

# For Parents: How to Talk to Siblings About Cancer

Siblings benefit greatly from honest, age-appropriate information when a brother or sister is diagnosed with cancer. Open and thoughtful conversations help them feel included, reduce feelings of confusion or worry, and create a sense of security. By sharing what's happening in a way they can understand, you not only ease their stress and anxiety but also strengthen trust and help them feel more connected and supported during this time.



*Brooks, JMML warrior,  
and his sister, Rowan*

## THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Be sure to emphasize to the sibling that **NOTHING** they *said, thought, or did* caused their sibling to be diagnosed with cancer.
- Encourage questions and open conversation about their siblings' diagnosis. It is equally important to listen as it is to engage in conversation.
- Stick to routines as much as possible. The structure helps children to feel safe.
- Try to incorporate one-on-one time with their sibling.

## TIPS BY AGE

### 2-5 years old:

- Keep explanations short and simple. Emphasize that they cannot catch cancer and that they did not cause it.
- Use FaceTime or Skype to connect visually and audibly.
- Talk about your own feelings in an honest but brief way. *"I am crying because I am sad."*
- Prepare them for physical changes their sibling might experience, such as hair loss, weight gain or loss, bruising, etc.
- Use creative tools to communicate, such as books, drawings, dolls, or medical play kits. These can help children express their emotions or understand the situation.

### 6-12 years old:

- Use clear and honest language to explain the type of cancer and that doctors have a plan to treat it.
- Acknowledge mixed emotions by letting them know it's okay to feel scared, jealous, or sad.
- Involve them in small ways. Encourage them to draw pictures, make cards, or help pack the hospital bag. This will help them feel included and give them a sense of control.

### 13-18 years old:

- Begin with basic information and elaborate as needed based on their questions. This will gauge how much their sibling does or doesn't want to know.
- Encourage their sibling to ask questions of the medical team.
- Take the time to understand how their sibling is feeling and what support would be most helpful to them. Ask questions like: "How are you doing with everything? Is there anything you need from us to feel more supported or included?"
- Respect their independence. Let them choose how involved they want to be.
- Create space for feelings and check in regularly. Let them know it's okay for them to be vulnerable.

*Reach out to the hospitals' pediatric oncology social worker, child life specialist, nurse, or psychologist should you need help with further suggestions or resources in having these conversations.*