



# PARENTING THROUGH A TERMINAL ILLNESS

CHILDREN AGED 7-13



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### HOW TO SPEAK TO MY CHILD WHEN A LOVED ONE IS DIAGNOSED WITH A TERMINAL ILLNESS

You may wonder what's the right time to talk to your child about their loved one's terminal illness. Truthfully, there may not be a perfect time. However, the sooner you communicate, the more time they'll have to process the news and start the important task of mourning.

#### 1. CREATE A SAFE SPACE

Find a quiet place where you can talk without distractions or interruptions. Include another adult if your child (or you) may be comforted by their presence.

#### 2. BE HONEST AND SPECIFIC

Be direct as you prepare your child for the news: "I need to tell you something important that's going to be hard to talk about".

Provide accurate, age-appropriate information. If you have several children of different ages, start with the language appropriate to the youngest. Use the right words, such as 'cancer', 'die', 'death', rather than something you think will be easier or sound nicer, like: 'not well', 'go away', or 'pass on'. These vague messages easily confuse children and they may not fully understand what you're trying to say. They may also jump to inaccurate conclusions like anyone who is sick will die or that the person is leaving temporarily.

#### 3. WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

Your child may still need you to explain what 'death' or 'cancer' mean in simple terms. You may not have all the answers and that's alright. The important thing is to establish and open the lines of communication. If you do have to explain death, talk in terms of the body not working anymore. You might say, "Dead means the person's body stops working and they can't do things like walk or talk anymore. When someone is dead, it can't be fixed, and they can't come back." Show that you are available to answer questions along the way and be upfront about what you or the loved one are still unsure of at this stage. By including your child in these conversations, you are showing him or her that your family will go through this together.



#### 4. COMFORT AND KEEP YOUR CHILD CLOSE

Throughout the conversation, reinforce that they are safe, and you are safe. If the death is related to a cancer diagnosis or other non-communicable disease, clarify that what their loved one is dying from is not something you or anyone can 'catch'. Stay close to your child and offer hugs or cuddles while you speak with them about this difficult topic. Comfort them by highlighting that they will continue to be cared for and loved no matter what.

#### 5. THEY ARE NOT TO BLAME

While this may be obvious to you, kids tend to believe they cause things to happen by what they do or say. Children may focus heavily on what the death means to them (ie., "is it my fault?" or "who will read me stories?"). Reassure them by emphasizing that what's happening to their loved one isn't happening because of anything they did or said.

Reassure them by addressing their concerns that they will continue to be loved and cared for, and what's happening to their loved one isn't happening because of anything they did or said.

#### 6. WHAT'S NEXT?

Let your child know what will happen next. For example, "the treatment is not going to cure the cancer, so we and the doctors are going to make sure she/he is comfortable".

1 IN EVERY 20 AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN  
WILL EXPERIENCE THE  
DEATH OF A PARENT BEFORE  
THEY REACH THE AGE OF 18.

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