

Rowans Hospice is a voluntary and independent hospice which exists to provide the highest quality specialist end of life care to patients with life-limiting illnesses living in the Portsmouth and South East Hampshire area.

We guide and support patients and those closest to them through the journey of their illness every step of the way.

We offer specialist support wherever it is needed, at the Hospice, at home and in the local community.

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Rowans Meerkat Service



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# Rowans Meerkat Service

*Communicating  
with Children  
and Young People*



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Hospice

- This leaflet has been created to provide guidance for families supporting children and young people when someone has a serious illness. The information presented is only a broad overview as all families and their circumstances are different.
- Please do not hesitate to approach a member of staff if you would like further help or advice.
- Remember, supporting children in these circumstances is not easy; be kind to yourself as well.
- Understandably, family members often try to protect each other, believing that by not talking about a person's illness, children will not be upset. However, if children are excluded, they will often make up their own explanation for what is happening. This can lead to confusion and further distress.
- Information is best given in small chunks. A child's attention span can be limited, especially when taking in difficult information.
- It is common for children to ask the same repetitive questions. Try to be patient and consistent with your answers. It is okay for children to know that adults do not always have the answers or that sometimes you may be unsure how best to respond. On these occasions, reassure your child that you will come back to them with a response.
- Children are limited in the words they have to articulate their feelings, they are more likely to demonstrate their emotions through their behaviour.
- Some children worry about upsetting other members of their family and therefore bottle up their feelings. It can be reassuring for children to hear that all feelings are okay and that everybody (adults and children) have different ways of showing their emotions. There is no such thing as a 'right' or a 'wrong' way.
- Children may feel responsible when things go wrong. It is important that they are given reassurance that they are not to blame for causing a person's illness.

- It can be helpful for children to see that their family are also finding things tough. It is really hard for an adult to 'stay strong' all the time for their child. Sometimes, sharing your sadness can validate a child's feelings and reassure them that it is okay to cry. At the same time, children just need to know that you are still able to look after them.
- For many teenagers, their friendship networks become the most important source of support. Therefore, a young person may choose to speak most openly with their closest friends before family members. If this is the case then ensuring your child knows you are also there to listen and support can provide the right balance. ([www.riprap.org.uk](http://www.riprap.org.uk) has been developed especially for teenagers who have a parent with cancer).
- When children are distressed, adults might feel like offering more treats and relaxing boundaries and discipline. At times this may be appropriate but generally, children feel more safe and secure if usual family rules and routine are maintained.

### Hints and Tips

Children need information, reassurance and involvement. It can be more frightening for children if they are not clear about what is happening. They can become confused, anxious or feel unable to ask questions.

- Even when you have explained things to your child, check what they have understood. Sometimes children appear to have taken in far more information than they really have.
- Avoid making promises you can't keep.
- Children step in and out of feelings in a way that may seem insensitive. Whilst this may be difficult to see or hear, it is a normal reaction and it does not mean they do not care. It is impossible for children to stay sad all of the time!
- Praise children for being helpful and thoughtful but not for being brave which could imply it is wrong to be upset.
- Please keep in contact with your child's school. It will help them to provide appropriate support.