



UCI

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When a parent is diagnosed with cancer, one of the most difficult conversations is not with doctors, but with their own children. Many parents struggle with what to say, how much to share, and whether telling the truth might cause fear or distress. Yet avoiding the conversation altogether can often create more anxiety for a child than the reality itself.

Children, regardless of age, are perceptive. They notice changes in routine, mood, and physical health. When something feels wrong but is not explained, they may imagine worse scenarios or even blame themselves. That is why honest, age-appropriate communication is essential.

Honesty, timing

There is no perfect script for this conversation, but honesty should always be the foundation. Experts recommend telling children the truth in a simple and clear way, using language they can understand based on their age.

Younger children may only need basic information, such as: "Mum or Dad is sick and needs special

Talking to children about a parent's cancer diagnosis



medicine to get better." Avoid overwhelming them with medical details. Older children and teenagers, on the other hand, often need more explanation. They may ask direct questions about what cancer is, whether it can be treated, and what changes to expect at home.

Timing also matters. It is best to have the conversation early, rather than waiting until visible changes, such as hair loss or frequent hospital visits, raise questions. Choose a calm, private moment where the child feels safe and has time to process the information.

Importantly, reassure children that cancer is not contagious and that nothing they did caused it. Many children, especially younger

ones, may secretly worry that they are somehow to blame.

Support

After the initial conversation, the discussion should remain open. Children need ongoing reassurance and the freedom to ask questions as they arise. Some may ask the same questions repeatedly, not because they were not listening, but because they are trying to understand and cope.

Parents should also prepare children for changes in daily life. This may include hospital visits, periods of fatigue, or times when the parent is unable to engage as before. Explaining these changes in advance helps reduce fear and confusion.

Emotional reactions will vary. Some children may become quiet and withdrawn, while others may act out or show anger. These responses are normal. What matters is creating a supportive environment where children feel heard and reassured.

Maintaining routine is one of the most effective ways to support children during this time. School, play, and familiar activities provide a sense of stability and normalcy. Where possible, parents and caregivers should try to keep daily life as consistent as possible.

It is also important to involve other trusted adults. Teachers, relatives, and caregivers can provide additional emotional support and help monitor how the child is coping. In some cases, professional counseling may be beneficial, especially if the child shows signs of prolonged distress.

Above all, children need reassurance of love and security. Even when the future feels uncertain, reminding them that they are cared for and not alone can make a significant difference.

Talking to children about a parent's cancer diagnosis is never easy, but silence is rarely the best option. With honesty, sensitivity, and ongoing support, parents can help their children understand what is happening and cope with the emotional impact.

In difficult moments, these conversations can also strengthen family bonds, creating space for trust, resilience, and shared strength in the face of illness.

The writer is the executive director, Uganda Cancer Institute