

Taking Care of Relationships

Relationships are an important source of support during this time, and strengthening your relationships will help build resilience around you and your family.

Relationship with your Partner

It is normal for couples to experience more strain in their relationship, with the extra practical and emotional demands of parenting a child with a serious illness.

- ✔ *People cope differently* Everyone has different ways that they cope with the stress, and it is important to find time to talk about each other's thoughts, feelings and experiences.
- ✔ *Understand each other's perspective* You may have different perspectives on what is happening. Try to understand where your partner is coming from, and remember that ultimately you are both on the same team.
- ✔ *Acceptance* Find an acceptance of the different ways that your partner copes and manages their stress. Remember, even though it may be different than yours, it does not mean that they are not hurting too.
- ✔ *Effective Communication* Some couples find that the need for more communication during their child's illness has a positive effect on their relationship. However due to the new demands it can also cause extra tension between you and your partner. If you find that the tension is becoming a problem, it may be useful to find someone to help facilitate your communication and help you work through any issues.
- ✔ *Managing disagreements* Sometimes it can be helpful to 'shelve' any disagreements or differences for now, as there is too much else happening. As long as both parties agree, this can work and any issues can be revisited when you have more time and emotional capacity (i.e. during maintenance phase or following treatment). However, this may need to be revisited, as if something is festering, then it has the potential to widen the distance between you.
- ✔ *Spending time together* Somewhere amongst the hospital visits, and jobs that you both have to get done, it is important to find some time to spend together. This might be trying to organise a night out, or to even find time to have a coffee or meal with just the two of you.
- ✔ *Division of Labour* Most parents find they need to divide their roles in order to balance continuing employment, spending time at the hospital and spending time with other children. However, try to take turns and share some duties. It will be helpful to go together to important events and consultations (e.g. treatment planning, getting results).
- ✔ *Consider Counselling* Take advantage of relationship counselling and family therapy if your relationships are struggling. You're welcome to discuss this with your child's social worker or mental health practitioner, or find an external agency that may be helpful.

Relationships with your other Children

It's common for parents to feel guilty about their other children while they are caring for their sick child. The demands of caring for your sick child, as well as trying to maintain normality for your other children can be exhausting. Brothers and sisters of a child who have cancer are likely to find this a difficult time. Some siblings are able to cope with the extra challenges that the illness brings to the family and report positive benefits such as increased maturity, empathy and family closeness. But they can also experience strong feelings, including negative emotions during this time. They may feel anger, fear, jealousy or sadness which

may result in acting-out behaviours, withdrawal, anxiety about their own health, and difficulty at school both academically and socially. They may even feel guilty that their sibling is sick and younger children may also worry that it is their fault in some way. Below are some things to consider to help your other children:

- ✔ **Information** Provide your children with factual information about their siblings' diagnosis and treatment, suitable to their level of understanding and development. This may include letting them know that it is no-one's fault that their sibling is sick, and that it is not a result of anything somebody did or did not do.
- ✔ **Communication** Keep the lines of communication open with your other children. Use appropriate language to explain what is happening, as this can foster a feeling of inclusion, and reduce anxiety about not knowing.
- ✔ **Acknowledge feelings** Your other children will also be experiencing a range of different emotions (as described above), and it is helpful if these can be acknowledged and time given to discuss these emotions.
- ✔ **Normalise** Although this is difficult, being able to keep things as 'normal' as possible can be useful. This includes trying to maintain extracurricular activities for your other children, as well as trying to keep house rules and chores remaining the same.
- ✔ **Use your supports** Other family members or close friends can be particularly helpful with getting your children to regular or important activities or being their 'special person' if you are unable to attend an event. This is a way many of your friends can provide practical support.
- ✔ **Inclusion** Try to include siblings in the cancer experience in ways that are comfortable for them. This may be in bringing them to the hospital, participating in siblings programs conducted at the hospital, or through community programs such as camps and other activities.

Relationships with your parents

Grandparents can play an important part in helping you care for your child. At a time of increased stress, you may need more help from your family and friends and sometimes your parents will be the major source of support. However, sometimes what is meant as support can feel like interference. It is important to let your parents know what is helpful and to keep them informed of important information so that they can understand and support your decisions. Grandparents will be distressed for you (as their child), and also for their grandchild. Sometimes, the thoughts and feelings you are both experiencing, as well as your existing relationship, can make communication difficult. If this is the situation, please feel free to talk with your child's social worker, doctor or nurse coordinator who may be able to help you with this.

Relationships with your family and friends

Friends and family are often not sure how they can help you. Sometimes their attempts may be misplaced but almost always their intention is to be helpful. It may feel like you are supporting others when you and your child need the support. It is not uncommon to feel disappointed by people you thought would be more supportive and surprised by others who you did not think would be so helpful.

It is important to remember that your family and friends will experience a variety of different emotions and will respond in different ways. Those who maintain little contact usually do this because they don't know what to do or say. It does not mean that they do not care or are not thinking of you or your child. It is common for families to report that their friendships can change over this time, with new friendships formed and increased distance in other friendships. Some families report losing friends who are unable to cope, however, there are also many instances of friendships that have been kept or enriched, which are incredibly precious.