



Addressing Cancer in the Classroom

As a teacher it can sometimes be difficult and frightening to address the topic of a student having cancer in the classroom. However, if it is not acknowledged students may learn about it through rumours in the school yard or through hushed conversation between adults. As well, when a student's illness is not addressed it sends the message that the student's cancer is too terrible to mention. Therefore, a clear, consistent and age appropriate message about the classmate's cancer is the appropriate method to address the situation. This also allows to begin a discussion with the goal of fostering understanding and acceptance of the student with cancer.

When preparing a classroom discussion, it is important to obtain the family's permission to disclose the information. It is also important to discuss with the student who has cancer to determine if he would like to be present during these discussions. As well, teachers must determine whether it should only be classmates or all the students in the child's grade who attend this discussion.

Script for the discussion with young children

Our friend _____ will not be in school for a few weeks because he has cancer. He has a type of cancer called Leukemia which means his blood has bad cells/He has a tumour, a tumour is a lump that grows where it shouldn't (Use a simple explanation, avoid saying he is sick). You cannot catch cancer and no one made it happen. It doesn't happen to children very often.

If the students ask about death: I don't know what will happen, but the doctors are working hard to make ____ well. _____ is trying get better and he needs everyone to hope he will get better too.

To aide other children's understanding if the student with cancer is coming to back to school: Cancer medicine is very strong and sometimes it does extra things: sometimes it will make you lose your hair, have a round face or make you very tired. Because of this _____ might look a little different but he/she is still the same person and he/she wants to be treated the same.

Question to ask to the class: What are some ways that we can help ____ while he/she is at the hospital or when he/she returns to class? Options include: writing a card or regular letters, group art projects, or everyone wearing a hat to class if the child wears a hat due to hair loss.

To help students deal with sadness: It is normal to feel sad or scared when a friend is very ill. What are some things that you do when you feel sad to make yourself feel better? Ideas include: making a card for their friend, ask for a hug from someone, talk to a parent, or do a fun activity.

For more information please contact the West Island Cancer Wellness Center (514) 695-9355.





Discussing Cancer with Older Children and Teenagers

Important information to consider before discussion with teenagers:

- Teenagers may be reluctant to share with their classmates the details of their diagnosis as children get older, their classrooms get bigger and they do not always know all their classmates very well. Therefore, before beginning a discussion about their cancer it is important to ask the student's permission.
- Teenagers should also be given more control over the discussions including who is present, who will lead the discussion, and what information is shared.
- If teenagers decide to not have a discussion it is important to let them know that they can change their mind whenever they wish. If rumors begin to spread around school, they may wish to clarify them later.

Script for the discussion with older children/teenagers

Your classmate _____ will not be in school for a few weeks because he/she has cancer. Cancer is not transmittable and is rare in children and teenagers.

If the students, ask about death: Childhood cancer is treatable and most children get better. (If there is any information about their treatment progressing well, it is encouraged to share this information) We cannot be sure of the outcome but keeping a positive attitude will help _____ and everyone in the classroom too.

Cancer treatments include chemotherapy and radiation. These treatments have side effects because the treatment kills all the different types of cells and not only cancer cells. Some of the side effects can be hair loss, fatigue and a round face (from steroids).

Questions to ask to the class: How do you think you would like to be treated after a cancer diagnosis? What would you be worried about? How would you want your friends to react? Answers: There is no right answer. It is important to address the fact that students should not stare, and that asking questions on their wellbeing can be helpful, but that being over attentive may not be.

What are some ways that we can help _____ while he/she is at the hospital or when he/she returns to class? Writing a card or regular letters, phone calls, emails, texts, social media and visits if possible. Teenagers may want to raise money for a charity or the family.

To help students deal with sadness: It is normal to feel sad, scared, and angry as this is a very serious situation. What are some ways that you can cope with these feelings? Suggestion: talk to a friend, school counselor, or parent. Take this opportunity to tell the students how they can receive counseling services at school.

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