

For Parents: Managing Your Child's Education During Cancer Treatment



Having cancer can turn your child's life upside down. Their education is just 1 part of life that cancer treatment will affect.

School may not be a high priority right now, but it can provide your child with a sense of community during a difficult time. Plus, research has shown that children who attended school had better social skills and more self-confidence.

But this doesn't mean attending school is always the best option. Your child may not feel well enough to handle their full school schedule. Talk with your child, the school's administrators and teachers, and your child's healthcare team to decide on the best plan for your child to continue to receive an education.

Setting your child up for success

Learning may look different now that your child is going through cancer treatment. They may have trouble with:

- Memory
- Focus
- Understanding
- Organization

Remember that these struggles are normal. And they don't have to impede your child's education. There are resources in place to help your child adjust. These programs include:

- **Individual Educational Programs (IEPs).** An IEP is a legal, enforceable document that outlines your child's personal goals at school. It also includes a plan to provide what they need to achieve those goals. Consider having your child evaluated to see if they qualify for an IEP if they aren't getting enough individualized attention at school.
- **504 plans.** These plans guarantee that a child with a disability receives any accommodations they need to ensure access to learning and academic success.
- **Homebound instruction.** If in-person learning is no longer possible, homebound instruction may be an option. Each state and school district has its own policies regarding these services. Work with your school liaison or call your school district for access. The use of Adaptive Interactive Virtual Technologies (AiVT) may be an option to connect homebound and hospitalized children to their classrooms.
- **Hospital- or clinic-based school.** This option may be especially useful when your child needs to stay in a hospital or a treatment center for a lengthy period.

You may find that a combination of these approaches works best for your child. Be sure to stay in touch with your child's teachers throughout treatment. If your child is too ill for any schooling, it's OK to take a leave of absence. Your child's health comes first!

Managing the stress of school

Even if your child can attend school, they may feel anxious about coming back after being away. They might worry that their peers will treat them differently now that they have cancer. They may also be self-conscious about any physical changes that have resulted from treatment.

You know your child better than anyone. To help them through this change, be their advocate. Tell the school what your child needs. Be proactive by:

- Providing teachers with a summary of your child's health history. Help them understand the impact cancer and its treatment will have on learning.
- Alerting the school to changes in your child's treatment schedule or any side effects. Talk with the school nurse about things they should know about your child's health.
- Figuring out what is working and what is not. If something isn't helpful, don't be afraid to change it!
- Encouraging your child to take part in activities they enjoy. They might be worried that other children see them only for their illness. Participating in social activities will help them bond with other kids. Talk with your child's healthcare team about what activities are safe for your child.

Sadly, some children with cancer and survivors are at risk of bullying. This includes cyberbullying in the form of hurtful or threatening messages.

If you think your child might be a victim of bullying, you can:

- Report the behavior to a teacher or administrator.
- Seek advice from a guidance counselor or mental health professional.
- Get support from peers.

Keeping your child connected

Your child may feel like they're alone during treatment. To help them maintain friendships:

- Ask if they want to use social media to update friends on their progress. This can keep their peers involved in their life.
- Encourage them to schedule virtual social events with friends. Video chat apps can help them stay connected.
- Work with your child's friends to plan in-person visits whenever possible.
- Use websites such as CaringBridge at www.caringbridge.org to share your family's experiences at your own pace. Ask your child what level of information they are comfortable making public.
- Prepare your child for how to answer questions about their cancer. Other kids may ask questions. Let your child know they can give as much detail as they are comfortable with, or they can say they prefer not to talk about it.

If you don't have internet or computer access, check out Hopecam at www.hopecam.org or ask your child's healthcare provider about Keep Kids Connected. These programs provide internet and tablet computers to children with cancer.

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