

TALKING TO YOUR CHILD...THE PARENT'S ROLE

What the experts think

Experts in child development now feel that children should be included in what is happening in the family. Unlike earlier thinking that promoted protecting children from pain or upset or from the knowledge that they are different, today's approach is based on the fact that children adjust better to change if they are included in the process. This gives them an opportunity to explore their feelings and reactions simultaneously along with other members of the family.

Your child's reaction

How you talk to your child about his/her medical condition, upcoming hospitalization and either the procedure or surgery that they face has a direct impact on how he or she adjusts and copes with the information.

Children respond to life situations depending on the circumstances of the event, the nature of family relationships, their developmental age, the visibility of their facial or body difference, the meaning the condition has to the child and responses they receive from parents, significant others and peers.

Explore and share your own feelings first

A discussion with a child, irrespective of age, cannot take place unless you are open when talking about the situation and your feelings about it. Examining your feelings is an important first step – sharing them with your partner and close others will help you clarify how you feel. With this clarity in hand, you are better equipped to talk to your child and answer his/her questions.

Explaining an illness or medical situation to a child is one of the hardest things a parent has to do (other difficult areas are death, divorce and sexuality). Often parents do not feel prepared, comfortable to “good at” these discussions.

Kid's have built-in radar

Once your child's built-in “something's wrong” detector starts to go off, it's time to talk to them. If you do not speak directly to your child (and his/her siblings) they may hear snatches of conversation that leave them with wrong or incomplete information. Children may interpret what is going on by blaming themselves or imagining the worst.

What will help your child cope

Children cope best when they are well informed and are not faced with surprises. Open and honest communication with your child, preferably by both parents at once, if possible, insures that everyone knows what has been said and can respond appropriately to future questions or concerns. The information that children and siblings receive from you needs to be consistent over time.

Explanations should be in simple terms – at your child’s level of understanding without simplifying them. If you don’t know the answer to a question, be honest about it rather than supplying inaccurate information. There’s nothing wrong in telling your child that you don’t know but that you will find out.

To make sure your child understands what you have said, ask to have your communication repeated back to you in his/her own words; do the same with all children in the family.

Encourage expression of feelings

The most effective way to get your child to talk about his/her feelings is for you to express yours. Talk about your fears, show sadness, cry, allow anger to show. Communicate information *as well as* feelings. Your child can misinterpret your lack of emotion to mean that what they are facing *isn't* of serious concern to you or isn't serious at all.

Children cope bit by bit

Children deal with serious information at their own pace and in bits and pieces so that they are not overwhelmed. Being in the world of play and activities helps your child to regroup, feel secure and act like nothing is wrong – even though they are aware of upcoming hospitalization and/or surgery or procedure. Therefore, prior to hospitalization, your child’s normal routine and play should be encouraged as much as possible. When your child is ready, he/she will absorb more of what you are saying and slowly begin to let themselves have feelings about it. Help your son or daughter to name their feelings and be open to talk to them about what kinds of feelings they may experience.

Children have many different moods and their feelings come and go, mixed in with normal, everyday life experiences. A child’s roller coaster of feelings is perfectly normal.

It is important to respect a child’s coping mechanism. Do not pressure your child to react in a certain way. Avoid scolding if your child reacts with anger – be patient and once the anger has

quieted encourage your son or daughter to talk about their feelings. Affirm that it is okay to feel anger but it needs to be shown in an appropriate way without physically harming anyone else or hurting someone else's feelings.

Your child may feel less afraid if he or she is aware of other children with the same condition facing the same surgeries and worrying about the same kinds of things. Forward Face can help put you in touch with these families.

Don't make promises you can't keep!

It is important never to make promises to your child that you cannot keep in an effort to protect or comfort them (and yourself). If you can, allow your child to make legitimate choices (i.e. which toys to take along, which pajamas). In circumstances in which they have no choice (being examined, going to the hospital) do not pretend that they do.

If your child exhibits one or a combination of these behaviors, it may be time to seek professional help:

- Changes in school performance, deteriorating grades
- Changes in friendships, isolating behaviors
- Increased withdrawal from family and others
- Changes in sleep and eating patterns
- Development of physical complaints, headaches, tummy aches
- Increased fear reactions
- Avoidance of enjoyable activities
- Excessive worry