

# THE BEST CARE AT THE WORST OF TIMES: SUPPORTING FAMILIES THROUGH A CANCER DIAGNOSIS

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## OUTLINE

- An overview of the role of social work within oncology
- Provide some useful strategies for dealing with a cancer diagnosis
- Encourage teachers to reflect on their current practice with children who have cancer
- Raise awareness of resources available for teachers and families

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## ONCOLOGY SOCIAL WORK

- Meet each family at diagnosis
- Psychosocial assessment
- Ongoing psychosocial support
- Referral and liaison with community agencies
- Group work programs

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## A FAMILY'S PERSPECTIVE

"Diagnosis was a life-altering weekend. I was in a tunnel, and there was no light ahead. It took a long time to see a glimmer of light at the end, that maybe we will actually come through this and be ok" - Gina

Woznick, L.A. & Goodheart, C.D. (2006) *Living with Childhood Cancer - A Practical Guide to Help Families Cope*

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## A FAMILY'S PERSPECTIVE

Molly (11) was admitted to CHW on Saturday after receiving abnormal results from a blood test. Molly's parents, who thought she had the flu, were told that she has a form of Leukaemia. When I meet the family on Monday, Molly has a central line and is about to start chemotherapy. It is expected that Molly will initially be in hospital for two weeks. Molly will then need to come to the hospital up to several times a week for the next 6 months. Molly's parents have just bought a new house. Molly's mum had just returned to work so that the family could afford the new mortgage. Molly has one older sibling (16) and a younger sibling (8).

NB: This is a fictional case example

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## WHAT DOES A CANCER DIAGNOSIS MEAN?

## ...FOR THE PATIENT

### Immediate

- New environment and people
- Emotion of parents and others
- Confusion and fear
- May not be feeling sick

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## ...FOR THE PATIENT

### Longer term

- Health problems
- Educational problems
- Social development
- Emotional responses

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## ...FOR PARENTS

### Immediate

- Emotional Response
- Decision making
- Negotiating an unfamiliar, large system
- A focus on the needs of the unwell child
- Dealing with questions from family and friends
- Arranging care and support of siblings
- Employment

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## ...FOR PARENTS

### Longer term

- Uncertainty of health of child and future
- Needs of siblings
- Chronic stress
- Changed financial situation
- Changes in relationships

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## ...FOR SIBLINGS

### Immediate

- Separation from family
- Changes in routine
- Limited understanding of what is happening to sibling
- Fear about diagnosis

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## ...FOR SIBLINGS

### Longer Term

- Adjustment to new routine
- Less focus on sibling's accomplishments
- Emotional response
- Educational deficits
- Social Development

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## STRATEGIES

### SUPPORTING A STUDENT WHO IS DIAGNOSED WITH CANCER

- Maintain contact with student and family
- Class and group of friends maintain contact with student
- For older students - reassure them about assessment tasks/assignments
- Prepare the class before the student's return
- Utilise resources available to you
- Encourage the student to speak to you / school counsellor if they need to

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### SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHEN A CLASSMATE IS DIAGNOSED WITH CANCER

- What to tell the class / parents?
  - Privacy issues
- Encourage the class to maintain communication with unwell child
- Be aware of changes in behaviour

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### SELF CARE FOR TEACHERS

- Supervision
- Peer support
- Professional development / further education on specific issues eg grief and loss
- Boundaries

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## RESOURCES

- Hospital based resources
- Community Resources
- Further reading

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