

Age-Appropriate Support & Advice

Adult & Family Programs | Family Education & Support



It will be helpful to think about your child's developmental age when you communicate and provide coping support in everyday life. Every child is unique and will respond to stress and change in their own way.

INFANT: 0 – 12 MONTHS

What to expect:

Your infant is relying on you to bond and form a secure attachment during this phase of development. They *will* notice even slight changes in daily routine due to your treatment and its potential side-effects. Your infant may:

- Be fussy or clingy.
- Change their eating or sleeping habits.
- Want to breastfeed more often.

Tips:

- Stick to a daily routine as much as you can. Bring in extra support and assistance to help you maintain as much normalcy as possible.
- Play relaxing music during nap/bedtime routine.
- Learn infant massage to help your child gain a sense of intimacy with you.
- Breastfeed or cuddle to help reassure your bond and attachment.
- Your child can feel worry and stress from their parent. Take good care of yourself, as this will also help you.
- Angel Foundation has Facing Cancer Together staff that are trained in child development. Contact them for additional ideas to support your infant.

Ways to reassure your infant:

"Mommy or Daddy is sick and needs to rest. I still love you and will do my best to help you when I can."

"Grandma or Grandpa will be coming over to help me take care of you."

TODDLER: 12 – 24 MONTHS

What to expect:

Toddlers may react to their parent or grandparent's physical changes (i.e. hair loss, weight loss, or surgery). You can let them touch your head and integrate play, such as peek-a-boo with your scarf or hat.

- Your child is learning to manage strong feelings that, to them, are often black and white with no shades of grey.
- Your child may have tantrums and get frustrated more easily.
- Your child is learning to feel pride, embarrassment, shame, and guilt for the first time.

Tips:

- Routine is important. Sticking to appropriate eat/sleep schedules will help give your child reassurance and maintain normalization.
- Be aware of your child's play. It will give you clues about how they are reacting to your illness.
- Read children's books that focus on feelings and how to cope. Talk with your toddler about how the character in the book is feeling and explore how it relates to their own feelings. Toddlers need your guidance to learn how to manage strong emotions. Make story time your special time together by snuggling and providing extra hugs.
- Angel Foundation can provide book suggestions and other parenting tips.

Ways to reassure your toddler:

"Mommy or Daddy may lose their hair. Can you help me pick out a scarf or a hat?"

"Will you snuggle with me? I'm not feeling well and your hugs help me feel better."

PRESCHOOL: 3 – 4 YEAR OLDS

What to expect:

Have you noticed your child is growing up? Preschool-age children can understand basic concepts, especially being sick. They may not be able to entirely understand the concept of cancer, but be honest with them and talk about it using short, simple phrases. Your child may:

- Have potty accidents.
- Start speaking in baby-talk or regress in speech.
- Hit or bite when feeling frustrated.
- Think they can catch cancer. Be reassuring: preschool-age is still very self-centric.

Tips:

- Your preschooler is learning new language every day and can carry on a logical conversation with you. Talk with them and you may be able to learn more about their thought process and what they understand about your illness.
- Tell them that cancer is not like a cold and explain that doctors are not certain why people get cancer.
- Schedule space on the calendar for special one-on-one time together. This helps promote love and connection between parent and child.
- Find a Child Life Specialist or Social Worker trained in child development to teach medical play and process through your preschooler's feelings and understanding of cancer.
- Angel Foundation offers medical play programs. Please call for more information or additional advice for preschoolers.

Ways to reassure your preschooler:

"Mommy has breast cancer. The doctor will give me a very strong medicine that could make me feel really sick. It might make me lose my hair, too, but you can help me pick out a pretty hat if it does."

"Even if mom or dad are unable to be with you, you will always be taken care of."

SCHOOL AGE: 5 - 10 YEAR OLDS

What to expect:

Children are becoming more concrete thinkers, as well as being more reflective. They may want to know more details about your cancer and your treatment. This is a good age to invite them to come with you to a clinic or hospital visit and teach them about your experience.

- This age group can grasp more logic, but their thinking can also be very rigid.
- Children at this age begin taking pride in their work and seek recognition for their accomplishments.
- School-age children are learning to understand other people's perspectives, rules for social cooperation, and appropriate behaviors.
- Being with friends is becoming increasingly important and they may dismiss parents as sole authority. This is very normal as they are learning to become critical thinkers.
- School-age children begin to develop a sense of privacy and may not want to tell their friends about their parent or grandparent's diagnosis.

Tips:

- Use a friendly but firm communication style. Give them open and honest answers about your diagnosis and treatment.

