



“I don't really know how to tell you this, sweetheart, so I'm just going to come right out and say it: Your goldfish ran away.”



Duke Cancer Institute



Challenges for Families Facing Serious Illness

- Living with uncertainty/fear of the future
- Role changes in the family
- Routines disrupted
- Family rules disrupted
- Individual and family adjustment – “Same illness, different journeys”
- Coping impacted by the “life stage” of the family, e.g., young children vs. teens
- Dealing with unfamiliar terminology and medical centers
- Family separated due to distance to treatment center
- Financial/work stressors
- Support from community vs. attention from community



Parents' Barriers to Talking with Children

- I am afraid I will cry.
- I don't want to scare them.
- They won't understand
- They are too young to worry like this.
- They don't even notice – they are in their own world
- Parents need permission – sometimes because of scrutiny from others
- Protection of the child vs. protection of self
- Protection of the youngest
- Cancer = Death
- Parent does not understand the illness process well enough to explain it
- I'm not sure when to tell them.
- I don't' know what words to use



Wrap-up and Review

- Ask for the exact words the parent used to explain the illness to the children so far.
- Encourage them to use specific words to name the illness, i.e., “cancer” vs. “sick”.
- Give the parent written examples of language to use with children
- Encourage parents to talk to children about the diagnosis before they are likely to overhear this information another way.
- Be aware of confusing words (I.V. vs. ivy, dye vs. die).
- Prepare the parent for the range of responses a child might have and how to “meet them where they are”.
- Normalize the right for the child to have and show feelings.
- Encourage the parent to give the children updates in a timely manner.
- If the parent is “stuck” shift your focus to building and maintaining rapport.