

## Talking with children about a parent's illness

The entire family is affected when a parent becomes seriously ill. Changes will occur in several ways: emotionally, financially, socially and existentially.

Children feel that things are not as usual in the family. They try to understand what is happening and if they are not given clear information, their imaginations may take over. And what they imagine is often worse than reality. By talking about what is happening in the family, the children become participants and able to understand why things are not as usual.

This is why it is important to talk to children, although it can be difficult sometimes. Some parents do not know what they are supposed to say and are afraid that what they tell the children may do more harm than good. Some children ask questions about what is happening, while others become silent and withdrawn.

In the following, you will learn a little more about how children might react, how children of various ages think, and how you can make things easier for your child.

### **How children react in various ways**

#### **When a parent becomes ill**

Children often experience a crisis in the same way as adults. Children who experience a crisis may react with sleeping problems, loss of appetite, physical symptoms such as stomach-ache and headache, sadness, worry and anger. Some children become afraid to leave their parent and do not want to go to school. Other children have a hard time concentrating in school and are more likely to have conflicts with schoolmates. Children often feel guilt and shame. They may believe that it is their fault that the parent is ill.

#### **What happens in the family**

##### **Changes**

When a parent becomes ill, things are not as usual in the family. For the children, that may involve the following:

- Worry about the parent
- The ill parent changes and might be in hospital
- Roles in the family change
- Routines change
- Poorer family finances
- Parents have less time/energy for the children

#### **Making things easier for the children**

##### **Children can sense that something is wrong**

Describe what is happening in the family. If you are sad, worried or angry, put those feelings into words together with the children and explain that they are connected to the illness. If the children are old enough, tell them about the illness, how it progresses and how it is treated. Make sure the children know that changes are going to happen. Be honest and if you do not know, say "when it comes to certain things, I just don't know". Talk to the younger children too, and describe what you know and what is happening in the family.

##### **Let the conversation be guided by the child's questions and maturity**

It is a good idea to begin the conversation by asking the child what they already know about what has happened. Listen carefully to the child's questions and base the conversation on them. Tell them a little at a time and ask questions to make sure the child has understood. Explain that the illness is not contagious and that it is no one's fault that the parent is ill.

## **Talking about death**

Don't use words like "go to sleep forever" or "leave us" because, especially in the concrete thinking of preschool children, they may become fearful of going to sleep or afraid if someone else is going to leave for a while. Instead, use words like "to die". Answer children's questions about whether the parent is going to die honestly.

## **Showing feelings**

It is natural for children to react in different ways. Give children the opportunity to show what they are feeling and to name the feelings, such as anger, sadness and worry. Confirm that all feelings are allowed. Children's feelings pass more easily. They may be sad for a while and then resume playing.

## **Routines**

Try and maintain daily routines at home, at school and with regard to leisure activities. Even though it can be difficult to find the time and energy, try to pay attention to special events, such as birthdays, Christmas and summer holidays. Get the children involved in what is happening. Being allowed to help with simple tasks will help them feel needed and give them a sense of belonging.

## **Let your children come with you to the hospital**

Children imagine things about what they do not understand and have not experienced. Before the hospital visit, explain that the parent may seem different and what things are like on the ward. Help the child formulate questions to ask the healthcare staff. If the child wants to, let them take a picture of themselves or make a drawing for the parent in hospital.

Healthcare providers have a special responsibility to give children and young people support and information about a parent's illness. Ask the staff for help explaining and making the visit easier on the child.

## **Talk with other adults**

Tell the staff at the preschool/school/after school centre that the parent is ill. If the people who are around the child know what is happening, they will be able to understand why the child is reacting differently than usual and provide extra support. Find out whether there are other adults around the child, such as neighbours and friends, who can provide support and help.

## **Child development**

### **0–2 years**

The tiny child lives in the emotion. They do not understand what we say, but they sense what is happening in the family. The child feels it when their parents are sad and worried.

### **3–6 years**

Language develops at this age. The child often uses language to understand what is happening. Their thinking is concrete and the child thinks in terms of cause and effect. The child tries to put things in order by ascribing a cause to what is happening, such as that if you go outside without a hat, you will catch a cold. For younger preschool children, death is something temporary, but for older preschool children, death is irrevocable and often associated with fear. At this age, the child may be more worried by changes in the daily routine than by the parent's illness.

### **7–12 years**

Children of this age want to know a lot and want as much factual information as possible. The child begins to understand that the parent is ill and that their family situation is different from the

lives of their friends. Sometimes, the child may feel embarrassed about their parent, which creates feelings of guilt.

The child begins to understand that life is risky; fear of becoming ill themselves and thoughts of their own death are triggered. If a parent dies, the child understands the consequences.

### **13–18 years**

Young people understand what it means to be seriously ill and abstract concepts like heredity.

Teenagers react in different ways. Some want to know a lot about the illness and others withdraw and do not want to be with the family.

Activities outside the home can be a safe zone, where the teenager can be the same girl or boy as always and spend time with friends.

The journey towards a more independent life may be temporarily delayed when a parent becomes seriously ill. It can sometimes be hard to return to the family, and the teenager seeks support from friends or other adults. Teenagers sometimes have concerns about hereditariness.

Text: "Barn som anhöriga" [Children as relatives of a patient], Dahlheimers Hus, Social Resource Administration, City of Gothenburg.