

# TIPS FOR SEPARATED FAMILIES

A tip sheet for separated parents, carers and their families written by separated parents who have cared for a child with cancer



In the case of separated parents and carers, a child's cancer diagnosis can bring about unique and sometimes difficult relationship issues, which can increase any existing tension and conflict. Try to find a way to work through any differences you may have with your former partner or spouse as this will help your child feel more secure and loved.

General tips on how to look after yourself and your family when your child has been diagnosed with cancer are available in a range of tip sheets in this series. This tip sheet has been written by separated parents specifically for separated parents, carers and their families.

1

**The best outcome for your child is most likely to be achieved when both parents and carers are involved.** The hospital understands that not all families are the same, and the care of its patients can occur in families in which the parents are separated.

2

**Conflict with your former partner in front of your child may make your child upset.** Try to remain calm around your child at all times. If your child reacts to conflict between you and your child's other parent with distress, then this can make it more difficult for your child to cope with his or her illness.

If you think that the stress of your child's illness is likely to aggravate an already difficult relationship with your former partner have difficult conversations away from your child. This can help you to better cope with your child's health.

3

**The medical treatments available for your child's illness may be complex.** You may have differences of opinion with your child's other parent about the best treatment options available for your child. Speak with your child's treating team so these opinions can be considered and discussed. If your child is older and mature enough, the discussions may also involve the child.



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**Each person copes with stress, lack of sleep, emotional upheaval, isolation and their child's illness differently.** Some people cope by becoming upset, angry, withdrawn or sullen. These differences may increase tension and misunderstandings between former partners. Try to respect your child's other parent's ways of coping.

Help with communicating with your child's other parent, and help with handling your feelings, is available from the hospital. Talk to your child's doctor, a social worker or nurse consultant, as they are excellent sources of support and experience.

5

**If your relationship with your former partner is conflicted, then communication may be difficult.**

To reduce conflict and improve communication, it may be helpful to develop detailed communication ideas and changeover plans with your former partner. Include ideas about how to quickly resolve arguments, if they occur. A hospital social worker is available to help you with preparing these plans.

Try to avoid conflict with your former partner within the hospital. This may mean making arrangements to avoid seeing them while you are there.

You might need to organise to attend alternate medical appointments with your child. If this occurs, the parent or carer who attends the medical appointment should ask for two copies of all information brochures, reports, letters and treatment charts. This is so each parent/carer has the same information. Make sure your former partner who did not attend the medical appointment is given the second copy of the relevant material.

6

**If your hospital has an electronic medical record with a patient portal, both parents should have access to the child's record.** This will enable both parents to be as up to date as possible on their child's care and can be a way to improve knowledge when communication is difficult.

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**Sometimes, communication with your former partner can be easier by using a communication book.**

Make sure it is kept up to date with relevant information. Make arrangements with your former partner to ensure the communication book follows your child at changeover and record all relevant information about the treatment and care of your child.

8

**Make sure you inform your child's treating team that you are separated from your child's other parent.** It is important that if you have the following documents they be given to the hospital:

- court orders relevant to general contact between carers and their child
  - court orders relevant to contact between carers and their child while the child is within the hospital
  - intervention orders.
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**Your child's treating team assumes that your child's medication will follow your child.** All medications given to you by the hospital and prescribed to your child when your child is not in the hospital must be available so they can be given to your child at the relevant time. If medication is not available, or if you are unsure about your child's prescribed medication, contact your child's treating team.

10

**Medical emergencies can happen. Keep your child's other parent fully and immediately informed about emergencies that arise when your child is in your care.** In the case of a medical emergency, if you are on speaking terms with your former partner, then telephone each other about the emergency. If speaking is difficult, then use SMS text messages or send an email.

If you have trouble getting information about your child's treatment and care from your former partner when an emergency arises, ask your child's treating team for help.

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**It may help you to speak with other parents and carers who have been through the experience of caring for a child who has been diagnosed with cancer.** Some hospitals have parents who are available to meet with you to provide practical guidance and support. If you would like to meet another parent, please speak to your social worker or nurse coordinator/consultant.

**Further information for families can be found at [www.pics.org.au/families](http://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.

Published January 2017 (version 2)  
Available at [www.pics.org.au/families](http://www.pics.org.au/families)