

Activities to Help Children Cope When a Family Member Has Cancer

Information for cancer patients and families

Read this resource to learn about fun activities to do with your children from all age groups.



Here is a list of activities to help your children cope when a family member has cancer. There are activities for children of all ages.

Playing with play dough (babies to 12 years old)

Playing with play dough is a simple and fun activity. Your children will focus on the play dough and tools. Play dough will distract your children from any tension or worry you are feeling.

Add scented herbs or oils to the play dough. This added smell makes the activity more fun and relaxing. Work on the play dough together with your hands.

You can also use tools like plastic knives, rolling pins, spoons, cookie cutters or trays. Let your children choose the scents and the tools.

As you play:

- make different shapes
- make different objects such as animals, people, faces
- talk about how the play dough feels and smells
- talk about how you feel while you play

Trade something personal or special (babies to 12 years old)

Trade something personal or special with your children when you are away or busy. Trade means you and your child give each other something special. Something personal can be a pillow, soft toy, favourite T-shirt, scarf or bracelet.

This trade helps children:

- feel like they are part of what's happening
- learn to share, arrange and respond
- understand that normal routines may change but you still love them
- feel like they are supported and accepted

Trading items can be very comforting for both of you. Trade items when you are not able to see or care for your children. Trade items before your hospital stay or while resting after chemotherapy. Your children can keep track of the days spent with their special item.

It is hard to know how babies will react to their mother being ill and in hospital. Give your baby a special item with your smell. Your smell helps them feel loved and secure. Give items such as a pillow, shirt or scarf.

Share messy moments (babies to 12 years old)

Children learn a lot through messy play. Messy play allows your young children to explore and have fun. Messy play could be painting, making a craft or other messy activities. Messy play also helps young children self-regulate. Self-regulate means learning how to deal with stress such as cancer. Messy activities are also good for babies. Your baby can explore by making little hand or foot prints.

Keep and date your children's messy work. Keeping your child's work shows you value their work. Keeping your child's work also shows your child their work is important to you too.

Messy play can help older children too. Older children get to be creative by having fun and using different tools. Older children can help younger siblings by leading activities and talking about their ideas. When siblings work together it helps build stronger sibling relationships.

There are many tools you and your children can use for messy play.

Tools such as:

- big construction paper
- cardboard box
- bubble wrap
- brushes
- feathers
- spray bottles
- hands or feet
- paints
- glitter
- food colouring
- tie die
- spray painting (all toxic free)

Flying feelings balloons (18 months to 6 years old)

Blow up balloons with your children. Use a marker to trace faces on each balloon. Choose different emotions such as sad, happy, curious, worried, proud, and surprised.

This activity helps children learn about different emotions. This activity also helps them understand that it is okay to have many different emotions. This activity can also help you find out what your child is feeling.

This balloon activity can be done inside or outside. When you are ready, tie the balloons in a bunch and let them fly up in the sky. You can also tie them to something in your backyard or on your balcony.

Read books (2 to 12 years old)

Read to your children. Reading is relaxing, rewarding and a great learning experience for your children. Some books can help your children understand your cancer. Other books may help your children better relate and understand illness and sickness.

Below is a list of good books to read to your children. All the books below relate to cancer, illness, hospital or treatments. The first 2 books on the list are good books for ages 2 to 6 years old. The rest of the books on the list are good for ages 6 to 12 years old.

Good books to read are:

- **Mom and the Polka Dot BooBoo** by Eileen Sutherland and Maggie Sutherland
- **Momma Grog Gets Sick** by Gretchen Huntley
- **A Friend in Hope** by Marissa Zammit
- **Angels and Monsters** by Lisa Murray
- **Once Upon a Hopeful Night** by Risa Sacks Yaffe
- **In Mommy's Garden** by Neyal Ammary-Risch
- **Good luck Mrs.K!** by Adam Gustavson
- **Sail On A book for life** by Susan Sternkopf and Glenn Halak
- **Kidscope Kemo Shark** by H. Elizabeth King
- **When Mommy Gets Sick** by Ferne Sherkin-Langer
- **The Paper Chain** by Claire Blake and Eliza Blanchard
- **Mr. C the Globetrotter** by Eva Grayzel

Popping cancer bubbles (3 to 12 years old)

Blow bubbles and pretend the bubbles are cancer cells. Let your children pretend to be a chemo shark or a radiation monster. Inspire your children to pop the bubbles to kill the cancer cells. This activity is fun, playful and helps lower your children's stress and worry.

Start the activity by blowing bubbles in the air. Your children can pop the bubbles by jumping, slapping, kicking or stomping them.

Explain to your children that your chemotherapy or radiation therapy pops your cancer cells just like they pop the bubbles. This activity helps your children understand chemotherapy or radiation therapy.

Drawing or painting (3 to 12 years old)

Drawing and painting is a good way for children to express themselves. Give your children their own sketch book or journal with pens, markers and crayons. Make some suggestions to get them started.

Tell your children:

- draw yourself
- draw your family
- draw things that you like
- draw different faces such as happy, sad, angry or curious
- draw a picture of yourself and what you would like to be when you grow up

Do not guess what your children's drawings are. Ask your children to tell you about their drawing. Write down your child's words next to their drawing. Use your child's exact words. Talking about their drawings can help your child express themselves in words. Support your child to draw often.

