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### How Parents Should Deal with a Child that has a Terminal Illness

One of the greatest experiences a person or couple can have is having a child. It really is a miracle how children are brought into this world. Once the child is here, parents get to watch their child grow and develop, they get to love the child, and they get to have pride in the child's achievements. These are all some of the common satisfactions that parents get to have from having a child. However, that can all turn around in an instant when a child is diagnosed with a life threatening disease.

Children can get sick from many things. "Cancer is the most common cause of nontraumatic death in children..." (Silence Is Not Golden). Of the twelve major types of childhood cancers, leukemia's and cancers of the brain and central nervous system account for more than half of the cases (National Cancer Institute). Some other statistics for children with cancer are "In the United States in 2007, approximately 10,400 children under age 15 were diagnosed with cancer and about 1,545 children will die from the disease" (National Cancer Institute). This makes cancer the leading cause of death by disease among U.S. children 1 to 14 years of age. (National Cancer Institute). Cancer can be caused from many different reasons, some environmental and sometimes it is just in the person's DNA. Many types of cancer can be treated, but some will take the person's life. Even if the cancer can be treated and beat; it is still extremely hard on the person and his or her family. However, it is even harder when a person has

a type of cancer that cannot be beaten and they know they are going to die, but they just do not know when.

Since death is something extremely difficult to deal with, there are many issues as how to deal with a child that has a terminal illness. One thing a family can do is to be honest and communicate with the child. “Issues surrounding how best to communicate with children who are dying of cancer are seminal because providing information and actively addressing their concerns can enhance the cooperation of the child, reduce anxiety, and lighten the burden of secrecy, things that create tension in families at the end of a child’s life” (Silence Is Not Golden). It is important that the family is getting along so they can deal with this event the best way possible. If there is a lot of tension it will not be good for the family or for the child and can cause the family to break up or death to the child sooner than expected.

The best way of dealing with a child who has a terminal illness is to be completely open and honest with him or her. “Many professionals working in the field believe that children should be given honest and accurate information about their illnesses and explanations of specific treatments and medications” (Silence Is Not Golden). By doing this, the parents will establish trust with the child, which is good for their relationship and also good for the child’s treatment later on. “Once the child recovers from the shock of the initial diagnosis, he or she can usually focus on the improvement promised by the treatment plan” (Silence Is Not Golden). It is better for a child to focus on getting better than worrying about if his or her parents are lying. Lying to the child is not going to make the child get better so the family should focus on doing the things that will help the child stay healthy for as long as possible and help keep the family strong and close.

Not only does communication keep strong relationships in the family, children want to know what is going to happen. “Studies show that children wish to be informed about their illness and plans for treatment. Although children’s information needs may be age-dependent, most will worry about the impact of the disease and medical treatments on their daily lives and on others around them” (Silence Is Not Golden). Dying is not what worries the children most; it is how their normal, everyday lives will be affected from then on. Will their parents still treat them the same, can they still play with their friends and go to school, or will they still be able to play sports? This is another reason why parents need to be honest, their child will need to know why he or she can or cannot do certain activities now. “While not all terminally ill children want to talk specifically about death or the dying process, when they realize that their future is limited, they adapt by shifting their focus to a more immediate future, such as the next holiday or a significant event” (Silence Is Not Golden).

For parents, it is not only important to be honest with the child for the child’s benefit, but for their own as well. “Their reluctance to be honest usually represents their own grief and struggle to accept their child’s death, and it can have significant consequences” (Silence Is Not Golden). Even though most might think that this event will be most traumatic for the child, it will also be extremely hard on the parents. “The impending death of a child may also engender powerful emotions in the professional caregiver, such as feelings of having failed the child, a sense of personal helplessness, sadness for a life unfulfilled, and anticipatory grief. These feelings need to be acknowledged and explored; avoidance or attempts to block them out or only partially address them, can lead to caregivers becoming detached from the child” (Silence Is Not Golden). “Researchers in Sweden found that parents who did talk to their child about dying had no regrets

about it later. But some parents who did not have the discussion wished they had” (Discussing Death with a Dying Child).

Parents do not talk to their child about what is going to happen to them for several reasons. The parents think it is in the best interest for the child not to know and believe that talking about death and dying will send the child into a deep depression and that children are not able to understand concepts of death. Trying to protect them, however, actually place barriers between them and the people who can best help them understand and deal with their experience. Children are even more anxious and can feel a greater sense of isolation when they are shielded from the truth (Silence Is Not Golden). “Even very young children can sense fear and anxiety in their family members. And while it may not be feasible to discuss death with a child who can’t yet talk, it is important to make sure that child senses love, security, and peace from family members” (Discussing Death with a Dying Child).

When a child dies, the death will affect each family member in a unique way. Not only is each family member going to experience it differently, each family will experience it differently too. This tragic event will cause stress to all members of the family, but the parents will be impacted the greatest. “Many parents consider suicide because of the death. Living becomes almost unbearable for most” (Olson 360). The death of a child is usually considered the most devastating crisis the parents have experienced.

Even though this event is so horrible and hard on the parents, they can still get through it and survive. They can do this by turning to each other for comfort, to their relatives and friends, and professionals in their community (Olson 360). Other positive ways of enduring through the lost of a child are, “commitment, togetherness and the ability of partners and other family members to take turns being strong for each other” (Olson 360). Just like anything else, as time

passes, the loss of a child becomes easier to deal with. There will still be grief from the loss, but parents will begin to realize that they survived the tragedy. “Once the realization sinks in that they will live though their child did not, they find strength in themselves they thought they never had” (Olson 360). One mother said, “Now I can survive anything” (Olson 360).

## Works Cited

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