Printed May 21, 2013 from http://www.cancer.net/all-about-cancer/cancernet-feature-articles/family-friends-and-caregivers/parenting-while-living-cancer

Parenting While Living With Cancer

While immensely rewarding, parenting can also be physically and emotionally exhausting. And the challenges associated with cancer and cancer treatment may make you wonder how you can continue to care for your family. This is the time to accept help from others, take advantage of available conveniences, and reevaluate your priorities. It is also important to take care of yourself.

Getting help from family and friends

If you have a caregiving spouse or partner, talk about how parenting responsibilities may need to shift during this time and express your appreciation for his or her support. Recognize that these added responsibilities can become overwhelming and may lead to feelings of frustration. It helps to talk openly about each other's limitations and brainstorm possible solutions. Learn more about nurturing your relationship with your spouse while living with cancer [1].

Meanwhile, other family members, friends, and neighbors will want to support you but may not know how. Make a list of specific tasks with which you need help. Tasks may include picking up your children from activities, arranging play dates for your children, walking the dog, grocery shopping, or making meals. When someone offers to help, choose a task from your list that suits the person. For example, ask a classmate's mother to drive your child to school each day.

It can help to designate a friend or family member as the point person whom people can contact if they would like to help. This person can organize volunteer activities, saving you time and energy that you can devote to your family.

Learn more about how friends can support a person with cancer [2].

Asking your children to help you

Don't overlook the helpers in your own home. When a parent has cancer, children often feel powerless to change the circumstances. Asking your children to do chores around the house can help them feel like they are making a difference. Explain that you are going to need some extra help for a while and that everyone in the family will need to pitch in.

The following are tips for asking your children to help with chores:

- Give your children a choice of which chores they want to do. It can help to make a weekly list of chores and have the children sign up for different jobs.
- Establish a schedule, including the time by which children should complete their chores.
- Offer younger children small, manageable chores that fit their abilities. Children will likely become frustrated and give up if the chores are too difficult.
- Work together to complete bigger tasks. To clean up after dinner, have one child clear the table, another load the dishwasher, and another put away the leftovers.
- Ask children to help each other. Teenagers and older children can help with car rides and homework. Younger children can help each other pick up toys or fold laundry.
- Build incentives into chores. For example, let your children pick their own drink and dessert when they make their own school lunch.
- Say thank you and offer rewards for jobs well done. Rewards may include a family movie night, an ice cream outing, or extra computer time.

Remember that you cannot expect your children to be expert cleaners or to do their chores as carefully as you might. Accepting their best efforts will help keep your children motivated.

Caring for yourself

With all the demands on your time, it can be easy to overlook your own needs. Some parents feel guilty about taking time for themselves when the laundry is not finished or when someone wants a ride to a friend's house. However, time spent resting and doing activities that you enjoy helps to replenish your energy, giving you the strength that you need to invest in your family.

Finding more time

Most parents struggle to fit everything into their family's schedule, even without the demands of cancer and cancer treatment. Consider the following tips to find more time for yourself and your family:

- Take advantage of free and low-cost delivery services. For example, many grocery stores offer online shopping and home delivery. Other items that can be delivered to your home include prescriptions, DVDs, stamps, school supplies, and even dry cleaning.

- Spend less time in the kitchen. If you enjoy cooking, try doubling recipes and freezing half to save for another meal. Or keep your meals simple; sandwiches or scrambled eggs can take the place of a more elaborate meal. In addition, take advantage of nutritious ready-to-eat and frozen foods available at grocery stores.
- Do not try to clean the whole house. Concentrate on what matters most to you, such as having the dishes done or the toys off the floor. If possible, hire a cleaning service or a college student to do a more complete cleaning once or twice a month.
- Reconsider your family's schedule. If your children are involved in many activities, ask them to take a break from some and pick which activities they would like to continue.
- Reconsider your own activities and focus on one or two that are important to you. Do not commit to any new activities until you know you have time for them.

Reevaluating your priorities

Cancer and cancer treatment are demanding in many ways. You may feel fatigued [3] or nauseous [4], be irritable or depressed [5], and have frequent medical appointments. It is important to accept that you do not have the time or energy for everything and to be realistic about what you can and cannot do. Consider making a list of all the things to be done, including household tasks, childcare, and tasks related to your cancer treatment. Then decide which tasks are priorities for you and which tasks you can ask someone else to do or just leave undone. Each person's priorities will be different, and they may include taking a nap each day, reading to your children before bed, or attending their soccer games. Cooking a big meal every day or having a spotless house may not be as important right now.

Maintaining routine

Although you likely will need to adjust your family's activities as your priorities shift, find ways to keep your children's schedules as predictable as possible. A regular schedule can provide them with a sense of stability during this time. It can help to track the family's activities on a calendar that is displayed in a place where everyone can see it, and you can talk about the plans together at the beginning of each week or the night before each new day.

In addition, try to maintain some of your patterns of spending time together as a family. For instance, if possible, eat dinner together each night or, at least, a couple nights per week. Or continue the tradition of playing board games on a Friday night or watching a favorite TV show. During this time while you have limited time and energy, ask your children to pick activities that they especially enjoy.

More information

How a Child Understands Cancer [6]

Online Communities for Support [7]

Talking With Your Children [8]

Talking With Your Teenager [9]

Additional Resources

Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center: Parenting Principles [10]

Last Updated: February 23, 2011

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/node/25299
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/24691
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25048
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25052
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/25480
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/25300
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/24634
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/25311
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/25313
[10] http://www.mghpact.org/parents.parenting.php