



Lennox
Children's
Cancer Fund

Supporting Brothers & Sisters **CANCER**

**Supporting the siblings of a child
with cancer**



Visit our website

www.lennoxccf.org.uk

Charity Registration Number: 1011325.

Contents

- 1 Jealousy
- 2 Anger
- 3 Fear
- 4 Guilt
- 5 Complaining about being sick
- 6 School-related issues
- 7 Missing their parents
- 8 Adapting to change
- 9 Fears of what might happen in the future

When a child is diagnosed with cancer, it affects the entire family. The child with cancer is not the only one who is impacted. Siblings go through their own emotional and traumatic upheaval. Its effect on siblings and their daily lives can cause anxiety and turmoil, resulting in changes in their actions and behaviour. If adults who care for siblings, whilst their parents are away, can understand and recognise these patterns, they may be able to help them in understanding and dealing with any feelings or concerns they may have. There is no way to predict how each sibling will react to the diagnosis or its implications; however, the following are some potential issues that may arise. This guide has been put together to help you in supporting siblings during this difficult time.

Jealousy

Siblings may feel resentful if their brother or sister who has cancer, receives more attention or treats than they do, or if their parents are more lenient with the child with cancer than with the rest of the children.

Although it may be challenging to maintain discipline on a sick child, doing so will help to reassure both the sick child and their siblings that family life will continue as normal as possible.

When disciplining a child under unusual circumstances, such as when they are on steroids, it can be helpful to explain to their siblings why the normal rules of discipline will not apply.

Encourage any visitors to pay as much attention to the other children as they do to the child with cancer. If they bring a small gift, encourage them to do the same for any brothers or sisters.



Anger



Siblings can get upset if they don't get the same amount of time and attention. This can make them act differently or even pull away emotionally. They might also be angry because their sibling is sick.

So many other feelings can be hidden under the surface of anger and frustration. It is very important for siblings to know that negative feelings like anger are normal. They may need to be able to talk to someone about difficult thoughts and feelings. Tell them that chatting to other people about their worries or fears will make it easier for them to deal with the situation. If you give the siblings time and ask them questions, they will be able to talk about how they feel and the problems they are having. Some young people may not know how to say how they feel, and acting angry may be the only way they know how to get those feelings out in the open and say what they are. You might find it helpful to have them draw or write about how they're feeling. This could help you and them understand how they're feeling.

Fear

Siblings of a child with cancer may be terrified of what will happen to their sibling, especially if they are in hospital for an extended period of time.

In their minds, worries and fears are frequently amplified and heightened. Paying a visit to their hospitalised sibling to see how they are and what is going on can often reassure siblings. Some may even value the opportunity to participate in their sibling's care and wish to regularly attend appointments or visit their brother or sister in hospital. Some children, however, may prefer not to visit and should not be pressured to do so because it may frighten them even more. If this is the case, make an effort to schedule phone or video calls with their sibling.





Guilt

Children may hold themselves responsible for the illness of their siblings. They might blame themselves because they wanted something horrible to happen to their brother or sister, or perhaps they fought and argued with their sibling a lot, thus thinking this was the reason of their cancer. Alternatively, they could experience feelings of guilt due to the fact that they are healthy while their sibling is sick.

It is imperative that siblings realise and be comforted that neither they nor anybody else's actions or words contributed to the development of cancer, particularly any of their family members.

Complaining about being sick

It is possible that siblings will express concerns about their health and complain about feeling ill. They may become anxious or concerned about their own health if they have a cold, a headache, or stomach pains. On the other hand, some siblings may refuse to admit they are ill because they do not want to worry their parents further.

Reassure siblings that cancer is extremely rare and will not affect them. Assure them that cancer does not run in families and that just because one of their siblings has cancer does not mean they will.

It is critical to pay attention to any health complaints they may have, in order to reassure them that they are receiving the same level of care as their sibling. If they are preoccupied with their health, they should seek professional help or counselling.



School-related issues



Concentration at school may be difficult due to disruptions in normal routine, along with worries and feelings they are experiencing.

Feelings of being overwhelmed, angry, and jealous can cause problems, so siblings may vent these feelings at school because they feel they can't at home.

Other children teasing or bullying them at school or leaving them out, because they believe they will catch cancer from them, can also cause problems.

Staff at school must be aware of what is going on at home to provide appropriate support at school. Our School Co-ordinator or nurses can speak with the school team and students to help them understand cancer, treatment, and the effects it has on the child and their family. This will help the children's classmates understand what is going on and how they can support their school friend.

Download our school resource pack, which contains a wealth of information for teachers and students.

Missing their parents

Brothers and sisters may miss one or both of their parents.

Those who are too young to communicate or comprehend what is going on, will value extra attention, play, and cuddles from trusted adults. This will help to compensate for the loss of contact with their parents, who may need to spend time away at hospital with the sick child.

Arrange for siblings to visit their parents in the hospital or for someone else to spend time with the sick child, if possible, so siblings can spend some special time with their parents; even if only for a short time. It will reassure them and make them feel as special and important as they are.

Schedule phone or video calls every day if possible. Telling them that their parents miss and love them equally will provide the necessary reassurance.





Adapting to Change

Siblings may become anxious and concerned about their brother or sister's physical changes. It can be frightening for them to see that they have lost their hair, their body shape has changed, how they have tubes attached to their bodies, or that they do not have the energy to play games.

Try to warn them about the changes ahead of time, assuring them that the tubes aren't painful and are there to help their sibling. Help them understand that their sibling will have good days and bad days, how they may not feel well enough to participate in an activity one day but may a few days later. Explain that all these changes are part of the treatment necessary to help their sibling recover. It might make them feel worse at first, but once the treatment is over, they'll start to look and feel like they did before they got sick.

Fears of what might happen in the future

Sometimes brothers and sisters are concerned that their sibling will die. Depending on their age, they have most likely heard of cancer and are aware that people can die from it. They may be afraid to admit it or concerned about upsetting others, so they choose not to speak up and keep their fears to themselves.

Siblings might ask difficult questions about what will happen in the future. This could appear to suggest that they are extremely worried about the recovery or death of their brother or sister. Explain that no one knows what will happen with cancer but assure them that their sibling is receiving the best possible treatment and that many children recover.

If you are unable to answer some of the questions, tell the child that you will get someone to talk with them and notify a parent or member of staff so that the child's concerns can be addressed as soon as possible.



Need assistance?

We understand how difficult it is for everyone in the family, particularly the adults who assist the child's parents and care for any siblings whilst the child is in hospital. Please let us know if you require additional assistance in supporting siblings so we can connect you with the appropriate support groups.

Scan QR code



**To get in touch
via our website**



Lennox
Children's
Cancer Fund

Help us by donating



Registered with
**FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR**

www.lennoxccf.org.uk

Charity Registration Number: 1011325