

Looking after Yourself and Your Family

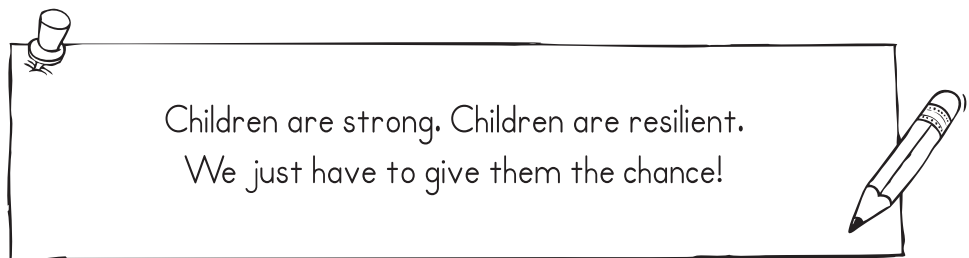
Having a child with cancer will impact upon your life in many and varied ways. It may affect your health, emotional state, financial situation, personal relationships and work. However, in the middle of everything that is involved with a cancer diagnosis and treatment regime, parents need to look after themselves and their family.

Increased levels of parental stress have been shown to be quite common in the first year following a diagnosis of cancer in their child. Kupst, a family researcher, has identified that while stress levels are obviously higher, families of children with cancer have no greater maladjustment in the long term than other families.



Psychologist John Spinetta has conducted extensive work with families. When he asked parents **what has most helped them function** throughout the course of cancer treatment, 5 key characteristics emerged.

- **Having a positive philosophy of life** – accepting the diagnosis and approaching treatment in a spirit of optimism and hope.
- **Having a strong support network** – both with family, friends and other parents who are in a similar situation. Because men and women communicate differently, it is critical to have a social support system beyond the marriage or family relationship, so the male and female do not place unrealistic expectations on their ability to support each other. (See **Chapter 7 Resource Pages and Links**)
- **Communicating well with their child** - Children diagnosed with cancer have a right to know the truth at their own level of understanding.
- **Having open communication with the child's brothers and sisters** - Siblings also have a right to know the truth at their own level of development. Try to be careful not to overburden or place too many additional responsibilities on siblings. (See **Sibling Pages in Chapters 5 and 6**)



- **Keeping family life as normal as possible** - This includes parents maintaining their own personal and intimate lives as far as possible. An effective way of communicating that they are going to get well is to send the child with cancer back to school as soon as medically possible and discipline them the same as if they did not have cancer.



As Spinetta says, whilst looking after themselves, their child and siblings, parents can help their children learn lifelong coping skills and strategies.

It is important for parents to recognise and handle their own stresses because this may affect how your child deals with the challenges of cancer. Specific support and counselling services are available for parents of children with cancer.

