

# 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 come up 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](https://lbbc.org/reading).

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

### Talking with your child about breast cancer

Children of different ages have different understanding of cancer. Compared to younger children, older children are more likely to understand details about cancer. Think ahead about the message you want to deliver and choose a time when your child has had their needs — such as hunger and sleep — met, 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
- How it will be treated
- Expected side effects of the treatment
- 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. Your child may have many questions. Encourage communication, and let your child know that their feelings are normal and that they are not alone.

While older children may have a basic understanding of cancer or know the difference between serious illness and something like a cold, they may also have misconceptions. Emphasize that nothing your child did (or can do) caused the cancer, and they cannot catch cancer from you.

Help them 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). Your child may want to feel included in what is happening, so help them find simple tasks for this (for instance, packing their own lunch or bringing you a snack). And reassure your child of the key things that will not change, such as how much you love them.

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.

Allow time for your children to ask questions. If they don't have any at the time, remind them they can come talk to you when they do. This will also emphasize that you value their feelings and encourage one-on-one conversations in the future.

# “The books helped my child know she’s not the only one with a mom who has breast cancer.”



**Every child is different.** Don't be surprised if your child does not want to talk, has lots of questions or none at all, or has big emotions around this news. No matter their reaction, be prepared to reassure your child that their feelings are valid and that they are not alone.

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 child

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

## Book discussion questions to consider:

- What did the main 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? To whom can you go?

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. For more guidance and examples on talking to children about breast cancer, visit [lbbc.org/parenting](https://lbbc.org/parenting).

Find more resources on parenting with breast cancer at [lbbc.org/more](https://lbbc.org/more) under Parenting Resources. And, to connect with a volunteer who has experienced talking with their children about breast cancer, please visit [lbbc.org/helpline](https://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](https://lbbc.org).

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### References:

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