

When a parent falls ill

Advice to parents and other adults



A parent's illness affects the whole family, both emotionally and in practical terms. Children have the resources to deal with even difficult experiences. They often have an ability to accept the situation as it is. If we let children be involved in what happens during the period of illness, we help them to deal with the situation.

What does a child need to know?

In the past people used to think that adults should shield children from serious matters, but now we know that this just makes a difficult situation even worse. Children sense from adults when something is wrong, and if they don't get any information, they create their own explanations using their imagination and have to deal with their concerns all on their own.

As a parent, you know your child best and you can explain things in a way to suit your child. Regardless of how old they are, all children need to know what the illness is called, what is being done to help, how the child can help and what will be happening in the near future, including in the child's everyday life.

Talk to the child when you feel able, ideally together with the healthy parent. If you are unable, ask the healthy parent or another adult with whom the child feels safe to help.

Try to keep up with your day-to-day routines. This shows that you care about the child, and routine creates reassurance. Children want their parents to continue to be parents. Scope is needed for the child's normal life, and contacts with friends often provide good support. It can often be a good idea to inform staff at school or the childcare service.



Information adapted to age

At all ages, children need to be given information adapted to age so that they can understand and deal with what is happening. Feel free to encourage the child to ask questions.

Pre-school children aged 2-6 live in the here and now, they see themselves as the centre of the world and can therefore come to believe that the illness is their fault. Changes in daily routines can be more alarming than the fact that mummy or daddy is ill. Tell them what has happened or will be happening in a simple, easily understandable way.

Children aged 7-12 are very interested in the factual reality. You can explain a little bit more to them and look up facts together. They might find it difficult to put words to emotions, but they can answer questions about what they are thinking. Once they are of school age, children start to become aware of the risks around us. It can therefore be important to explain that it is very unusual for bad things to happen to other adults they know or to the child himself/herself, even though one parent has fallen seriously ill.

Teenagers and young adults understand the full meaning and consequence of having a serious illness. Inform them about the illness and the treatment. Respect the integrity of the teenager. A teenager can be extremely close to the family or choose to distance himself/herself from the family. Let the teenager decide for himself/herself whether and when he/she wants to come to the hospital.

A serious illness in a parent can make it difficult to release emotion. Many teenagers and young adults know little about common reactions upon hearing bad news or in connection with serious illness. If you don't know what the usual response is, you can interpret your own reactions as being odd and abnormal. Remember those young people who have left home.



If you require further information

You can find more information, films, advice and tips on the County Council's and the Regions' shared website: 1177.se.

There is also useful information on the Swedish Cancer Society website cancerfonden.se, under the heading "Vad säger jag till barnen?" [*What do I tell the children?*"].

This material has been drawn up by counsellors and workgroups in the field of cancer care at Östergötland County Council.

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