



TALKING ABOUT CANCER

**A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS AND MEMBERS
OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

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Camp Quality brings positivity, fun and laughter back into the lives of kids facing cancer at every stage of their journey. One of the ways we do this is through cancer education. We have developed these teacher resources because children are often scared and confused when they learn they have cancer or that someone they care about has cancer. This guide will help educators, staff, parents and carers talk to kids about cancer and bereavement, and give practical support to families facing cancer.

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Note to reader

Talking About Cancer is relevant for primary schools and preschools across Australia. While care has been taken to ensure the accuracy of this information, Camp Quality and its members assume no responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions. This book is intended as a general introduction to the topic and should not be seen as a substitute for medical or legal advice. Always consult a health professional about matters that affect your health.

CAMP QUALITY CANCER EDUCATION PROGRAM

If someone in your school community receives the heartbreaking news of a cancer diagnosis, Camp Quality is there to offer support.

Camp Quality's free programs and services help families build optimism and resilience through community, education and fun. We are there for kids (0-15) dealing with their own cancer diagnosis, or the diagnosis of a sibling or parent, every step of the way. We're proud to have improved the quality of life for kids impacted by cancer, and their families, for almost 40 years.

Our **Cancer Education Program**, featuring the Camp Quality Puppets, visits primary schools and preschools across the country to deliver free cancer education. Our puppets provide interactive and age-appropriate cancer education for any child impacted by cancer – whether they are dealing with their own diagnosis or the diagnosis of a sibling, parent, carer, grandparent, relative or friend. The program creates a shared language to facilitate cancer conversations within the school community.

A 2020 **independent report by KPMG** found that for every \$1 spent producing our Cancer Education Program, there was a \$5 return in social benefit. The report also found that our puppet shows help to reduce the likelihood of bullying, confusion, exclusion and anxiety that can follow a cancer diagnosis. For children facing cancer, this makes the transition from hospital back to school a little less daunting. For kids who have a family member with a cancer diagnosis, it helps them relate to their peers, who gain a better understanding of what their family is going through.

- [Request a puppet performance](#) for your school.
- [Download our Teacher Resource Pack](#).
- [Download the free Kids' Guide to Cancer app](#) through the Apple Store or Google Play.

To book our Cancer Education Program, or for further information and support, contact **1300 662 267**, or visit campquality.org.au.

“

IT TOOK AWAY THE STIGMA AND FEAR OF CANCER. AS WE HAVE A STUDENT AT OUR SCHOOL BEING TREATED FOR LEUKAEMIA, IT HELPED THE CHILDREN UNDERSTAND WHAT SHE WAS GOING THROUGH AND WHY SHE HAS LOST HER HAIR.

HAVING AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE DISEASE HAS CERTAINLY INCREASED EMPATHY IN THE OTHER CHILDREN TOO.

”

— SCHOOL PRINCIPAL ON THE
CANCER EDUCATION PROGRAM



TALKING ABOUT CANCER – WHAT DO I SAY?

What should I say? How can I help? That's what we ask ourselves when someone is diagnosed with cancer. The best approach is to keep conversations open and honest – remembering that:

- Before you tell others that someone has cancer, check that it's OK with the person living with cancer, or their parent or carer.
- Each person's situation is different and may need its own approach. When talking about someone's illness, consider cultural differences, age, maturity, learning ability and any wishes for privacy that the person or their family may have.



TALKING TO SOMEONE WITH CANCER

Tips for educators, staff, students, parents, and carers

- Acknowledge the situation. You can say, "I don't know what to say, but I want you to know I care."
- Let them do the talking. Listen and let them lead the conversation.
- If they're sad or angry, let them express how they feel.
- Keep things normal. Talk about day-to-day things – not just cancer.
- Don't give advice.
- Understand that the person may look or act differently.
- Have a laugh – after all, at Camp Quality we believe laughter is the best medicine!

