

By Jen Scully

Kids & Cancer

How To Talk About It



These young girls are learning how to talk openly about cancer through the Kid Support program at Gilda's Club.

Nearly three out of four families in Westchester County are touched by cancer in some way – yet when it comes to talking about cancer with their children, parents typically struggle. When children are touched by cancer, it is essential that they understand what cancer is, how it is caused and how it is treated. Without this information, they will “fill in the blanks” and develop their own misinformed beliefs about cancer and its outcome. It is this misinformation that can cause children increased anxiety, fear and confusion. The following are recommendations to families touched by cancer.

1 Call it what it is – cancer. Often parents hesitate to use the word cancer because they fear it will cause unnecessary anxiety in their children. The reality is that not calling it cancer can lead children to have more questions and confusion.

2 Keep it simple and to the point. Once you use the word cancer, provide a simple explanation of what cancer is. For example, “cancer is an illness that starts because abnormal cells in a person’s body begin to grow rapidly and out of control.” Explain that cancer is not contagious, and it’s no one’s fault. It is not uncommon for children to think that they can catch cancer, or that they did something to cause it.

3 Keep everyone in the loop. It is important to keep an open dialogue about cancer. Using simple words, explain the medical treatments the patient is receiving and that doctors have different ways of treating cancer. They may remove cancer through surgery, they may give the person medicine called chemotherapy that destroys the cancer cells, and they may also require the patient to receive radiation, the treatment of cancer with radioactive rays.

It is also important to explain any side effects. It can be confusing for children to see someone who is taking medicine to feel better actually feel more tired, nauseous and weak. Explain that the medication is very strong, and can often cause someone to feel worse before they get better.

4 Talk about the tough stuff. Often parents think that if they do not bring up death, their kids will not think about it – quite the contrary. Even if you are not talking about it at home, kids hear about people dying from cancer on television, the Internet, at school, or at a friend’s house. Be honest and explain that although many people who have cancer get treated and are fine, some people do die. Tell your

child that you will keep them informed about how treatments are going and progress that is being made.

5 Get the facts and feelings out in the open. While it is important to talk about what cancer is, it is just as helpful to talk about what feelings are often associated with the disease. When cancer is in the family, frustration, sadness, anger and guilt are not uncommon. Children of all ages pick up on these emotions, and can often believe that they did something to cause them. Sharing your feelings with your children can help them to better understand theirs. As a result, they may be more likely to express those feelings to you.

6 Offer outlets. When someone is diagnosed with cancer, it is a new experience for a child. New experiences bring about new feelings and a need to find alternative ways to express them. There are many outlets that children can use – drawing, karate, writing, even playing. Introduce similar expressive activities to your children to see how they respond and best express themselves.

7 Know that you don’t have to know all the answers. It is hard for children to understand that when dealing with cancer no one really knows what will happen next. How will someone respond to treatment? Will the cancer spread? Is the cancer really gone? These are some of the many questions that kids may have about cancer. It is important to encourage kids to ask questions, but explain to them that you may not always have the answer.

This January, Gilda’s Club Westchester launched Kid Support™, a 10-week peer support group for school-age children who have a family member with cancer or have cancer themselves. Gilda’s Club Westchester also offers a bereavement group for children, social events for teens and families, as well as lectures and networking groups for parents. For further information contact Gilda’s Club Westchester, 80 Maple Ave., White Plains. 644-8844. www.gildasclubwestchester.org. ♦

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