



The siblings of the child with cancer may feel neglected or isolated by the many competing concerns facing their parents.

Helping the siblings of a child with cancer

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When cancer is diagnosed in a child, parents face a frightening and uncertain world. They must make crucial medical decisions, cope with difficult emotions, pay mounting bills, and sort through important paperwork. The siblings of the child with cancer may feel neglected or isolated by the many competing concerns facing their parents.

After learning of a brother or sister's cancer diagnosis, siblings may experience a wide range of emotions including anger, confusion, fear, guilt, or even jealousy. Children who are unable or unwilling to talk about their feelings may resort to displaying challenging behavior.

If the sibling of a child with cancer experiences sleeping problems, increased separation anxiety, regression (acting younger than they are), and physical symptoms such as bedwetting or aches and pains, parents should speak to a health care professional. The landmark Institute of Medicine (IOM) report *Cancer Care for the Whole Patient: Meeting Psychosocial Health Needs* recommends that all family members, including siblings, of a child with cancer should "expect and receive cancer care that ensures the provision of appropriate psychosocial health services."¹

Open communication about the cancer and its treatment can help siblings of a child with cancer cope better, feel less isolated, and experience fewer behavioral problems. Parents should discuss in advance any changes that the child with cancer may experience (such as loss of hair) as well as their emotional

state. For example, they might say, "Your brother is going to be very sleepy" or "Your sister may seem cranky, but it's just because she doesn't feel well."

Children feel reassured and more secure when a consistent schedule is maintained. When the siblings of a child with cancer cannot visit the hospital, phone calls should be scheduled to help them feel included and keep them informed.

The nonprofit organization *Supersibs!* offers educational materials for siblings of all ages on its Web site (www.supersibs.org). The site also includes a SibCamp Connect Web page, which lists camps where siblings can connect with each other. The Sibling Support Project (www.siblingsupport.org) is also a resource dedicated to helping siblings cope when a brother or sister has a special health concern. In addition, the National Cancer Institute, the American Cancer Society, and Cancer.net all provide helpful information.

Professional oncology social workers at CancerCare (800-813-HOPE [4673]) can provide counseling and referrals. Visit www.cancer.org/tagged/siblings to view CancerCare's resources for siblings. ■

Helen Miller is CEO of CancerCare.

REFERENCE

1. Adler NE, Page AE, eds. *Cancer Care for the Whole Patient: Meeting Psychosocial Health Needs*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2008.