HELPING KIDS UNDERSTAND CANCER

- Have a plan before talking to your students; be well informed about cancer, anticipate any difficult questions and how you can respond. [Cancer Council's Understanding Cancer](#) may be helpful.
- Listen to your students' concerns.
- Host a Cancer Awareness Day, or plan a lesson about cancer, encouraging students to talk about what cancer is, its treatments and side-effects. For lesson plan ideas, download our [Teacher Lesson Plans and Activity Worksheets](#).
- If you don't know the answer to a question about cancer, offer to find out. The 'Frequently Asked Questions' page in this booklet, or the [Kids' Guide to Cancer app](#), should provide some guidance.
- Provide tips for coping, such as how to talk to a classmate with cancer – see the 'Talking To Someone With Cancer' page in this booklet.
- Give students the opportunity to talk and express their emotions. Activities such as writing, art, or music may help them work through their emotions. For more ideas, download our [Teacher Lesson Plans and Activity Worksheets](#).
- Ask an expert to talk to the class; for example, someone from the person's treatment team or an oncology social worker. Remember to get permission from all parties involved first.
- Book the free [Cancer Education Program](#), featuring the Camp Quality Puppets, to visit your school.

HOW TO HELP A FAMILY FACING CANCER

AT DIAGNOSIS

- Talk to the family and offer your support.
- Nominate a school liaison person to stay in touch with the family – they can keep other staff members updated with the situation.
- Explain what services are available through the school.
- Direct the family to Camp Quality's [Family Registration Form](#), to access programs and services that support mental wellbeing and build resilience and optimism. For an overview of all services available in the cancer space, visit the [Cancer Hub](#) or call 1800 945 215.
- Ask the family what information they want you to share.
- Respect their wishes and privacy. Some people may wish to keep their cancer diagnosis quiet. That's OK.
- [Book the Cancer Education Program](#), featuring the Camp Quality Puppets, to visit your school.



DURING TREATMENT

- Offer the family practical support; for example, help with shopping, meals, laundry, or carpooling, if appropriate.
- Liaise with the student's family and hospital school to plan learning and support.
- Support siblings and classmates.
- Plan for the child's return, if applicable.

RETURN TO SCHOOL

- Treat the student as normally as possible (remembering that the diagnosed person cannot be in contact with anyone who has a cold, cough or infectious illness due to compromised immunity).
- In conjunction with the child's parents and medical team, develop a back-to-school (BTS) health care plan for the student.
- Inform teachers of any medical complications included in the student's BTS health care plan.
- Maintain good communication with staff and the school community regarding the student's welfare.
- Provide ongoing support for academic, emotional, or behavioural issues, or any physical changes.
- Ask if the student would like to talk to the school counsellor, or another trusted adult in the school community.
- Arrange for extra tutoring, flexible due dates, or exemption from sport or other events, if necessary.



FIND WAYS TO STAY IN TOUCH

- Social media, video chats, emails or texts can keep the student with cancer connected to friends and the school community.
- Send postcards, letters, drawings, or photos.
- Record an audio or video/DVD of a school event, or personal messages.
- Create a website or blog about what's happening at school.
- Plan a cancer awareness event or [school fundraiser](#) (if it's OK with the family).

BEREAVEMENT IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

The good news is that survival rates for adults and children with cancer have increased. The five-year relative survival rate for cancer has increased from 51% to 70% between 1988–1992 and 2013–2017, according to the [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(AIHW\)](#) (2022). Unfortunately, not everyone survives – so what should you do if someone is unlikely to recover? How can you support those who are bereaved? These tips will help.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR A CANCER-RELATED BEREAVEMENT

- Staff and students may wish to visit the person prior to their death, with the family's consent.
- If they can't visit, staff, students, parents and carers can stay in touch with the person in other ways. The 'Find Ways To Stay In Touch' page in this book may help.
- Keep key community members updated about the person's situation.
- Staff can have age-appropriate discussions with students about death, loss, and grief. Refer to the 'What Children Understand About Death' page in this booklet.

WHAT TO DO IF SOMEONE DIES

- Check your school's guidelines for managing a critical situation, including death.
- With the family's permission, and in consultation with them or their representative, decide on how best to let people know.
- Offer support to the family or friends of the person who has died; for example, access to the school counsellor or external counselling sessions for students and staff.
- Inform students in their normal class groups or in small groups, rather than in an all-school assembly.
- Send a letter home to families or include a note in the school's newsletter, if that is appropriate.
- Stick to school routines.
- Explore different ways for students to talk about the death, ask questions, and express their emotions.
- Educate students about cancer in class; for example, include information about cancer research and treatment in the curriculum, especially if students raise the topic.
- Plan a memorial for the person; for example, plant a tree or place a memorial plaque within the school grounds.



