

The KidPack Program:

The KidPack program provides backpacks tailored for children and specialty packs for teens that have a parent with cancer. Packs are available for children ages 4-7, 8-12, and teenagers. Each pack includes the following components:

- Supportive information geared to each specific age group.
- Creative materials and activities to encourage expression.
- Soft soothing items to reduce stress and provide comfort.
- Age-appropriate information and resources including books, stories, websites and videos.

This binder is intended to act not only as a tool to help offer guidance, information and support in speaking to your children about the cancer in their family, but also as a guide for how to engage your children using the materials provided in their individual KidPacks.

The Family Connections Program provides resources in KidPacks for children and teens that we hope will help you and your children.

- Please take a look at the items in the packs and make sure you are comfortable with giving them to your children.
- The packs are intended to provide information children are often looking for and they may spark your own ideas for engaging them.
- Sharing the packs may make it easier for you and your children to bring thoughts, feelings, questions and concerns into the open.
- Please see the following pages for suggestions on communication and ideas for activities with your children.

The Role of Play and Activities in Supporting and Communicating with Children

You can help children express their thoughts and feelings through something very basic to their everyday: play. Time for play as part of their regular routine can be comforting and soothing to children.

Depending on ages and level of understanding, play:

- Helps children express and understand more about how they feel.
- Is a safe way, in their control, to bring feelings and thoughts to the surface.
- Provides a way to release tensions that may be bottled up.
- Can be an outlet for managing anger, sadness, and worries.
- Gives children a way to try out ideas or review and work through new experiences.

Young children particularly enjoy “make-believe”. This type of play includes dressing up, acting out characters like firefighters, teachers, super heroes, etc., playing with dolls, stuffed animals, trucks, cars, action figures, dinosaurs, or other toys.

Children often replay situations from their own life or imagination, or some of both. Sometimes when there is an illness in a family, children weave into their play pieces of conversation, themes or scenes from their own experience, or what they have overheard or imagined. You may have noticed some of this in your children.

Activities:

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| • Dolls | • Drawing |
| • Dollhouse with family | • Painting |
| • Doctor's kit | • Box games |
| • Puppets | • Collages |
| • Stuffed animals or animal figures | • Costumes and dress up clothes |
| • Cards | • Story books/Read alouds |
| • Other materials such as clay, sculpi, model magic, etc. | • Fundraisers – for school/community |
| • Construction paper cutouts | • Nail polish and make up |
| • Collages | • Puzzles |
| • Cooking together | |
| • Journals or diaries | |
| • Ball games | |
| • Photo albums | |
| • Scrap booking | |

Play is also good because at times everyone needs a break from the focus on cancer and treatment and how serious things may be or feel. In general, doing activities together or playing together says: I want to be with you; it's fun to be together and laugh, even when things are hard; time with you is important regardless of what else is going on.

Children of all ages may find it easier at times to express complicated and difficult reactions by means other than talking. Such activities include drawing, other art activities, writing in a journal, sharing a story, listening to or playing music, dancing, being physically active or merely playing with familiar toys and objects.

Children can have a hard time identifying what they are thinking and feeling at any given moment. However, they usually have no trouble *doing* something in response to how they are feeling, whether it is related to cancer or not. Even if you see no clear connection between what is going on in your children's lives and their reactions and behavior, they may benefit from ways to let off steam, relax, take a break.

Many children, even those who never talk about your cancer, can think about it often. In this way, they try to gain some sense of control and among older children, try to sort out their thoughts and feelings. Sometimes children will fill in the gaps of their knowledge and understanding with their own ideas or what they have heard from others, including other children. What you hope is that they will bring these ideas and impressions to share with you.

Although they may have questions or worries, children will not always ask these questions or talk about concerns as they come up. It is not helpful to pressure them to tell you or talk to you about what they are thinking. You can let them know, however, that you are available to talk when they are ready. Try to provide them with lots of opportunities to do so.

It can be helpful to give them basic information that you know they need or might want to ask about. Provide openings by saying, for example, "Things have been a little difficult lately" or "Sometimes I can't even remember what life was like before I got cancer." Give your children time to respond if they wish.

You can also offer brief updates, "I thought it might be helpful for you to know...", or "I have another appointment and I will keep you posted on how it turns out". This way you are giving them some information, and if they would like more, the door has been opened. They will also know that you are thinking about them and are trying to keep them in the loop.

It also helps to spend time together as a family, have some fun, and enjoy each other's company. Sometimes with everything going on, this family time can be lost all together or very limited. When it is possible, watch movies, work on jigsaw puzzles, play cards together, or choose whatever activities you have enjoyed in the past, or want to try out. These are times that also open doors for questions or other needs.

Below are some general age-appropriate ideas to try or to spark your own ideas. Of course, ideas can be drawn from any category for children across all age groups.

You are the expert on your own children and will think of other activities that are best suited to them.

Specific Ideas for Children under 3:

- Provide small figures of animals or people so that your young children can act out their thoughts and feelings. You might also suggest certain situations, such as, "If the mommy cow doesn't feel well, and wants to lie down for a nap, what do her baby calves do?"
- Provide lots of opportunities for your children to be active. If you don't have the energy to organize this, ask a trusted neighbor or friend to come over to play ball or an active game, hide and seek, or whatever activity they usually enjoy.
- With your child, read picture books about cancer in the family. See the Resources section of this binder for a book list and other suggestions. Stories with animals are often helpful ways of conveying the concepts and feelings. Reading non-cancer related books together is another way of being close and having fun. **The Light One Little Candle Program** offers families a book of their choice for school-age and under children (See Resources section of this binder).
- Acknowledge that things have changed in the household, and that your children might find this upsetting. Reassure them of your love and concern, and tell them that there will always be someone to take care of them. Provide sitters or other helpers with specific information on what is comforting for your child, including all usual routines and rituals, special toys and books.

