



# TIPS FOR PARENTS

## Talking with Young Children about Illness

As parents and caregivers, we have an important role in helping young children (ages 2 to 6) understand how illness may impact our family or friends. Young children may not understand why someone is ill or how they became that way. For example, a young child may think that they made their grandfather sick because they did not mind their mother. For this reason, it is important for adults to have these hard talks to clear up any misunderstandings.

You can help young children process the changes caused by the illness by answering their questions on a level that they can easily understand. It is also important to let them know it is okay to be scared, and remind them that you are here for them. Also

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be aware of how you react and behave because children take cues from you to know what to do.

Young children may not always understand what

is happening to a loved one or friend who is ill, but they do realize that something is different. There may be changes in daily routines, fewer visits from a loved one, or changes in how or if the child can interact with the person who is sick. These changes may create stress for children. By giving simple answers, chances to play, and choices, when appropriate, you can lessen the stress and help children work through these feelings and find comfort.

Each child is different, and some may need a little extra help with their uneasiness with the sickness. Here are some ways that might help to calm young children's stress during these times.



### Daily Routines

A daily routine will help most young children to feel safe. When possible, help young children keep their normal daily routine. If routines must change because of the illness, tell the child what will change, who may be caring for them, and what they will be able to do during their day.



### Play

Play is more than just fun for young children. Play provides them with chances to express and work through their emotions. Parents and caregivers can watch and listen while the child is playing with toys or friends, and they may find out that the child is having a hard time with what is happening with their loved one. For example, a child may use their dolls to act out what is on their mind. You can use this as a chance to talk about what the child is showing in their play. You could ask the child questions such as “How do you think the doll feels?” or “What do you think the doll is worried about?”



## Read Books about Illness

Storybooks can help young children understand an illness in a non-threatening way. Young children may have the same questions as the character in the book but may not feel comfortable asking or know how to ask about the illness. When the character in the book asks the questions, young children get their questions answered. This can address their uncertainty and lower stress.

Here are some suggested books for young children:

**Let My Colors Out** by Courtney Filigenzi

*This book helps young children understand a range of emotions they may experience when their parent has cancer.*

**Big Tree Is Sick** by Nathalie Slosse

*This book helps young children cope with the serious illness of a loved one.*

**Daddy's Old Robe** by Shawn Stranigan

*This is a story about a parent's illness.*

**How Do You Care for a Very Sick Bear?**

by Vanessa Bayer

*As a child who experienced leukemia, author Vanessa Bayer knows first-hand how to deal with a difficult illness. She offers gentle, reassuring advice for all ages.*

### References

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## Be Truthful

Being truthful does not mean you have to tell all the details to young children. In fact, some details about sickness are not helpful to them. It is important to keep the talk open and provide honest information that they can understand. An example may be, "Mom is sick. She will stay at the hospital so the doctors can help take care of her." Simple terms and sentences during these talks are best for young children.

Young children learn differently than older children and adults, and they often ask the same questions over and over. Be patient and answer their questions as many times as needed. Also reassure children that nothing they did or said caused their loved one to become sick.

For more information about this and other relevant parenting topics, go to [tips.extension.msstate.edu](https://tips.extension.msstate.edu).

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