

How do I address sibling needs?

Cancer creates enormous stress for all family members, including siblings. Sometimes parents are away for long periods or feel so consumed they are not able to provide emotional support to their other children. Additionally, parents may find it difficult, particularly at the early diagnosis stage, to answer questions or to correct misinformation.

Parents can help siblings deal with the illness by encouraging open discussion in the family and by providing information about the illness, its prognosis, and plans for treatment. Siblings may avoid asking questions, despite their need for information, because they fear the answers. If no one talks about these matters, siblings may assume the answers must be terrifying.

Siblings may respond to the challenge of changing family dynamics by acting out, withdrawing, failing to complete school work, having emotional outbursts or depression. Siblings benefit from empathy, information, routine, structure, and discipline; however, professional counselling may be necessary when these measures are insufficient.

Teachers can be instrumental in providing support and understanding and act as a bridge for communication with parents, encouraging children to verbalize their concerns and anxieties and helping to alleviate resentments.

Sibling Concerns

Teachers can help alleviate young siblings' stress by:

- allowing the child to bring in a familiar object when comfort from home is needed;
- encouraging the child to express their feelings in writing or in artwork;
- diverting a child's anger or fear with physical activity using manipulatives such as blocks and construction materials;
- rewarding independent behaviours;
- responding to outbursts calmly and explaining that you understand they are going through a difficult time;
- sharing stories about childhood cancer.

Guidance counsellors and teachers can provide support for a troubled adolescent by:

- sharing personal feelings: "I'm worried about _____, too. It's hard for me to believe it. I know I will feel less frightened when I know more about childhood cancer."
- recognizing that they are taking on added responsibilities and independence;
- arranging professional counselling, if necessary, to provide for the adolescent's needs.