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What to Say if Your Child Asks About Dying

When you talk with children and teens about their cancer diagnosis, they may ask if they are going to die. Not all children will ask directly. They may be worried about dying but not comfortable asking about it. It can be easy to quickly reply to try to comfort them and say things like, "Of course not." As hard as it is to be asked this question, it is an important question to answer. Older children and teens, and sometimes younger school age children, often have some experience with cancer. Even if they do not know anyone with cancer, they may have seen news stories or movies and TV programs that talk about people with cancer. They may have the sense that it is a life-threatening illness. Whatever your child's experience has been with cancer before their own diagnosis, it is important to be honest and hopeful. If your child or teen is not getting better with treatment or cancer has returned and they asks if they are going to die, you may want to talk with your care team about ways to handle it. Here are some examples of things you can say:

Most children with cancer do very well because a lot of people worked hard to find the best ways to help cure cancer.

Sometimes children do die from cancer. We are not expecting that to happen to you because the doctors have said they have good treatments for the kind of cancer you have. If for any reason that changes, I promise to be honest about what is happening.

Your cancer is a hard one to treat, but there are lots of things we can do to help you get better. We aren't always going to know what could happen in the future, but we do have lots of things we can do today to help you get better and to try and make sure we still make time for other things you like to do. I'll tell you if I find out anything new or different.

If you find you worry a lot about what's going on, please tell me so we can work on that

together. I know we are both going to worry about things, but I think it will help if we talk about it.

Your cancer care team can help you talk with your child if they are worried about dying.

References

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