

Play Therapy:

Supporting children affected by a family member's cancer



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Words shared by a 12-year-old child in play therapy (anonymised) highlighting the impact of a parent's cancer diagnosis on children.

"Before [my parent] got cancer, I lived happily, with no special worries, having lots of activities. I loved when [my parent] came to watch my tournaments.

After [my parent] told me they had a cancer, I was shocked, then scared and worried. I didn't like seeing [my parent] unwell, tired, and losing their hair. [My parent] couldn't take part in things like before. I started to help more at home. I made efforts to manage myself independently and tried hard not to upset [my parent]".

Cancer disrupts the lives of everyone in the family, not only the person concerned. Children can be particularly affected.

When a loved one is seriously ill, children's lives are turned upside down. Separations due to hospitalisations, treatment side effects and physical changes in a sick person can make a child feel insecure and worried. Parents may struggle with how best to talk about illness and answer any questions without increasing a child's distress.

Children need help in understanding what is happening so they can overcome their feelings of insecurity without disengaging from their daily activities or school.

Play Therapy allows children to benefit from a neutral and caring space in the face of these trials. Children express themselves more fully and directly through self-initiated, spontaneous play than they do verbally, allowing them to share what they experience, be open about their anxieties and address existential questions. Playing out their experiences and feelings is a natural, dynamic and self-healing process, bringing out a child's unique resources and helping regain mastery and energy for everyday life.

An initial interview with the child's loved one will allow the therapist to assess the individual needs of the child and their family. Options range from individual sessions with the child or joint sessions with siblings, and/or parent-child sessions. Support is possible at whatever stage a parent determines their child is impacted, be it when cancer is diagnosed and the worry is about how best to share the news, or during the time when the parent undergoes treatment.