

# How to talk to kids about a grandparent's (or other loved one's) cancer



**Considering that people are living longer than ever with chronic or serious illnesses, grandparents with cancer are a rapidly growing group<sup>1</sup>**

For many children, a grandparent is the first person they know and love who has received a cancer diagnosis. Parents may worry about sharing the news on the grandparent's cancer with their kids, but children of any age can sense that something is wrong.<sup>2,4</sup> To ensure they don't feel confused or fear the worst, be honest with your children about the cancer.<sup>3,4</sup>

Try to speak with your kids as soon as possible following the grandparent's diagnosis, as that puts you in charge of determining what your kids know, rather than risking that they overhear a conversation or receive sympathy from others unaware that they don't already know about it.<sup>2,4</sup> There's no wrong or right way to tell your children about the illness—filling them in, assuring them that you're there to provide support, and giving them the chance to talk about it will help them through.<sup>2</sup> You may even develop a closer connection as you work through it all together.<sup>2</sup>

If you don't know where to start, consider following these general tips on talking to your kids about cancer affecting any loved one who has received a diagnosis:

- 1 Take a moment to prepare**  
Think about what you want to convey to your children, working with your whole family beforehand to decide what and how much to tell them.<sup>2-4</sup>
- 2 Choose the right time**  
Make sure you'll be able to spend as much time as your children need to answer questions and provide comfort. If you or your kids are tired, busy, or ill, consider delaying the discussion until the time is right.<sup>2</sup>
- 3 Start the conversation**  
Calmly talk to your children within their attention span and level of understanding, letting them know that whatever they're feeling is acceptable.<sup>2-5</sup> Use the word "cancer" to prevent misunderstanding, and explain in basic terms that cancer is a general name for abnormal cells that turn into a tumor (perhaps adding that it can spread but isn't contagious, and that sometimes we know the causes and sometimes we don't).<sup>2-5</sup>
- 4 Continue the conversation**  
Tell your children where the cancer is in the body and types of treatment.<sup>2,4</sup> You may also want to explain to older kids and teens how the illness and treatment will affect the family's daily routines and responsibilities, if the grandparent lives with or near the family, and assure them that you'll continually provide updates on these changes.<sup>2-4</sup>

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## Invite their input

Encourage your kids to tell you what they already know about cancer, to ask you what they'd like to know, and to share with you how they think the illness will affect them and the family.<sup>2</sup> However close they are with their grandparent, you'll want to prepare them for what they might experience.<sup>3</sup> By giving your kids the opportunity to ask questions and voice their concerns, discussing their feelings as much as the facts, you can help them feel a sense of relief and move forward.<sup>2,3</sup>

**Feeling really emotional?** That's okay—it's an emotional time when you may need to cry together. However, remember that your priority is to inform while supporting your children—so if you're very upset, consider delaying the conversation or asking someone feeling a little stronger at the time, such as your partner, to help lead the discussion.<sup>2,5</sup>

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## Anticipate the hardest question

A common question from children is, "Are they going to die?" You may want to respond with a realistic but hopeful reply resembling, "People do sometimes die from cancer, but a lot of people don't. They're going to do everything they can with the help of their doctors to get better."<sup>2-4</sup>

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## Offer a support system

Tell your children if and what you've confided in other loved ones, as they may want to turn to these family members and friends for advice and comfort.<sup>2</sup>

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## Prepare them for physical changes

Let your kids know that they may see their grandparent or other loved one experience hair loss, weight changes, or other side effects before they happen.<sup>2,4,5</sup>

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## Find answers later

If you can't answer a question, simply say, "I don't know. That's a good question; I'll find out the answer for both of us." Kids usually accept this kind of response and will appreciate when you ultimately give them an answer.<sup>2,4,5</sup>

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## Pick up on cues

If your children seem ready to end your chat, try to wrap it up and sensitively open it up again later.<sup>2</sup>

### References

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- 3 McCue K. When a grandparent has cancer. *Coping With Cancer*. July/August 2014. <https://copingmag.com/when-a-grandparent-has-cancer>. Accessed July 16, 2014.
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- 5 Goldstein C. How can I talk to young children about a grandparent's cancer. Child Mind Institute. <https://childmind.org/ask-an-expert-qa/how-can-i-talk-to-young-children-about-a-grandparents-cancer>. Accessed July 16, 2021.

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