Sometimes your child's drawings will tell you how they feel. Drawing gives your child a way to express their fears, dreams and other feelings.

Hugging hands activity (6 years old and up)

Give your children a long piece of material and colorful markers. Get your children to trace a hand on each end of the material. Cut around the hands so you have a long material with hands on each end. Your children can wrap this craft around them as if it was hugging them.

The long hugging hands makes your children feel loved and cared for. You can extend this activity by reading a great book called: "The Hug Therapy Book" by Kathleen Keating.

All children need to be hugged. Your children need extra attention when a family member is sick. This activity gives your children the chance to get some extra attention. The hugging hands activity allows your children to feel safe and supported during tough times.

Plan a party (3 to 16 years old)

Everyone likes to have things to look forward to especially when life is hard. Think of a reason to have a party.

Some reasons to have a party include:

- a birthday in the family
- the first day of spring, summer, fall or winter
- a sleepover
- a pajama party
- a holiday celebration
- any other reason you can think of

Plan the party with your children. This party can include your family or friends. The important part of this activity is spending time with your children. Have your children help you send invitations, decorate, and plan the food and activities. Keep the party simple so no one gets too tired or excited.

Make henna designs (3 years old and up)

Henna is a dye that comes from a plant. Henna is used to make temporary (do not last) designs on hands or other body parts.

Getting henna designs is a good way to spend time together and connect with your children. Get a professional to do your henna or learn how to do henna yourself. There are many videos on the internet or on YouTube that can show you how to do henna designs.

You can also follow the instructions that come with your henna. Guide your child if this is your child's first time making henna. Let your child choose what to paint on your hand.

Make friendship bracelets (4 to 12 years old)

Children often feel they are somehow different from their friends when a family member is ill. Have your children invite friends over to make friendship bracelets. Have thread and different beads ready to assemble according to your child's age. Use larger beads for younger children because they are safer.

Get your children and friends to trade their bracelets after they are done. Doing activities with their friends helps them feel open and normal about their life. This activity also helps your child feel more relaxed and comfortable with their friends.

Make colorful paper rings or chains (5 to 12 years old)

Have your children write feeling words on strips of coloured paper. Some examples of feeling words are love, life, hope, together, courage, and fight. You can add words that express how you are feeling as well.

Use the strips of paper to create rings linked together with glue or a staple. Have the children decide what order to connect the rings. For example, your children may want to connect the rings by colour or by words. Decide together where you want to hang the chain.

This activity allows you to talk about your feelings with your children. This activity will help your children understand what you are feeling. Younger children may learn new words to help them express themselves. Older children may understand more of what you are feeling.

Play doctor (6 to 12 years old)

Children use play to cope with fear and understand new settings. Your children can learn about the tools, people and hospital setting through play. Give your children doctor toys.

Doctor toys can include:

- a doctor's kit
- dolls dressed like doctors
- stuffed animals dressed like doctors
- doctor's office tools such as stethoscopes, bandages, facemasks and plastic syringes
- blankets
- hospital looking beds

If you have an intravenous line (IV), a catheter or an oxygen mask, ask your nurses for some plastic tubing or a plastic face mask. Allow your child to play with this tubing and mask.

Do not force this kind of play. If your child wants you to play too, let them lead the play. This kind of play allows your children to learn about your doctor and hospital visits.

Create a scrap book (6 to 12 years old)

Create a scrap book to bring together great memories and fun times. In your scrap book you can include pictures of trips, camping, nature walks, your favourite movies or stories. Scrap books are an amazing way to put all your pictures and memories together.

Inspire your children to find the materials needed for their scrap book around the house. Get your children to start a collection of things they want in their scrap book. Such things include pictures, seashells, rocks, favorite sayings or quotes from stories or movies. Creating this scrap book will be an unforgettable experience they will treasure.

Write thank you cards (4 to 12 years old)

Help your children make a list of people who have done nice things for them. Make a point of focusing on the people who have done nice things during your cancer journey. Make thank you cards together. Allow your children to write down how they feel on the cards.

Younger children can express their feelings by drawing, tracing or making a hand print. This gives children a chance to thank other people's efforts and support. This activity helps children express their feelings, feel included and feel valued by their family.

Spend special time together (all ages)

Create special times with your children during your cancer experience.

Spend quality time doing things like:

- watching a movie and talking about it after
- baking or cooking your favourite things
- shopping
- writing or drawing
- playing games such as board games, flying kites, playing frisbee
- taking long walks or other outdoor activities

Spending time together gives you a chance to talk, have fun and create happy memories.

Take pictures and video recordings (all ages)

Take pictures and video recordings of yourself throughout your cancer journey. Share these pictures and videos with your children. This will let your children learn about your cancer journey. Your children will learn about your physical changes, emotional changes and the different places you go during treatment.

Pictures and video recordings are helpful for children of all ages. Your younger children will be able to see you and hear your voice. Pictures and videos can help you talk about daily events or changes.

With your older children, you can create a blog or set up a social network account. Use social media to share events or changes during your treatment. Your older children will want to know more information about your prognosis (how serious your cancer is and your chance of getting better) and your treatments. This process makes them feel included in your experience.

The development of patient education resources is supported by the Princess Margaret Cancer Foundation.

Visit www.uhnpatienteducation.ca for more health information.

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Form: D-5074 | Author: Alketa Kumbaro | Reviewed: 2019