

Local moms share ways to talk to children about cancer

Digesting your own breast cancer diagnosis is difficult enough. Now you have to tell your friends and family, including your children. How do you tell your children that mommy has cancer? How will they react? What questions will they have? How honest should you be?

C.A. Tolchinsky's children were 9 and 12, Alicia Palelis' children were 4 and 8, and Andrea Nugent's son was only 2. While there are no hard-and-fast rules for talking with your children about breast cancer, these three local women share the following suggestions based on what was effective for their family.

PLAN IT

"There's never going to be a 'good time,' so please do not wait for it," Tolchinsky said. She recommends circling a date on your calendar and forcing yourself to have the talk before that time. The Plantation resident who was diagnosed with stage 1 breast cancer in Dec. 2010 waited until after the holidays to talk with her children. "There were a couple times I thought I was ready for that conversation, and then I realized I wasn't, so you really have to prepare," she said.

HAVE SUPPORT

"If there is a partner involved, then that person should be there because they [the children] need to see a united front that we're all going to be in this fight — we're all going to be warriors," said Tolchinsky, whose husband was there when she broke the news to her children. "There were a couple sentences that I couldn't fin-

ish that I needed him to finish for me." She suggests single parents have a supportive relative or friend present.

BE TRUTHFUL

"They're going to notice the changes in you if you're on a treatment plan, so my first thing is to be truthful to them and just try to keep everything age-appropriate,"

said Nugent, who remembers during her treatment wondering whether her 2-year-old son recognized her when he looked up at her every day. "He saw that my hair was now bald. He saw that I was a different weight, and he knew something because he stuck closer to me than normal." The Miramar resident notes that children are very imaginative, so if you don't explain cancer to your children, they may develop their own, possibly more frightening notions about cancer.

BUT KNOW YOUR CHILDREN

"You really need to know your child, personally," said Palelis, of Pembroke Pines. "So if they're more of an anxious child, then less is more; you don't need to give them all the details, [and] you don't need to show them everything."

AND PROJECT STRENGTH

Palelis recalls her son asking her if the cancer could come back. "We don't want to give them false hope, and then it happens, and then you lied, but give them the

sense of hope and that you trust in your doctors and you have faith that everything will work out," said Palelis, who last month started Ribbon Warriors, a monthly support group for women under 45 with any type of cancer at Memorial Regional Hospital in Hollywood. "I tried to keep my emotions in front of them as positive and happy as possible, and I would cry, scream and the whole thing after they were in bed," she said. "... I just found that their emotional response is based on my emotional response."

READ A BOOK

Kid-friendly books about cancer can help facilitate conversation. In August 2011, Nugent published "Mommy is Still Mommy: Cancer Can't Change

That!" a 20-page children's book containing text and multi-ethnic illustrations to help children better understand the effects of cancer treatment. "The second time I got diagnosed I had the book to use as a tool, so we simply sat and read the story, and in the end I allowed him to ask me questions about any concerns or things he felt while reading the story," she said.

SHARE A JOURNAL

Tolchinsky's son, Cade, wasn't as comfortable as his older sister asking questions, so he and his mother kept a journal for two years. "He would write down questions, and I'd write him back with my answers," Tolchinsky said. "... I'd come in at

night to kiss him at night, and if I saw the journal in one spot on his desk, then I knew he had written a question in it." In August 2013, Tolchinsky published the book "Dear Cancer, You Messed with the Wrong Mom," which contains about 50 questions and answers from the journal, along with short stories Tolchinsky and Cade wrote.

USE HUMOR

Although Palelis underwent cold cap therapy to help her retain her hair during treatment, her family playfully entertained the thought of her being bald. "They would joke that if I did get bald, what would I be for Halloween?" Palelis said.

Tolchinsky remembers Cade asking in their journal if she would have tubes coming out of her body following surgery. "I wrote, 'Yea, but not forever; just for the first few days. The tubes get out all the yucky stuff from the body, so they are good things, but I'll look like some octopus-like creature with six arms — ha! When was the last time you had six arms?'" Tolchinsky said.

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

"To me, it's better to talk early and talk often. Some kids' perspective changes too," Nugent said, paralleling how children change their favorite animal or what they want to be when they grow up. She and her son talk a half hour before bedtime.

Sharing a journal helped the

ARE YOU NEWLY DIAGNOSED?

Ines Rodriguez, who is a breast cancer survivor, breast care nurse and the breast patient navigator at Memorial Regional Hospital in Hollywood, offers this advice:

- Seek care at a hospital with an established breast cancer program, preferably one accredited by the National Accreditation Program for Breast Centers or the Commission on Cancer.
- Ask questions so that you understand your diagnosis and treatment options completely.
- Accept help. Now is not the time to be Superwoman. Fill your life with positive, loving people who offer support and encouragement.
- Take one day at a time, and remember that breast cancer is just a diagnosis; It does not define you forever.

line of communication stay open for Tolchinsky and Cade. "Questions would arise from other questions that we didn't anticipate, so you have to keep it ongoing, and you can't just assume that once you tell them once that they get it," Tolchinsky said.

REMINDE THEM YOU'RE STILL YOU

"Looking at mommy lose her hair or go from being very active to always having to sleep, your child wonders what's going on," Nugent said. She encourages affirming to your children that although the way you look and the way you do things may change, you're still you and your love for them won't change.

INVOLVE THEM IN CARE-GIVING

Even when her son was just 2, Nugent allowed him to take part in her recovery by bringing her water or

helping her out of bed. He's now 7 and comes with her when she gives motivational speeches. "When I say, 'I would like my son to stand up because he was one of the best caregivers,' he's grinning from ear to ear because he feels like he was so responsible for helping mommy," Nugent said.

Palelis' daughter, Addison, has also enjoyed being included in her mother's care. "She really wanted to know everything, see everything. She came with me to chemo," Palelis said. When she came home from the hospital after surgery, Addison was dressed up like a doctor and equipped with bandages to put on her mother's arm.

The next Ribbon Warriors monthly meeting will be 5:30 p.m. on Oct. 15 in the main conference room, Suite 270, at Memorial Regional Hospital, 3501 Johnson St. in Hollywood.



TOLCHINSKY



PALELIS



NUGENT



RODRIGUEZ