SUPPORT SERVICES

Families needing bereavement support can contact the [Cancer Hub](#) or call **1800 945 215**.

HOW TO TALK TO KIDS ABOUT DEATH

A principal will often work with the school counsellor on a short script to help teachers tell their class what happened. Encourage staff to meet and discuss how best to share the information. Only ask staff members to speak if they feel able to manage students' reactions and questions.

Give staff the following information:

- The main points that explain the circumstances of the death.
- Some positive words of reminiscence.
- Details of how the school will honour the person who died, if appropriate.
- Details of the funeral service and arrangements for attending, if known and appropriate.
- The best way to send condolences from the school and from individual staff members and students.
- Information about support and counselling services for students.

Grief is a process that can be different for everyone. When talking to students about death, factors like their cultural background and age may influence what you say, and how you say it. Create opportunities for students to talk about the death and ask questions. Encourage them to express grief and sympathy in ways they find comfortable. Remember that the purpose of telling students is to draw the school community together and help the grieving process.

WHAT CHILDREN UNDERSTAND ABOUT DEATH

Lower primary (4–7 years)

- May think death is temporary.
- Might realise that death means someone isn't around anymore but may not understand the cause of death.
- Sometimes believe their behaviour caused the death.
- Might wonder who'll look after them or teach them.
- Might worry that cancer is contagious or that they will die too.
- May ask confronting questions.

Upper primary (7–12 years)

- Understand death is permanent.
- Know some reasons why death happens (for example, illness or old age).
- Are less likely to blame themselves for the loss but might blame someone else.
- Want to know more about death, including what happens after death.
- Are better at articulating their feelings and showing sympathy.

Secondary school (12–18 years)

- Usually understand death.
- Might respond in a self-centred way to the loss.
- May worry about their own mortality.
- May express feelings in positive ways (for example, writing or playing sport).
- Usually want to spend more time with friends after the loss.
- May express their distress through risk-taking behaviours.
- Need to know that support and counselling are available.
- Might find it helpful to take part in a private or public memorial service.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHAT IS CANCER?

Our bodies are made up of millions of tiny cells; they're like building blocks for your body. But sometimes the body makes some cells that aren't normal. These are called cancer cells and they can make a person sick.

HOW DO YOU GET CANCER?

Your body makes new cells all the time. These are usually healthy cells that help us grow and heal. New cells in your body make you grow taller, and keep you well and active. Cancer cells can grow more quickly than normal cells. They can overtake healthy cells and stop them from doing their job. This can make a person sick. Some cancers grow as a lump called a tumour.

CAN YOU CATCH CANCER?

No. Cancer isn't contagious like a cold or flu. Just like you can't 'catch' a broken leg, you can't catch cancer. It's OK and safe to hang out with someone who has cancer.

HOW LONG DOES CANCER LAST?

That depends, as every cancer is different. Treatment can take months, or maybe even years depending on the type of cancer. Doctors and scientists are working on new ways to fight cancer cells more quickly.

WHAT TREATMENTS ARE THERE FOR CANCER?

Common treatments for cancer include radiotherapy, chemotherapy, surgery, and transplants.

WHAT IS CHEMOTHERAPY?

Chemotherapy (often called 'chemo') is the most common medicine given to people with cancer. It is a group of very strong medicines that slow down or get rid of cancer cells. This eventually allows the healthy cells to grow again, once the bad cells have been reduced or wiped out. If we don't treat cancer, the patient won't get better.

DOES CHEMOTHERAPY HAVE ANY SIDE-EFFECTS?

Chemotherapy's job is to get rid of cancer cells and stop them from growing. A side-effect of chemo is that it can also attack healthy cells. Chemo can sometimes make hair fall out, cause a sore mouth, make you feel very tired and stop you from being hungry. But when chemo stops, these side-effects stop as well.

WILL THEIR HAIR GROW BACK?

Yes, when they stop having chemo. Until then, some people might wear cool hats, scarves, or wigs – or even proudly show off their bald head!

DO KIDS GET CANCER?

