How do I speak with my child about my cancer diagnosis?

The Parenting At a Challenging Time (PACT) program at Smilow Cancer Hospital at Yale New Haven offers free guidance and support to parents with cancer who are concerned about the impact of their illness on their children. PACT clinicians understand that parents know their children best. We will work with you to develop the best ways to support your child as he or she comes to better understand your illness and treatment.

We provide individual consultations with you, your spouse/partner, and/or other caregivers. We can explain what you might expect from your children and how to talk with children of different ages about cancer and cancer treatment. We can help clarify how well your child is coping with your diagnosis and, if further support is necessary, we may guide you on how to provide or seek additional support.

Consultations can be scheduled Monday through Friday at Smilow Cancer Hospital. We are available at any point during your diagnosis or treatment.

Please call the department of social work at (203) 688-2195 to schedule a PACT appointment at a convenient time and location.
Should we tell our child that I have cancer?
Words like “lump” or “boo-boo” can be confusing for children. Being open about your illness tells your child that you trust him/her with honest and open communication. The worst way for a child to learn troubling news is to overhear it or for your child to fear something is happening but not know what it is.

Welcome questions from your child realizing that sometimes you may need to tease out the “real” question.
Encourage your child to share their thoughts, feelings, and concerns with you. Be mindful of when your child is most likely to talk with you and realize that not all questions need immediate answers. If need be, you can respond, “that is a good question - let me speak with my [doctor, nurse, your dad/mom] and get back to you, then we can talk some more.”

Try to keep your child’s daily routine in place.
Ask others to help keep the routine as normal as possible; children find comfort in set routines. Keep the lines of communication open with all your child’s caregivers: teachers, family, coaches, babysitters, and parents of their close friends.

Carve out protected family time.
Turn off the telephone and ask your friends and extended family not to visit at these times. Consider designating someone to be in charge of fielding phone calls and offers of help and channeling them to what is most needed at the time.

Hospital visits often help children feel less worried.
Talk with your medical team about good times for a family visit. Adjust the length of the visit to what your child can comfortably manage. Be sure to have an adult check in with your child after the visit to address any confusion or worries.

Take care of yourself.
Parents with cancer and their spouses or co-parents need to be mindful of their own well-being and its impact on their children. Children can feel secure and hopeful when they know their parent is receiving excellent care, is able to appreciate today, and has hopes for the future.