



# *Blessed are the children*

Supporting those whose parents have cancer

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by Rev. Percy McCray

About **80,000 young adults** aged 20 to 39 are diagnosed with cancer each year in the United States, according to the American Cancer Society.

What happens mentally and emotionally to the children who are greatly impacted when their parents are diagnosed with cancer?

“People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.’ And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.”

Mark 10:13-16 (NIV)



### Don't keep cancer a secret.

Trying to keep a cancer diagnosis a secret can be exhausting and unproductive. Pursuing this approach may also create unwanted challenges for both the patient and the family. All energies and efforts should be focused on the path of possible healing.

Having this conversation with your child is no doubt complicated and difficult, but not having the discussion will not safeguard the child from learning the truth another way. Children can sense when things are not normal, and not having a discussion may cause them to create their own narrative, eavesdrop or receive misleading information from other unmanaged sources that may cause fear and anxiety.

Taking the lead by controlling the conversation better allows you to instill trust, safety and confidence that your child will have your much-needed support and attention and not feel isolated from the family unit.

### Approach the child with a cancer conversation.

Give some thought to what to say before you speak. You'll likely be nervous, so write down talking points to be concise and focused, and feel free to practice with another person before engaging your child; the preplanning will help you gather yourself and be grounded with calmness and preparation.

### Map out adequate time thoughtfully.

Don't allow much lag time to transpire from diagnosis to a discussion. The earlier the better. Allow adequate

time for the conversation to take place, allowing for a natural pace to frame the conversation and negate interruptions. Assure that both you and your child have had adequate rest before engaging in such a discussion. Don't be alarmed if there's no initial reaction or the conversation ends sooner than expected.

### Settle on a designated spokesperson.

You as the parent ideally are the most appropriate for this discussion, but for many reasons, a surrogate may be needed instead. This conversation will be challenging, and some emotions may come to the surface, for you as well as your child, so be prepared for both to possibly occur.

### Give thought to where the discussion will take place.

Find an environment that lends itself to comfort, familiarity and safety that will allow your child to feel comfortable asking questions. Kids identify with their environments, which produces an association of thoughts and emotions, so the goal is to find a space that's conducive for them to relax and open up to discuss their feelings.

*"For giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young—let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance."*

Proverbs. 1:4-5 (NIV)



### Children's reactions will vary.

Consider your children's age, personality type and overall disposition, each of which will influence how they'll respond to news of a cancer diagnosis. The three basic age groups to consider are:

**Small children:** Cancer is a complicated topic they will not readily process. More than likely, their focus will be on cancer side effects that they witness.

**School-age children:** Your kids in this age group will understand more than small children and have a low level of understanding about the human body. What will be required for your child are simple details of explanation in terms they can understand.

**Teenagers:** Your teen probably has heard about cancer from friends or things read and may want more detailed information.

### Allow children to express what they are thinking and feeling.

Your children may express themselves in many ways, some positive and some negative. Their expressions may be verbal or nonverbal. They may display mood swings, begin fighting with others at school or at home, lose focus, begin to see their grades in school drop, etc. Encourage your children as much as possible to write poetry or record feelings in a diary, but don't force them to express themselves if they're not willing or ready.

### Children may ask hard questions.

Try to consider questions that may be raised and how you might react to them. One of the more difficult questions not to avoid is, "Will you die because of cancer," even if it's not asked. Be as optimistic as possible, but also be truthful and honest. Remember there are [numerous ways to message a response to this question](#).

### Children need assurance for their well-being.

You are your children's emotional lifeline, so allowing your child to feel secure and safe is essential. A cancer diagnosis can compromise your child's sense of comfort and safety, requiring you to reassure them there's a plan in place for their needs to be met and that they'll be cared for.

### Children, especially younger children, thrive on routine and predictability.

Cancer treatment often impacts the patient emotionally and physically. Bodily changes can occur. When you're away for treatment, someone else may have to drive your kids to and from school or prepare their meals. Discussing these possibilities ahead of time provides your children the ability to be prepared to pivot when needed. Having these types of talks as much as possible may help your children feel more comfortable that the family unit is moving forward with a steady hand and that their needs will be met.



### Allow children to be involved.

Provide your children opportunities to pitch in and help with day-to-day chores around the house, or allow them to witness you taking scheduled medication, going on doctor's appointments, etc., while also allowing your children to pray with and for you or read scripture together. This will allow your children to get involved in spiritual solace and feeling part of a family that's fighting together. But be careful not to overwhelm them with activities they don't wish to engage in, particularly your teens who may need to have their space and time for social activities with friends.

### Allow children to say goodbye if the parent has entered end-of-life stages.

This will be very difficult, but it will allow the process of closure to begin. Don't force your very young children to do this if they are resistant to it. Everyone needs closure after losing someone they love. Your children who are not afforded this process may later resent not having that opportunity. This will, in many cases, take time, but it may be a necessary step to start this very important process.

### If a parent passes away, remind the child of God's love and grace.

Feel free to have someone share the message of eternal life in the presence of God that you will experience and remind your children of the great reunion we hope to have with you later. This may help to manage and comfort your children's emotions of loss and separation.

### Consider counseling for children with a licensed family therapist at any point.

Remember, it's important to recognize when you've exhausted your limitations. No one knows your child better than you do. It's okay and helpful to acknowledge that you have exhausted your ability to help your children cope with and understand the subject of cancer. This is a complicated endeavor that may require different voices and approaches to help your child. There is more safety in a multitude of counsel.

#### For additional information:

[American Cancer Society: Helping children when a family member has cancer](#)

**DISCLAIMER:** For those of you who may be called on to be a surrogate parent of a child placed in your care, be sure to receive permission from the parents to employ any of the suggested schools of thought first. No matter how well-intended, having everyone on the same page is crucial in creating a circle of trust for all children involved.



Rev. Percy McCray Jr. has spent more than 20 years ministering to cancer patients and their caregivers at Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA).

An ordained minister, Rev. McCray is a member of the U.S. Chaplain Association. He has been recognized as one of the "most influential African Americans in Lake County (IL)" by the *Chicago Peoples Voice* newspaper for his religious and leadership roles within the community.

**Health, Hope & Inspiration** is a weekly podcast, sponsored by Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA), designed to help people find answers to questions about cancer, cancer prevention and overall healthy living. One of the greatest gifts a person can enjoy is good health. A well-rounded lifestyle is the product of physical, emotional and spiritual health. These three things are interdependent, and that is the message of *Health, Hope & Inspiration*, as well as the basis of the integrative approach at CTCA®.

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