



## ANNOUNCING A SERIOUS ILLNESS TO YOUNG PEOPLE

**If you are reading this document, it is probably because you are affected by the illness from near or far, and there are children or teenagers around you. You may be wondering whether or not you should tell them about the illness.**

- Is it better to wait to avoid worrying them?
- What «children's words» can be used to make sure they understand, but are not afraid?
- When and how do we explain the situation to them?

**Your questions are perfectly normal, and this document can help you find answers.**

*\*Note: This tool is based on the expertise developed by Deuil-Jeunesse working with young people. Know that there is never a perfect way to do it, and especially that nothing is irreparable. The information in this document will help you choose the best way to do things for you and your family.*

Remember that you are the expert on your situation and that you can always call on Deuil-Jeunesse to discuss your particular situation.



## IDEAL CONTEXT FOR THE ANNOUNCEMENT

### As soon as possible

Most of the time, young people feel that something is happening or observe the changes brought about by the illness (e.g., medical appointments, physical symptoms, work stoppage, etc.).

Not telling your child about the illness is risky. It would not be good for them to learn the news by overhearing a conversation, discovering a search history on the Internet, or seeing someone talking about it on social media.

It is therefore important not to hide the illness from the young person. Not knowing or learning it the wrong way can be even more damaging and anxiety-provoking for them.

### In a suitable place and with a trusted person

The announcement should be done in privacy. It is important to choose a place where the young person feels comfortable and sheltered from others, so that they are comfortable expressing their emotions and asking questions. Ideally, the ill person makes the announcement or is present at this important time.

### All siblings together

Despite the fact that siblings' age will most likely influence their understanding of the situation, it is important to announce the illness to everyone at the same time. This will prevent one of them from feeling left out or that they have not been told everything. Details can then be provided individually depending on age.

## HOW?

### With the S-C-D method

**Simplicity**: Make the announcement in a simple way, avoiding detours. Use real words and stick to the facts. Example: “*Mom has a serious condition called breast cancer.*” Name the illness, even if the young person doesn’t know this term. This will help them get clarity and avoid bad comparisons with other diseases they might be familiar with (e.g., gastrointestinal, cold, etc.).

**Comprehension check**: Explore the young person’s understanding and their questions.

**Details**: The necessary details are then provided (e.g., stage of illness, future treatments, etc.).

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### Answer questions with calm, honesty and attention

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**All questions must be answered quickly and with the right information, because young people can quickly try to find their own answers on the Internet, which may expose them to wrong information and lead to imaginary scenarios.**

Be tolerant: it is normal for young people to ask the same question several times. At a young age, they cannot assimilate everything at once. By calmly answering questions, we show them that they have the right to talk to us about it.

If you are uncomfortable answering a question, it is better to be honest and say that you do not want to answer for the moment than to opt for a lie. Lying is very risky because it jeopardizes the trust that is so important between the adult and the young person, in addition to depriving the latter of access to the truth. This can have a significant impact on the young person’s grieving journey. If you choose to answer later, make sure you get back to them with an answer as soon as possible.



## AFTER THE ANNOUNCEMENT

### Reactions:

#### **PIN (Personal, Impossible to predict, Normal)**

All reactions are normal, and unresponsiveness is a reaction in itself. Reactions may vary depending on the young person's age, understanding of the situation and other factors such as personality. It is important to welcome all reactions, to normalize them and to explore the needs associated with them.

### Attitudes you should adopt: TPP (Talk, Participate, Prepare)

**Talking:** It is important to talk to young people about the illness as it progresses. The illness must be clearly named. The use of real words is favoured (e.g., brain cancer) and it is better to avoid words such as «having a big sore head» or simply «being sick.» We want young people to be able to distinguish a serious illness from a simple cold or a minor injury. Using words that we find softer in the first place can create significant fears, such as the fear of dying from a cold or a sore mouth.

**Participate:** Although they tend to be removed from the disease in an effort to protect them, young people often feel the need to be included and to participate. It is good to ask them about the place they want to take, and then to inform them about the actions they can take (e.g., bring a glass of water to the sick person, ask their doctor questions, moisten their loved one's lips with a washcloth, etc.). Even the little ones can participate to the extent of their abilities. They can make a drawing to brighten the sick person's room, comb their hair, give a hug, etc.

**Prepare:** It is necessary to prepare the young person for what is to come: treatments, future changes, etc. When death is imminent or inevitable, it is important to prepare the young person for the passing by informing them and asking about their needs.



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## Contact us

If you have any questions or would like more personalized assistance, please contact a Deuil-Jeunesse specialist.

Deuil-Jeunesse is here to support you.

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