- Reassure them that they did nothing to cause your cancer.
- Keep your child involved by giving them a special role or responsibility around the house or showing them ways to help care for the adult that is sick.
- Remember that your behavior serves as a model for your child's behavior. Being upfront with your child will go a long way.
- Encourage school-age children to feel guiltless about enjoying activities and being with their friends. At this age, feeling guilty or ashamed are common responses to conflict and change.
- Angel Foundation provides programs such as summer camp, retreats, and medical play for your school-age child. Please call for more information.

Ways to reassure your school-age child:

"You might look cancer information up online or hear something from a friend. Please, talk with me first if you have any questions."

"A lot of people get cancer. The doctors know how to treat it and hope I will get better. If anything changes, I will tell you right away."

PRETEEN: 11 – 12 YEAR OLDS

What to expect:

Developing independence and responsibility is a key part of growing up, and your preteen is doing their best to navigate this stage of life. Preteens go through dramatic emotional and physical growth, and people often compare this development phase to being like a toddler again.

- It's normal for preteens to swing from being happy to being sad. Your preteen child may cry and react intensely about your cancer diagnosis.
- Preteens may feel embarrassed by their parent or grandparent's appearance.
- Your preteen may ask if you will die and wonder who will take care of them.
- Your preteen may not want to tell their friends about their parent or grandparent's diagnosis.

Tips:

- Provide consistency with schedules and routines, as this will help prevent possible mood-swings.
- Allow your child some personal independence. Encourage regular activities and guilt-free time with friends.
- Talk openly about death and dying and discuss worries and fears.
- Angel Foundation provides programs such as summer camp, retreats, and medical play for your preteen child. Please call for more information.

Ways to reassure your preteen:

"I have leukemia. It's a type of blood cancer. I will be very tired due to chemotherapy

treatments, but I'll do my best to be there for you."

"I know you may not want to talk to me right now about my new diagnosis, but I think it's important for you to connect with someone. Do you have a friend or a teacher that you can talk to?"

"We can still hug and kiss. You can't catch cancer like a cold."

TEEN: 13 – 17 YEAR OLDS

What to expect:

Emotional, intellectual, and social changes are common occurrences for teenagers. They will have a deeper, more mature understanding of their parent or grandparent's cancer diagnosis. However, their growing independence may cause isolation and make it difficult for them to know what to do or how to react.

- Teens go through less conflict with adults, but a new diagnosis may cause anger, fear, guilt, and resentment.
- Teens understand and show deeper capacity for caring, sharing, and developing deeper relationships.
- Teens tend to spend less time with parents and more time with friends; often hiding their feelings from their parents.
- Teens can be imaginative, passionate, sensitive, impulsive, moody, and unpredictable.

Tips:

- Talk to your teen and ask curious, not loaded, questions.
- Listen to your teen's thoughts about the future.
- Give privacy when needed.
- Offer to connect your teen with a counselor or school Social Worker for additional support.
- Encourage positive and safe ways to vent anger and frustration, such as journaling, exercise, or joining a teen group.
- Angel Foundation provides support for teens such as summer camp, Teen Outreach, and expressive arts groups. Please call for more information.

Ways to reassure your teen:

"I know you are feeling frustrated or resentful of more responsibilities. Let's keep communicating and discuss how we can all help each other."

"You may be interested in some resources that I've found. Take a look at this list of books that might be helpful."

YOUNG ADULT: 18 – 26 YEAR OLDS

What to expect:

A young adult's emotional and physical growth is slowing down. However, having an adult body doesn't always mean being completely grown up. Your young adult child may be transitioning to college or just starting a first job. Learning a parent has cancer during this time can be a huge shock to this age-group, especially if the young adult is now needed to act as a caregiver.

- This is the stage of emerging from adolescence to adulthood. This can be a complex, yet exciting time of growth.
- Young adults are focusing on themselves, through education, career, and sexuality.
- Young adults have a strong need for community.
- Some young adults will prosper and some will struggle.

Tips:

- Listen and provide guidance as needed. However, young adults may need room to make their own mistakes in order to learn from them.
- Encourage positive role models.
- Validate their sacrifices, especially if the young adult is now in a caregiver role.
- If you provide your young adult with resources, they will most likely look toward those possibilities and think, *"How can I improve my life?"*
- Angel Foundation provides young adult programs and resources. Please call for more information.

Ways to reassure your young adult:

"Let's talk about you and what you are needing to cope with this diagnosis."

"Remember you are not alone; there are online and community support groups to help you through this."



Angel Foundation provides education and support programs in the Twin Cities for parents, caregivers, young adults, teens, preteens, and children.

All events and programs are free.