



# Explaining Terminal Illness and Death

## Communicate with your child

- ♥ Talk to your child as soon as possible about a terminal illness and anticipated death. A delay in discussing facts may add difficulties to the child's grief process. Provide simple, concrete, developmentally appropriate facts.
  - Be open about your feelings, while reassuring your child you are coping with the loss. Open, honest communication allows your child to ask more questions and express their feelings.
- ♥ Offer reassurance which may include hugs, words of encouragement, or gentle touch if the child is receptive to this type of physical support.
  - With younger children, do not over explain. Allow their questions to be your guide.
  - With teenagers, give them space but let them know that you are available when they want to talk or ask questions.

## Use correct medical terms

- ♥ Use terms that represent their loved ones correct diagnosis (cancer, heart disease). Refrain from using the word "sick" as everyone gets sick at times and it does not mean they are terminally ill.
- ♥ A child may experience increased fears by lack of information. It is better if children are made aware of the difference between everyday illnesses and diseases that may result in death.

## Offer choices for visiting/caring for the patient

- ♥ It is important to offer a child the opportunity to visit and/or assist in caretaking responsibilities.
  - Visiting: Describe ahead of time what your child will see and then offer a choice about visiting. Respect their decision. If they choose not to visit, offer them the opportunity to send a card, draw a picture, or talk to the patient over the phone.
  - Caretaking: Offer a child the opportunity to help with simple caretaking responsibilities such as getting a glass of water. However, respect their decision if they decline.



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