

Talking with your children about breast cancer

Reading for Reassurance Discussion Guide

There is no right or wrong way to talk to your child about your breast cancer diagnosis. Even same-age teens vary widely in emotional maturity and coping styles. You can choose when and how to share what is appropriate for your child. Books can be a helpful tool to open the conversation and for answering the many questions that arise for children whose parent is facing an illness. Living Beyond Breast Cancer provides free, age-appropriate books for children (ages 1–17) whose parent has been diagnosed with breast cancer. Through the Reading for Reassurance program, children and teens can read their way through stories that mirror their own. You can learn more about Reading for Reassurance at lbcc.org/reading.

The purpose of this guide is to offer recommendations about talking with your child and questions for discussion when sharing books.

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Children of different ages have different learning styles. Compared to younger children, teens are more likely to understand the science behind cancer and seek more detailed information, although some may avoid the medical details as a way to cope. They likely know or have known someone with it, understand it is a serious illness, and has common side effects like hair loss. However, they may have some misconceptions; (example, cancer is contagious) so it can help to encourage your teen to ask questions.

Think ahead about the message you want to deliver and choose a time when your teen has had their needs — such as hunger and sleep — met, and when you have plenty of time without interruptions. Don't be surprised if your teen has an emotional reaction, such as anger or avoidance. Allow time to pause the conversation if needed.

You may want to share basic information about your diagnosis.

Provide only the information that is needed, such as:

- The name of the cancer and where it is located
- How it will be treated
- Expected side effects of the treatment
- Acknowledgment that some uncertainty is expected as you go through treatment and doctors learn more about the cancer
- How diagnosis and treatment will affect your day-to-day lives as a family

Having an open conversation may help your teen feel more in control of their situation and reduce their worry. Your teen may have many questions but may also need time to process the information you share. Encourage communication and let your teen know that their feelings are valid and that they are not alone. Teens may also want reassurance that you'll let them know if anything changes in your prognosis or treatment. You can discuss with them how you'll let them know about urgent changes if they are in school or don't have access to their phone.

To reduce any feelings of guilt that your teen may be experiencing, emphasize that nothing they did (or can do) caused the cancer, and explain that they cannot catch cancer from you. Help your teen understand what changes to expect, and explain what will happen to preserve their usual routine as much as possible (such as school and activities with friends). If anything is new, such as a different pickup person or time, let them know so they can be prepared.

Socializing will continue to be important for your teen — offer to help them choose what to say to their friends about your diagnosis. Be clear about family roles and expectations, and ask your teen how they want to be involved (for instance, assisting younger siblings with homework or helping to prepare a meal). Some teens may struggle with being independent during this time and prefer to stay close to family.

If your teen raises concerns about their own breast health, you may want to talk to the doctor together for information and guidance. You can always involve a trusted family healthcare provider to help separate myths from facts and reduce anxiety.

“My teen daughter does not want to hear anything about ‘the C-word.’ I didn’t know how to reach her, and she was very open to the books when I showed them to her.”

about their cancer risks. And reassure your teen of the key things that will not change, such as how much you love them.

Teens may have conflicting emotions at the same time, such as fear, anger, relief, guilt, or numbness. Emotional shifts over time are completely normal. Teens may communicate through changes in behavior rather than words.

If you have multiple children with different developmental ages, it is important to discuss your diagnosis with each of them separately so they will have a safe time and space to process the information. This will also emphasize that you value their feelings and encourage one-on-one conversations in the future. They may react differently and at different times. Avoid comparing responses to reduce pressure on them.

Your healthcare team and mental health counselors can also be great sources of guidance on discussing breast cancer with your family. You may also ask them for guidance on professional support for your children, too.



Discussing books with your teen

Books can help teens understand what to expect, generate questions, and open important discussions about breast cancer and how it may affect your family. Learning about others’ experiences through books can also help teens feel less alone.

Before you share a book about cancer with your teen, read through it yourself and note any connections between your situation and the one described in the book. You know your teen best and can determine how to explain any similarities or differences between the book and your own situation.

Teens may respond best if they decide if and when to read the book. You may want to tell them about the book and let them know that they can read it at any point, and that there is no pressure to do so. You can reconnect about the book later if they would like to talk about it then. If they choose not to read it, that’s OK, too. It doesn’t mean they are rejecting support; they may just need time to process and revisit it.

Book discussion questions to consider:

- How did the teen in the book feel about their parent’s cancer? How do you feel about my cancer? You can model healthy ways to express tough feelings: “It’s OK to feel sad or angry.”
- In the book, what changed because of cancer? What are some things that stayed the same? What do you think will change because of my cancer? What do you think will stay the same?
- How did the teens in the book get involved with family activities? What are some ways you can do that?
- To whom did the teen in the book go when they needed to talk about how they were feeling? To whom can you go?
- What are some things you worry about the most right now? What questions do you have that we haven’t talked about yet?

You don’t need to ask every question at once. This conversation can unfold over time.

After talking about breast cancer and reading books with your child, be prepared for more questions and discussion. If you’re unable to answer a question right away, don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know, but I will find out for you.” Your child may also need some time to process the information before coming back later for more discussion.

You can find additional resources about parenting and breast cancer at lbbc.org/more. For more guidance and examples on talking to children about breast cancer, visit lbbc.org/parenting. And, to connect with a volunteer who has experienced talking with their children about breast cancer, please visit lbbc.org/helpline for information about LBBC’s Breast Cancer Helpline.

Developed with LBBC Leadership Volunteer Jenna Shillingburg, partner organizations with expertise in cancer support for parents and families, and LBBC staff.

For more information, call 855-807-6386 or visit lbbc.org.

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