



# Parenting with Cancer:

## What Kids Understand and How You Can Help Them

### What does my child understand about cancer?

Our job as parents is to help our children process the world around them, understand their emotions and express what they're feeling in developmentally appropriate ways. All of our kids' behaviors are communication and our job is to be detectives—which can be really difficult!

**Infants and toddlers** may not understand much of what's happening, but even babies can sense changes in their environment. So, if there's a change in the family system, even little ones can feel it.

**Preschoolers** are all about themselves! Their main lens is “how does this affect me right now?”

*They have:*

- A limited scope of understanding
- An emphasis is on the here and now
- A focus is on how it affects them

**Elementary school children** are starting to broaden their thinking a little bit.

*They may:*

- Be wondering: Did something I do cause this? Did I wish something bad?
- Show an interest in the biological aspects of cancer: where in the body are things happening?
- Ask broader questions about what's happening, including concerns about death

**Middle school children** are starting to understand more complexities.

*They may:*

- Have heard about cancer before
- Think more abstractly or question their belief system
- Have broader concerns (worries about the death of a parent or that they may get cancer)
- Be inclined to seek support from peers rather than from adults

**Teens** understand complexities.

*They may:*

- Have concerns related to their own self-identity; they don't want to feel different from peers
- Be caught between breaking away but also needing support
- Be inclined to seek support from peers rather than adults
- Need to hide their feelings to maintain a sense of control

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**Remember:** You know your child the best. Each child's own developmental path will have a great impact on how they process, experience and understand a cancer diagnosis.