**How to tell children that someone is seriously ill – COVID-19**

Whether someone in your family has cancer, heart disease or [coronavirus (COVID-19)](https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus/), telling a child or young person that someone they love is seriously ill is one of the most difficult conversations you will face.

You may feel that you are protecting them by not telling them but, based on our experience of supporting families both before and after the death of someone important, it is better to talk to children and young people about the illness.

**Should I tell my child that a family member is seriously ill?**

It is a natural instinct to want to protect children from things that will hurt them and to shield them from news that will distress them. However, children of all ages often know more about what is happening than adults realise. They might overhear conversations or phone calls; they can be given information – not always accurate – by others; and very often they intuitively pick up on changes in their family’s mood and emotions.

This is especially true for [coronavirus (COVID-19)](https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus/) as it is being extensively discussed in the media, online, on social media and by friends and families. We know that for the majority of people, coronavirus can be a mild-to-moderately-severe illness but for others it can be much more serious, and in some cases lead to the death of the person. If a member of your family, or someone important to your child, has become unwell with the virus, this poses further questions and dilemmas about how you as parents and carers can support them at what may well be a difficult time for you all.

Children and young people have an ability to deal with the truth that adults often underestimate. Being aware that something serious is going on but not having any clear information can be a frightening and confusing experience for them. Partial or inaccurate information can be more worrying than the truth.

It is also important for your child to know that they can trust you to be open and honest with them, even about serious matters.

For these reasons, we advise that you do talk with your child about their loved one’s illness. Try to balance the news with your hope that the person will recover, and with assurance that everything is being done to help their loved one get better.

**What should I say?**

What, when and how to have a conversation with children will depend on many things, including:

* The age and level of understanding of the children and young people
* The severity of the person’s condition
* The children’s previous experience of illness and loss

*There are three key things to tell children:*

* That someone close to them is ill
* The name of the illness
* The nature of the illness and how it may progress

You could begin by asking them what they already think is happening – this will help you correct any misunderstandings.

Think of your first conversation about the illness as being the first piece in a jigsaw; in further conversations you can add more pieces of information, and more explanations. Depending on the age and level of understanding of your child, these pieces may be added over minutes, days, weeks or months. For younger children, hearing that their loved one is ill may be all they can absorb at first, whereas you may be able to tell older children everything you know immediately.

**Choosing the right words**

How you explain the illness will, of course, depend on the child’s age and level of understanding.

Choose a quiet time and place and use simple, honest words. Be prepared to go over the information many times while children gradually take it in and ask them questions to make sure that they have understood.

It is hard to find the right words on the spot, so you might want to rehearse what you want to say and prepare to answer the questions your child might ask. Try to familiarise yourself with the facts about coronavirus (or other illnesses) using reliable sources such as the [NHS](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/) and [government](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public) websites. Then you can give accurate answers to your child’s questions.

You may not know all the answers to their questions and that’s ok. Tell them that you don’t know but you will let them know when you do. Make sure you go back to them when you are able to answer.

For example, you could say:

*“I have something important to tell you. [Name] has become ill and s/he has the illness called coronavirus. S/he is feeling poorly and he has a bad cough and feels hot.”*

*“The illness means that s/he needs to stay in one room/in hospital. We won’t be able to visit them for about a week. Perhaps you’d like to draw them a picture/make a card/send a message to let them know you’re thinking about them.”*

*“[Name], and the doctors and nurses are all working really hard to get her/him better and we’re all hoping that s/he’ll be well again soon.”*

**How might my child react to being told their loved one is seriously ill?**

Children can respond very differently to the news that someone is ill. They may be very distressed or angry. Or they may not seem to react at all and ask ‘what’s for tea’ or ‘can I go and play’. Try not to worry about their immediate response, this doesn’t mean that they don’t care. It can be hard for children to take in what is being said straight away and they may need time to understand and express their emotions.

It’s a good idea to mention the illness from time to time, as children sometimes don’t want to or don’t feel able to ask questions.

*“You know I told that [name] is ill? Well I’d like to talk about it with you a bit more.”*

*“I wondered if you had some questions that I can try to answer for you?”*

**Remember to look after yourself**

Try to remember that ‘super parents/carers’ don’t exist and that you are doing the very best you can in exceptionally challenging circumstances. You can’t support others if you are overwhelmed yourself. Make sure to call on any help available from friends or family to support you during this time. That way, you’ll be better able to support your children.