

How to talk with your kids about breast cancer

BY EMILY MOORHOUSE
FORUM PUBLISHING GROUP

Digesting your own breast cancer diagnosis is difficult enough. Now you have to tell your friends and family – and your children.

How do you tell your kids that mommy has cancer? How will they react? What questions will they have? How honest should you be?

When she was diagnosed, 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 – who have each faced the challenge – share what was effective for them.

PLAN IT. “There’s never going to be a ‘good time,’ so please do not wait for it,” Tolchinsky said. She suggests 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 December 2010, waited until after the holidays to talk to 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 finish that I needed him to finish for me.” She



Alicia Palelis' daughter, Addison, now 6, pretends she's a doctor during her mother's cancer treatment.

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.

KNOW YOUR CHILDREN. “You really need to know your child personality-wise,” 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 detail, you don’t need to show them everything.”

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

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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,” Nugent 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,” said Tolchinsky. “I’d come in 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



Above, C.A. Tolchinsky, center, with daughter Bryn, now 16, and son Cade, now 13. Bottom, Alicia Paleis, left, with daughter Addison, now 6, son Ryan, now 9, and husband Jimmy.

the journal, along with short stories Tolchinsky and Cade wrote.

USE HUMOR. Although Paleis 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?” said Paleis.

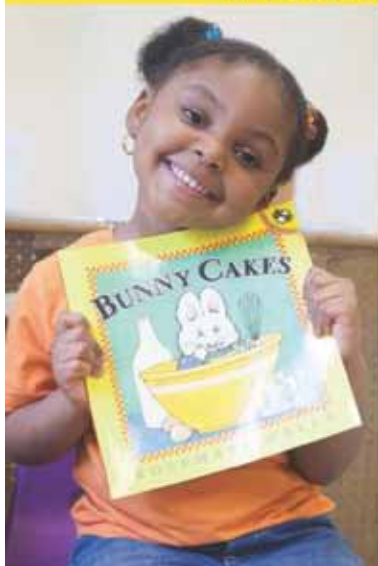
Tolchinsky remembers Cade asking in their journal if she would have tubes coming out of her body following surgery. “I wrote, ‘Yea, but not for forever, just for the first few days. The tubes get out all the yucky stuff from the body, so they are good things, but I’ll look like some octopus-like creature 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

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Andrea Nugent
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talk a half hour before bedtime.

Sharing the journal helped the 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."

INVOLVE THEM IN CAREGIVING. 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."

Palelis' daughter 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, her daughter was dressed up like a doctor and equipped with bandages to put on her mother's arm.

"Dear Cancer, You Messed with the Wrong Mom" by Cade and C.A. Tolchinsky and "Mommy is Still Mommy: Cancer Can't Change That!" by Andrea Nugent are available at Amazon.com.



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



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