People of any age can get cancer, including kids. Kids with cancer often go to a children's hospital for treatment. Cancer in kids is rare. Talk to someone you trust – like your mum, dad, or teacher – if you have questions about this.

CAN PEOPLE DIE FROM CANCER?

Most people get better after treatment for cancer. However, some cancers can be difficult to treat and sometimes people die. If you are worried about someone you love who has cancer, talk to someone you trust.

HOW MANY TYPES OF CANCER ARE THERE?

There are more than 200 different types of cancer in adults, while for children there are 12 major types of cancer. They are usually named after the part of the body where the cancer cells first grow; for example, 'stomach cancer', or 'brain cancer', or 'breast cancer'.

WHAT CANCERS AFFECT CHILDREN?

Acute leukaemia (cancer of the blood) is the most common cancer affecting children, followed by brain cancer. Other types of cancer include neuroblastoma (cancer of the nerve cells), lymphoma (cancer in the lymphatic system) and sarcoma (cancer developing in the bone, muscle, or connective tissue).

Do you, or someone you know, have a question about cancer?

Camp Quality has additional resources available to help you easily and safely find out more. To download the [Kids' Guide to Cancer app](#), our [Teacher Lesson Plans and Activity Worksheets](#), or for further support, visit campquality.org.au, or call us on 1300 662 267.

CAMP QUALITY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Have you heard about what we do at Camp Quality? We bring positivity, fun and laughter back into the lives of kids facing cancer (0-15) who are dealing with their own cancer diagnosis, or the diagnosis of a sibling, parent, or carer, every step of the way.

Check out our free programs and services, all specially developed to help kids and their families build optimism and resilience through community, education and fun.

We're proud to have improved the quality of life for kids impacted by cancer, and their families, for almost 40 years. If you, your students or their families need support on the cancer journey, we can help.

PUPPET PROGRAMS

The Camp Quality Puppets bring laughter, joy and age-appropriate learning to kids at school, in hospital and online.

- [Cancer Education Program](#)
- [Hospital Puppet Playdates](#)
- [Digital Puppet Playdates](#)

RECREATION PROGRAMS

Camp Quality understands it is vital for kids and families to get a break from cancer. That is why we offer families precious time away to reconnect, build resilience and create happy memories together.

- [Kids' Camps](#)
- [Family Camps](#)
- [Family Experiences](#)
- [Family Fun Days](#)
- [Retreats](#)
- [Virtual Camps](#)

HOSPITAL PROGRAMS

When a child is undergoing cancer treatment in hospital, Camp Quality is by their side.

- [Child Life Therapy](#)
- [Beads of Courage](#)

SERVICES AND ONLINE RESOURCES

Cancer can be an isolating experience. That's why our digital resources and counselling aim to be there for our kids and families 24/7.

- [Cancer Hub](#)
- [Parenting Through Cancer](#)
- [Counselling Services](#)
- [Kids' Guide to Cancer app](#)
- [School Resources](#)
- [Happiness Hub](#)

To register with Camp Quality, learn more about our programs and services, or for further support, call 1300 662 267, or visit campquality.org.au.



HOW YOU CAN HELP

Camp Quality relies almost entirely on the generosity of everyday Australians to help us provide our programs and services free of charge. There are so many ways you can help make this possible:



DONATE

Whether you're able to give a one-off contribution or become a regular giver, you can donate on our website or by calling.

1300 662 267



VOLUNTEER WITH US

If you are passionate about making a difference to kids facing cancer and are over 18, visit our website and apply to become a volunteer.

campquality.org.au/volunteer



REGISTER WITH US

If you have a child aged 0-15 years old diagnosed with cancer, or you're a parent or primary carer diagnosed with cancer and have a child 0-15 years or under in your household, register with Camp Quality today.

campquality.org.au/register-your-family



SPREAD THE WORD

Follow us on social media to hear our news and share our stories.



FUNDRAISE FOR US

If you or your school would like to support Camp Quality, be it a mufti day, bake sale, crazy hair, sock or hat day, or in any other way, you can register here to fundraise for us.

fundraise.campquality.org.au



JOIN A FUNDRAISING EVENT

Camp Quality runs fundraising events in the community and online. Sign up and join the fun.

campquality.org.au/events

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