

# Talking to Children and Young People When Someone is Seriously Ill

We know that in these unsettled times children and young people may need additional support, information and reassurances. We know too that parents and carers may also need extra support and guidance. CHUMS will do everything in our power to help families through these challenging times.

We hope the following information about supporting these children will be helpful.

## Telling a Child Someone is Seriously Ill

We know that breaking the news to a child or young person that someone in their lives is seriously ill can be a difficult conversation for parents and carers to face. Parents often feel they can protect children by not telling them, however our experience in supporting families has shown that it can be more helpful to talk to their children about the illness, whilst remembering the following:

- **Be age appropriate**
- **Be sensitive**
- **Be truthful**



## Tell Children At Your Own Pace

Adults may need time to experience and understand some of their own feelings and to have their own questions answered before they feel ready to talk to their children.

We recognise that this can be a very difficult time for families; however, it is important that children feel included.



# How To Tell Children

How you explain the illness will depend on the child's age and level of understanding. For younger children they may not be able to absorb much information and you may need to add as time goes on, whereas you may be able to share more information with older children and young people.

- Choose a time and environment which is quiet and calm and use simple language. Do not overwhelm very young children with too much information all at once. Be ready to answer their questions honestly over the next days, weeks or months. Remember fears and fantasy can be worse than the reality.
- It may be helpful to rehearse beforehand what you want to say as it can be hard to find the right words.
- Perhaps start by asking the child or young person what they think is happening, this help you to know where to start.
- Tell them that you are very concerned about the person because they are so ill.
- Explain what the illness is and give it a name.
- Talk about the treatment and then a little about how the illness may progress.
- Let them know that the doctors and nurses are doing everything they can to help their loved one. And we are all hoping he/she will be well again soon (If that is the case).
- Say so if you do not know. Children can cope with uncertainty better than with dishonest reassurance.
- Explain that worries about the person who is ill can make people at home behave differently. Adults and children may feel upset or grumpy at times. Remember to be kind to each other.

## Children's Reactions

- Children may become upset or angry or they may not seem to react at all. It may take a while for children to understand what they have been told, to express their emotions or ask questions.
- Children may feel confused and unsettled.
- Children often express difficult emotions through a change in their normal behaviour: i.e. being withdrawn, tearful, sleep / eating changes, clingy, angry, anxious, headaches / tummy aches etc.



# What Can Help?

- Children may copy the behaviours and coping skills from the adults they live with.
- Accept and acknowledge children's fears. Help them to talk about any worries.
- Share your feelings together.
- Children are more likely to express themselves in art, play or actions. They may also ask the same questions frequently – be patient and answer in simple language.
- Drawing, painting, puppets, play people, books, poems, playdough, outside play - all these can help children to express their emotions, talk about their anxieties and release pent up energy. Be with them, play too.
- Ask the children what they need to feel safe and try to provide it. If you cannot, explain why.
- Ensure familiar and comforting things such as blankets, special toys etc. as these provide security and comfort.
- Try to maintain their established routines and allow them to continue previously enjoyed activities or interests should they want to.
- Help children to keep in touch with family and friends - this may be through WhatsApp or Facetime. Recognise that children may need increased support from their wider network.
- If they are unable to visit the person who is seriously ill, perhaps see if it would be possible to phone, send cards, drawings, record messages etc.
- Help children to feel useful and involved.
- Children need to know that they are loved and will always be taken care of. Regular one to one time with a parent or carer can give opportunities to have their questions answered, receive hugs, and do not forget their need for fun and laughter.
- Regularly update school. School can give a sense of stability. Teachers need to be kept informed as the more they know about what is happening at home the more they can help.



## As the Illness Progresses

- Continue talking with your child or young person.
- Children may be reluctant to ask questions in case they upset you so do not be afraid to take the initiative.
- If there is no chance of recovery, remember honest information will help them the most, however hard this is. If things are not explained they may feel confused, insecure, and alone with their fears.
- Make use of available books to explain about death and dying (please see booklist on **CHUMS** website). If it is possible, allow the child the choice and opportunity to visit the person who is dying. Prepare them beforehand for any changes in the person's appearance and any medical equipment present. At this time of Coronavirus (**Covid-19**) if this is not possible you could consider other ways such as phone, Facetime, recorded messages, video clips, cards, drawings, or letters etc. that may be shared by nursing staff.

## Looking After Yourself Too

- Remember you can only do your best.
- Be kind to yourself.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help.

## Support

**CHUMS** is still delivering all services, albeit we are now working remotely and conducting appointments, 1:1 sessions and groups virtually online or via telephone.

If you have any queries, please make contact via our usual email address: [info@chums.uk.com](mailto:info@chums.uk.com)  
Our admin team will get back to you in due course.

Please have a look on **CHUMS** website for suggestions for helpful books and our online referral form if additional support is required [www.chums.uk.com](http://www.chums.uk.com)

PLEASE NOTE: **CHUMS** is not an urgent response service, therefore, if you feel that a child or young person is at immediate risk to themselves or others, please contact your GP, A&E department or call **NHS 111**.



Telephone Number

**01525 863924**

For online referrals visit:

[www.chums.uk.com/refer](http://www.chums.uk.com/refer)