children. We offer support and advice to parents, and counsel children to help them understand the disease. We help people through counseling and support groups via the telephone, online, or in person. CancerCare for Kids™ also offers education, information and referrals to other resources that can help your family cope with a cancer diagnosis.

The CANCERcare® Constellation of Services



CancerCare's services are provided
free of charge to anyone affected by cancer

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