



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. 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 lbbc.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 older children, younger children are less likely to understand medical details about cancer, but they do sense changes and are aware of behaviors and feelings. Think ahead about the message you want to deliver. Choose a time when your child has had their needs met, such as when they are fed and well-rested, and when you have plenty of time without interruptions.

You may want to share basic information about your diagnosis using simple language, including:

- The name of the cancer and where it is located (for young children, it can help to use a stuffed animal to show where the cancer is in your body)
- How it will be treated. Depending on your child's understanding, you might describe chemotherapy as medicine you get at the doctor's office, surgery as an operation to take out the cancer, or radiation as a special machine that "zaps" the cancer cells
- Side effects they may notice, such as hair loss or fatigue
- How diagnosis and treatment will affect your day-to-day lives as a family

Having an open conversation may help children feel more in control of their situation and reduce their worry. Encourage questions, and let your child know that their feelings are normal and that they are not alone. Emphasize that nothing they did (or can do) caused the cancer, and they cannot catch cancer from you like people catch cold germs from each other.

Help your child understand what changes to expect, and explain what will happen to preserve their usual routine as much as possible (such as going to school or playing with friends). Your child may want to feel included in what is happening, so help them find simple tasks for this (for instance, playing quietly or picking out their own clothes). And reassure your child of the key things that will not change, such as how much you love them.

If you have multiple children in different developmental stages, 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.

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.

“The books helped to put words to what we’ll walk through so we could talk about feelings.”



Discussing books with your child

Picture books can help children find a way to talk about difficult topics and can open important discussions about breast cancer and how it may affect your family.

Before you share a book about cancer with your child, read through it yourself and note any connections between your situation and the one described in the book. You know your child best and can modify the book vocabulary if needed or explain terms as you read with your child. Try using sticky notes to mark certain pages you may want to spend more time on, or use them while reading to mark anything you want to follow up on.

Book discussion questions to consider:

- What did the character in the book learn about cancer?
- How did the character 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?
- When the parent didn’t feel well, how did the child help? What are some ways you could help when I don’t feel well?
- To whom did the character in the book go when they needed to talk about how they were feeling? Who are people you might go to? (e.g., teacher, parent, coach, family member)



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.

Find more resources on parenting with breast cancer at lbbc.org/more under Parenting Resources. 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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