



Young Caregivers

When kids and young adults care for a parent with cancer

There is an invisible group of people joining the ranks of cancer caregivers—kids. These aren't the adult children of parents with cancer; these are adolescents and young adults caught between the reality of two worlds: the world of friends, school, and fun versus the world of cancer and everything that comes with it.

Kids as Caregivers

There is little data about the population of kids serving as caregivers; most studies focus on people over age 18. However, a recent report from the National Alliance for Caregiving indicates that the ranks of young caregivers are growing.¹ In fact, nationwide approximately 1.4 million kids ages 8 to 18 are serving as caregivers and about 4 percent of those are caring for someone with cancer.

Why are kids serving as caregivers? It can be the result of socioeconomic status, a single-parent home, or because that's what families do—they unite during a crisis. If mom has cancer and dad has to keep working to support the family, that means kids are stepping up to fill many caregiving needs.

These young caregivers face a variety of tasks including household chores, meal preparation, and assisting loved ones with activities of daily living such as bathing, feeding, medications, and more. It's a huge responsibility for young folks who may not have had the emotional preparation to cope with the juggling act of caregiving.

Caregiving Concerns

While caregiving is an adjustment for anyone, it poses a unique challenge for young people. Adolescents and young adults need a sense of stability that allows them to explore, experiment, and grow. When a parent has cancer, the child must confront uncertainty and many changing complexities. Some of the challenges these young caregivers face include:

- Feeling isolated from friends
- Experiencing parent-child role reversal
- High stress load as they juggle school and caregiving
- Feeling misunderstood by their peer group
- An emotional roller coaster of guilt, fear, resentment, and more
- Intense fatigue (Adolescents need more sleep and this is often compromised due to caregiving.)
- Pressure to meet family expectations

- Inability to look toward the future
- Change in personal plans (Some college students report dropping out of school to care for a parent.)

Support for the Young Caregiver

In a perfect world, kids would be allowed to be kids. Unfortunately, we don't live in a perfect world and young folks must sometimes step into caregiving roles. When this is the case, it is imperative to enlist support.

- **Emotional support:** A social worker or therapist can be an invaluable resource for young caregivers. It's important to have this outlet. A professional counselor can help young people navigate the emotional stress of caregiving.
- **Community support:** No caregiver can do it all alone, especially young caregivers who may be juggling schoolwork along with caregiving responsibilities. The wider community can provide extra support for the family through meal drop-offs and more. Organizing this extra support helps relieve some of the burden on the young caregiver.
- **Balance:** Young caregivers still need an opportunity to be kids and to spend time with friends. It is up to their adult community—parents, teachers, doctors, spiritual advisors—to ensure that they maintain a healthy balance.

The best way to support young caregivers is to try to maintain parent-child roles and allow kids to be kids. When your child is a caregiver:

- Have children perform age-appropriate tasks, such as folding laundry or emptying the dishwasher.
- Seek adult help whenever possible, especially for adult tasks such as administration of medication or help with personal hygiene.
- Enlist outside support when possible. For example, perhaps a friend can organize a care team via an online tool such as lotsahelpinghands.com.

There is no question that cancer is a family affair. With some extra community support, families—and kids—can still thrive in the face of cancer.

Reference:

¹ National Alliance for Caregiving in collaboration with the United Hospital Fund. *Young Caregivers in the U.S.: Findings from a National Survey*. September 2005.