

TIPS FOR FAMILY & FRIENDS

A tip sheet for family and friends,
written by parents who have cared
for a child with cancer



It is hard to know what to do when a child you know is diagnosed with cancer. We all want to help but we worry about saying the wrong thing or intruding on the family. The following tips come from families who have faced these challenges and are intended to make it a little easier to offer support that is helpful and useful.

1

Offering words of comfort is very much appreciated, although words should be chosen carefully. Having a child with cancer cannot be explained and does not make sense. It is often better to simply say 'I don't know what to say'.

2

Everyone says 'let me know if I can do anything to help'. Instead, just do what you know is helpful.

Cancer treatment is really time intensive, especially in the early stages so it's hard to keep up with the rest of your commitments. Offering to help with household responsibilities, such as vacuuming, washing a window, looking after siblings, school pick-up etc. is always very much appreciated and at the same time can reduce family stress.

3

Make food in small serves that can be frozen and reheated at the hospital. Parents need meals and the café is expensive. Write the name of the meal and the date it was made on the top so the family knows what it is. Make a meal for the family at home. If you leave it at the front door, place the meal in an esky/cooler.

4

Be interested but not too curious. Let the family share information at their own pace. It can be really difficult telling and re-telling the information. Be careful asking about the prognosis.

5

Try not to make light of the experience. However, you want to avoid overplaying the experience too, especially in front of the child. It is confronting and distressing to have a family member or friend with cancer but it is important to make sure that the child doesn't feel like they are responsible for causing that distress.

6

Be careful when sharing internet facts and figures. Childhood cancers are not common and treatments are highly specific and personal. Information available may not be applicable to your family member or friend's child.

7

Show up at the hospital if you can. Text first to check it is ok, bring a coffee, stay for a little while. Although it can be confronting to visit a cancer ward, it is far more confronting to be a cancer patient. No one loves hospitals! A little effort and thoughtfulness can make a world of difference.

8

Keep including and inviting the family to events even if they rarely attend. Families often report feeling isolated and disconnected from their social networks, so it helps to keep the door open. Try not to be disappointed if texts, voicemail, emails etc. are not responded to. They are usually appreciated but sometimes in the midst of treatment the energy is not always there to respond to everyone.

9

Keep up your support. Cancer treatment is often long and continues over months and years. Support often drops away after the first stage but the family continues to manage the many needs for a long time. All support is appreciated throughout the whole journey.

10

Notice and celebrate treatment milestones. Finishing treatment stages, coming off treatment, getting back to school, out of hospital. It doesn't need to be a big gesture, just a card in the mail will mean a lot.

11

Look after yourself too. Being a supporter is a wonderfully rewarding role but also exhausting and distressing at times. It can be helpful to find someone a bit removed from the situation to debrief with from time to time.

12

Print off and/or email this tip sheet to others. It has some really great ideas.

Listen, laugh, text, email, post. Be present and sensitive and know that your support and care is truly appreciated by a family going through the most challenging of circumstances.

Further information for families can be found at www.pics.org.au/families

This tip sheet has been written by the Children's Cancer Centres Parent Advisory Group (PAG) with the support of the Paediatric Integrated Cancer Service (PICS). The PAG are a group of parents of cancer patients and staff representatives who work together to improve the care of children with cancer.

Disclaimer: For education and information only. Content is accurate at the time of publication, however over time information may change. Always get advice from your health care team for answers to your medical questions.

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