



New England Coalition for Cancer Survivorship

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Basic Tips for Parents: Caring for Your Children When You Have Cancer

- Begin with the knowledge that cancer is a family illness. The cancer experience effects all the members of an individual's family including children.
- Cancer is the elephant in your family's living room. Your children see the elephant. Acknowledge its presence.
- Understand that your children's imagined fears are often worse than reality.
- Always tell the truth, but present it in a loving and hopeful context.
- Answer questions directly, honestly, and at your child's intellectual level.
- Keep your explanations simple.
- Use the word cancer and clarify your child's understanding of the disease.... Be sure to explain that cancer is not contagious, that it is no one's fault, and that wishes or thoughts do not cause cancer.
- Explain that many cancers are curable and that most are treatable.
- Reassure your children that they will be cared for and their needs will be met. Let them know that they don't have to worry about their own safety, health or every-day routines.
- Shield your children from easily hidden daily reminders of your illness.
- Encourage and protect your family's normal times. Try to insure emotional time off from cancer for yourself and your child.
- Help your children prepare for and accept necessary changes in a positive way.
- The best gifts you can give your children are the tools to cope and grow– especially during difficult physical and emotional challenges.
- Remember that your children should not be your primary physical caregivers; nor should they be your primary emotional support.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help, especially with day-to-day parenting tasks. Call on your extended family, friends, church group, medical team, etc., for the support you need.
- Keep teachers, coaches, and the parents of your children's close friends in the loop about your illness. Update them as necessary and let them know how you would like them to support you and your children.
- Seek professional advice for yourself and your children whenever necessary. Join a support group. Ask for advice from veteran parent/survivors.
- There are many models for successful parenting during chronic illness. Do what works best for you and your children. Go with your gut!
- There is no way to be a "perfect" parent. Don't hold yourself to impossible parenting standards. Forgive yourself when you make a mistake. Pat yourself on the back when you are doing a great job.
- Take the time to care for yourself. Self-nourishment will lead to renewed parental strength, wisdom and courage.

We strongly recommend that you read *When a Parent Has Cancer: A Guide to Caring for Your Children* by physician/survivor Wendy Schlessel Harpham. It is a gem of a resource, which develops and explains many of the tips on this sheet. (Available in book stores, on-line, public libraries, and possibly in resource rooms at your treatment center.)