Specific Ideas for Children ages 4-7:

- Leave clay, crayons, drawing paper, or other craft materials out where your children can easily reach them. Invite your children to use them whenever they want. You might suggest that they create something specific, such as a picture of their favorite family activities. If you say nothing, however, children often communicate a lot through whatever they choose to create.
- Ask your partner or a friend to buy you a few boxed cake or cookie mixes. At some point when you are able to be in the kitchen with your child, ask him or her to give you a hand mixing the batter, or decorating the cake, etc. When children are busy with an activity this can be a good time to ask them about their thoughts or how school is going, or if they have any questions. You can also share brief updates on your treatment, what you are learning, etc.
- Sit down with your children and together; make a list of the questions you both have about the cancer diagnosis. (“You know, there are things I don’t understand about my cancer. Maybe you have some questions too. Let’s make a list, and the next time I see my doctor, I’ll ask about them.”). Share the information you get from your doctor with your child, using language at their level of understanding (See the Articles section of this binder for glossary of medical terms). Children of this age often have many questions and it is helpful to give them information and to encourage them to ask questions.
- With your child, read picture books about cancer in the family. See the Resources section for a book list. Stories with animals are often helpful ways of conveying the concepts and feelings for younger children. Reading non-cancer related books together is another way of being close and having fun. **The Light One Little Candle Program** offers families a book of their choice for school-age and under children (See Resources section of this binder).
- Make sure your children know that they are not the cause of your cancer, and that they cannot “catch” it from you. Reassure them on both fronts, and see if they follow up with other questions or concerns.

Specific Ideas for Children ages 8-12:

- Take your children (or ask someone else to take them) to a library or CD store and let them pick out music they would like to play at home. If possible, make sure your children have a private place to listen to their music.
- Some parents and children or teens take turns writing in a journal and responding to each other. On the other hand, a journal may be a place for your child or younger teen to sort out or simply put in to words some of what they are thinking about or feeling about your illness.
- As much as possible, support your child's efforts to continue in school, town athletics or other organized activities. If you don't know whom to contact to find out about sign-ups, suggest that your son or daughter go on-line at school or to their guidance counselor's office to find out more.
- Take out some videos about cancer from a library, video store or on-line service (or ask a friend) and watch them with your children. At the end of the video, share your reactions and ask for their own. The Blum Resource Center in the Dana-Farber lobby also has many videos to choose from.
- Offer your children books about cancer in the family. Stories are often helpful ways of conveying common concerns and feelings. See the booklist in the Resources section of this binder. If your child is more likely to connect through reading non-cancer related books together, **The Light One Little Candle Program** offers families a book of their choice for school-age and under children. (See Resources section of this binder)
- This may be a time that you can present the idea of the family as a team that can work together to make things run smoothly and that everyone can be a part of this. School age children may enjoy helping out around the house, and you can ask them for their ideas. They can feel good about being old enough to be asked and to contribute ("It's hard for me to get the trash out to the sidewalk, and it's a big help for all of us").
- Creating a scrap book together may be a wonderful way to share thoughts and feelings. Take pictures, use stickers, write poems, add personal letters, notes, etc. to create a book to share and save.

Specific Ideas for Teenage Children:

- Teens often like journals, or if you prefer, buy a blank notebook (one with an appealing cover) and special pen for your teen. Leave it with a note saying that this is for his or her use in case the teen wants to write down any private thoughts, feelings, or questions.
- Some parents and children or teens take turns writing in a journal and responding to each other. On the other hand, a journal may be a place for your child or teen to sort out or simply put in to words some of what they are thinking about or feeling about your illness, and life in general.
- Teens often have sorted out the ways that they like to be active and will need your support to know that it is okay to continue with, or even start up, these activities. Some teens join outdoor clubs or groups through school, religious or community organizations that provide opportunities for hiking, skiing, camping, skating, biking, etc. If your town has a recreation department, you can suggest that your teen call to find out what programs are offered. Many organizations are listed on the web. They may also be interested in participating in, or organizing local events. Some ideas include a fundraiser, bake-off, 5K walk/run, or volunteering for a meaningful organization.
- Teens tend to focus more on their peer group and what is going on at school. Keeping up with friends and their usual activities helps give them a sense of stability and security. Encourage your teen to continue in their areas of particular interest (academic, artistic, athletic) by asking about assignments, games, practices, praising efforts, and helping (or asking for school or other support) when you can. The booklist in the Resources section of this binder has some suggestions that may be supportive to your teen.
- Some teens might find it hard to leave the house, and you, so you may want to let them know that it is okay to continue with seeing their friends and keeping up with their activities. You might say something like, “I think you may not be going out because you might be worrying about me. It’s really okay, and in fact, it makes me feel good for you to do what you usually do. We can do something together another time. Let’s make a plan for that later.”
- Creating a scrap book together may be a wonderful way to share thoughts and feelings. Take pictures, use stickers, write poems, add personal letters, notes, etc. to create a book to share and save. Using the camera and photo album included in the Teen KidPack may be a good place to start.

