

Talking with Kids about Cancer

by Michele Reiland

Wife of Keith & Mother of three

Living in Rochester, NY

I would like to share with you our story and some information that I found helpful in talking with kids about cancer. My husband Keith & I met in college in 1987. We have been married 14 wonderful years and have three beautiful children ages 9, 7, 5 years. Keith works as a Manufacturing Manager at a local plastics company. I have chosen to be a stay at home Mom for a few years while our kids are young. Keith & I are volunteer to help out at the kids school, coach their softball & soccer teams, and even being a Girl Scout Leader. We were enjoying our family life together and had no worries.

One day, just before Thanksgiving, in November 2008, Keith started complaining of pain in his right side. At first, he thought he pulled a muscle. Keith (age 39) had always been health conscious and in good physical shape by running and lifting weights. After a few days, the pain got worse and he decided to go to the Emergency Room. This is when our nightmare began. We had an excellent Doctor in the emergency room who ordered an CT Scan. He told us that he saw spots on Keith's liver that looked like metastatic cancer. We were told to make an appointment with our family physician and schedule a liver biopsy right away. The liver biopsy was done on December 4, 2008. It confirmed our worse fears, a cancer diagnosis. It was metastatic adenocarcinoma that spread to Keith's liver. Doctors need to find the site of Keith's primary tumor. On December 19, 2008, we had a GI endoscope done. The Doctor found Keith's primary tumor at the GE Junction, the point where the esophagus and stomach connected. Unfortunately, Keith's cancer was stage IV. It had spread to the near by lymph nodes and liver. We were told that Keith had 10 -12 months to live. The cancer was too widespread to be a candidate for surgery or radiation. Our only option was palliative chemotherapy to reduce the side effects of cancer and prolong Keith's life for as long as possible. A diagnosis of esophageal cancer (EC) was a shock. Keith was young and did not meet any of the common risk factors of the disease (smoker, over weight, heavy drinker, chronic heart burn or acid reflux).

Cancer affects the entire family. Our children knew something was wrong. What and how much should we tell them. Here are some tips from [www. cancercare.org](http://www.cancer.org) that help us communicate with our children about Keith's cancer diagnosis. It also helps to take some time to prepare yourself and think about what you want to say.

1. Give your children accurate, age appropriate information about cancer in a way they can understand. show or tell them where the cancer is in the body. This is a very difficult thing to do and there is no easy way of saying it. It is ok to get upset or cry. For example, I have an illness called cancer. Some cells , black spots, or bad guys in my body are growing too fast and are not supposed to be there. It is sore. It makes me sad to feel sick. I have to take strong medicine to try to get rid of it. The Doctor's will do their best to help me get better.

2. Explain the treatment plan and how it will affect their lives. We told the kids that the chemotherapy might make Daddy feel sick, very tired, lose his hair, weight loss, etc. We explained his medical port, the home infusion pump, and how they would be used. We also tell them when we got to the hospital for treatments, tests, and appointments and why the babysitter will be coming.

3. Answer your children's questions as simply and accurately as possible. It is ok to say, "I don't know."

4. Reassure your children that they will still be loved and cared for, and who will look after them. Explain that they did not do anything to cause cancer and they can't catch cancer like they can a cold. Leave them with feelings of hope that the Doctors are doing their best to help and there will be both good days and bad days ahead.

5. Let them know that they can turn to others for support. Your spouse, relatives, friends, clergy, teachers, coaches, etc. They can ask others questions and talk about their feelings.

6. Allow your children to participate in your care. Give them age appropriate tasks like bringing you a glass of water or a blanket.

7. Encourage your children to express their feelings. It is ok to feel sad or to cry.

8. To the extent possible, make communicating with your children a priority. They can overhear conversations or hear news from others. Listen to your children and help them feel comfortable. Show your children a lot of love and affection. Let them know that although things are different now, your love for them has not changed.

Finally, parents who are concerned with how their children are coping should talk to the child's pediatrician, teacher, school counselor/ psychologist, or the social services department of their local hospital where they are receiving treatment. Two good non-profit support groups for kids are:

1. KATS- Kids Adjusting Through Support. Help children and families cope with serious illness or loss. They also have summer camps available for kids & families.

2. Gilda's Club - offers support groups, workshops, lectures, social activities, and a special playroom and program for children with cancer or whose family member has been diagnosed with cancer.

Cancer affects the entire family. Children pick up on things very quickly. If they don't know what it is, they may imagine terrible things that are even scarier than a cancer diagnosis. Children react in different ways. Some act brave and take on more responsibility at home, some get angry and act out. Others become afraid and withdrawn from the parent who is sick. Finding a counselor or support group for children can give your child a safe place to work through complex emotions. We need to take steps to take care of ourselves & our families during this difficult time. You can still have a good quality of life with a cancer diagnosis. Live strong every day and laugh often.