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## Age appropriate psychosocial support crucial for paediatric cancer patients

Article by: [Nicole Madigan](#) | Published: 18-11-2020

Photo: Age appropriate psychosocial support crucial for paediatric cancer patients

While the physical repercussions of cancer are often the first thing that comes to mind following a diagnosis, it's crucial not to underestimate the importance of psychosocial support when it comes to treatment.

For mental health specialists, treating someone with cancer can be unfamiliar territory. Treating a child with cancer can be particularly so.

"The older the child, the more impact the diagnosis," says psychotherapist, Dr Karen Phillip.

"While many children have heard of the word cancer, they often connect it to something bad, painful, causing death or great illness, and often relate it to older people.

"The psychological impact can be immense."

Children experience a wide range of emotions, many of which they don't understand themselves.



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"Concern, confusion and fear, however, not always for themselves, but for their parents who may appear worried, frightened and upset.

"The child may feel responsible for their family's distress.

"The child may fear death, and not being able to enjoy their life, friends and activities.

"They may become angry this illness is affecting them."

Dr Phillip says children often express their emotions in different ways.





“And others can become angry at their body, at the medical treatment because it’s making them sick, or not curing them.

“Some kids feel fear and anger because they are separated from family and friends during treatment.”

Emotions also differ considerably with the age of the child, says Dr Phillip.

A young child or toddler has limited understanding of mortality and may accept their condition, but might be distressed by the treatment.

Whereas a child aged between four to 11 years often has a better understanding and may require reassurance about their future.

“The teenager is often more informed and understands mortality much better,” says Dr Phillip.

“This age group is where we see a higher degree of emotions expressed.”

The importance of psychosocial support is increasing, with most hospitals now employing a number of mental health experts as standard treatment.

“What the mind believes the body responds to, therefore, it is essential we do all we can to keep the child feeling safe, positive, with a strong drive to survive and recover; even if the parent is feeling fearful or negative.

“Our brain is our most powerful organ.

“Combining positive mindset with the latest treatments can have wonderful long-lasting results, they need to go hand in hand for best outcome.”

Despite the difficult circumstances, Dr Phillip says it’s important to engage children’s imagination in a positive way, as much as possible.

“Depending on the age of the child, the degree of illness and the attitude of parents and medical staff, the child may welcome psychosocial support or be resistant.

“Nothing is over until it is over and while the child is surviving, we must remain positive and this may positively influence their belief as well.

“When discussing upcoming treatment, therapists should be honest with the child, while at the same time, painting a clear, positive picture of what is to come in their life.

“Make sure you paint the picture for their active imagination using all senses so they can see what they see, hear what they hear and feel what they feel.

Children, like adults, have a range of emotions, however children may not understand what they’re feeling, or be able to label their emotions like adults can.

“There are some wonderful supports set up for kids and families however not all families are able to access them.

“The more support we can provide the children plus the families going through this traumatic situation the better outcome for all.”





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