

Ideas for how to talk to children

- Small bits of information at a time
- Encourage them to ask questions
- Reassure them you will tell them as things change
- Allow them to respond in any way that is helpful to them (children may have different emotional reactions)
- Normalise their reactions
- Carry on talking about it (over the coming days)

If you can't answer a question exactly, it's fine to say *"I don't know"*.

In fact, this answer is much better than a guess or making something up.

If you are unsure about an answer you might say: *"That's a difficult question – to be honest, I'm not sure I know the answer. I need to find out more from the doctor before I can answer that."*

And then it's important to make sure you do this and come back to them with an answer when you have one.

Further support

www.cardiffcriticalcare.co.uk

Information adapted from:

www.mariecurie.org.uk

www.winstonswish.org.uk

Talking_about_Critical_Illness_Leaflet_2019_v1.0



Patient and carer information

Talking to children about a critical illness



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Talking to children about critical illness

We want to protect those we love, especially children, from difficult issues that affect them.

We cannot protect children from sadness, but we can help them. Sometimes adults think that by not saying anything about someone's illness their children will somehow not be affected.

In fact, however much adults try to hide what is happening, children know something is wrong and will often blame themselves unless things are properly explained to them.

For example, a child may secretly worry that if only he or she hadn't been naughty, or had tidied their bedroom as asked, their mother would not be so ill.

This can make a child feel very lonely and afraid, particularly if everyone else's silence stops them from being able to ask questions.

It is natural to worry about talking to children when someone close to you is ill, but it is important for your child or children to be told when something is wrong.

Adults will want to soften the pain and shock of bad news. They may be unsure

about who should talk to the children, how much should be said and what and when they should tell them.

Visiting

Some illnesses and treatments change the way people look.

They may lose or put on a lot of weight. They may be very sick or tired or be connected to tubes or machines.

If this is the case it is important to tell children in advance and to reassure the child that although the person may look different they are the same person.

When visiting, children may not wish to stay very long or they may feel awkward or be bored.

Depending on the age of your children it may be helpful to take something for them to do or bring for the person who they are visiting.

When should I tell my children?

Children are helped by adults who are honest and direct in their communication with them. It is usually best to let children know what is happening as soon as the information seems definite.

When parents try to delay telling the news, a 'good' time may never arrive and it becomes increasingly difficult to explain why you have waited.

Adults may underestimate how much children have already picked up.

Children are often very sensitive to tensions and unease in their family situation. They may comment on changes in the person's condition and this could give you an opportunity to explain more about the illness.

Giving children time to prepare for what is happening now and what is likely to happen in the future minimises unnecessary anxiety and distress.

It is also ok for children not to want to ask questions - don't worry if they appear uninterested.