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Ontario Parents Advocating for Children with Cancer

www.opacc.org

Guide for Friends and Family of Parents of Children with Cancer

You have a close friend or family member who has a child diagnosed with cancer. You don't know what to do or say, how to help or support them. This brief guide is written for you by a parent of a child with cancer and the friends who did unbelievable things to help. Your friend or family member was given this guide to distribute to you and others to help you to understand and find ways to help them on this unbelievably difficult journey. This friend or family member feels like their world has just stopped spinning and they can't think of anything beyond how to save their child.

This pamphlet is not a "how-to" guide, but rather a list of helpful suggestions when you want to help but aren't sure what to do.

From personal experience, please know that the family needs your help in any way you can. Whether they can ask for it or acknowledge it or not they need help. Receiving the news that your child has cancer is all the parents can think about, all the other things that still need to be dealt with take a distant back seat to their child.

The help they need can be the simplest thing, like a phone call or a warm meal at their door, to something as overwhelming as a fundraiser to raise money for their expenses. Having a child diagnosed with cancer is a very isolating experience. It feels like everyone was moving on with their "fun" lives while they are stuck in this horrible nightmare. So calls, cards, and e-mails are a great and easy way to let the family know that, despite the distance or lack of actual contact, you haven't forgotten them or what they are going through.

Please remember, don't walk away - cancer is not contagious and you or your child is not going to get it by association. This advice may seem trite, but as a parent of a child with cancer, there are people that feel that way. For them, this diagnosis is far too real and they can't deal with it. Your friend/family member needs you now and needs to know that you are going to be there through thick and thin. If your child played with the cancer child fairly regularly, have that child call or write notes or e-mails and if possible have those playtimes resume as soon as possible. It is great for the cancer child so they don't feel so alone and that everyone has forgotten them. Also, for your own child to they realize that while cancer is a yucky thing, their friend is still their friend. It is a wonderful way to teach your own child compassion, empathy and the true meaning of friendship.

As adults, one of the best things you can offer is a sounding board. So be ready to listen. You don't need to fix anything or make it better - you just need to listen.

You may hear the same thing time after time after time. Just be patient, it takes parents time to process this news and they need to talk it out and vent their feelings. They aren't trying to be selfish or self-absorbed, and in time they will get some perspective, but that may take a while. They just need someone not involved to cry to, scream to, talk to...

Whether you live next door or across the country, there are very practical ways to help your friend or family member. There is no way to provide an exhaustive list of ways to help, so we have developed a Family Wishlist (www.opacc.org > Resources > Family Wishlist) that is a template of typical things that can be done, but also the wishlist can be customized for your family's specific needs. A family member is going to maintain the wishlist so that you can find things to be done. If your friend or family member hasn't done this wishlist, offer to do it for them as it will be a wonderful assistance and allow others who truly want to help know what they can do.

For those that live close, some very simple and very practical ideas are: cutting their grass or shovelling their driveway, taking in mail, ensuring garbage and recycling is taken out and bins are put away, raking their lawn or winterizing their pool, etc. The parents have not even thought of these chores, but yet they need to be done.

For those that live farther way, aside from cards, letters, and e-mails, the family could use gas cards, cards for meals, groceries or coffee. By finding out what restaurants are near or in the hospital, you can send cards so the parents don't have to spend all their money on meals while in the hospital with their child.

Another wonderful idea is before being discharged after a round of treatment, you can ensure there is milk, bread, eggs and some other basic essentials in their fridge at home. It may not seem like a huge help, but it is. Knowing there is enough food in the house to last a couple of days until they have a chance to go out grocery shopping removes another stressor.

If your friend or family member has other children and you are able, offer to take care of them before and after school or to do pick up and drop off at daycares, take them to their extracurricular activities, etc. When a child is diagnosed with cancer, the siblings are often the forgotten victims.

Also, it is very important that you communicate with the parents about life outside of the hospital. They want to be engaged in other activities. It is okay to talk about the regular stuff and the things you are doing in your life. The parents aren't jealous about you doing "normal" stuff, and it helps them feel a little more normal that they know what is happening, so when they do go home they haven't missed everything.