

# Will Mommy be Okay?

Helping kids deal with mom's cancer diagnosis can be just as important as the treatment

by Sarah McCoy



In 1990, Dr. Wendy Harpham was a wife, a mother of three young children and a successful internal medicine physician with her own practice at Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas. Life was good. Then the unthinkable happened: a diagnosis of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

"I was a kindergartner when my mom got cancer," recalls Wendy's daughter, Becky Harpham, in a column for *Oncology Times*. "Much of the first few years of her illness are a blur. I just remember feeling scared, and hating everything having to do with cancer, doctors and hospitals."

That's a normal reaction for kids, explains Wendy, who is now in remission and has made it her life's work to help cancer-diagnosed mothers raising children. She's the author of numerous books

and has appeared on *Today* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

"My children told me my honesty was the best thing I could have done for them," Wendy says. "If you exclude your children, you take the risk that they draw inaccurate or less hopeful conclusions."

Dr. Paula Rauch, director of Parenting At a Challenging Time (PACT) at Massachusetts General Hospital, agrees. "The first part of a quality conversation begins with naming the cancer so that a child can talk about it. Many parents imagine it's more protective not to use the word 'cancer.' They worry that their child might have heard cancer in association with other scary things—another death in the family or a friend's family. Our experience and research support the idea that children feel

better when they're included, not excluded, from the conversation."

It's not enough to call it a "boo-boo" or "owie." This can cause children to be paranoid that every scraped knee or achy tummy has the same repercussions as cancer.

"You've got to use the words 'breast' and 'cancer,'" Wendy clarifies.

A recent study conducted at the University of Oxford explored children's perceptions of their moms' breast cancer treatment and how much the moms thought they knew. It concluded that there were large misconceptions and called for hospital staff to have more involvement in helping parents inform children.

"We'd like every cancer center to have designated mental health experts for parenting. We want to help them communicate



## Be a Captain of Kindnesses

What can neighbors, friends and family do to help? Dr. Paula Rauch, director of Parenting At a Challenging Time (PACT) at Massachusetts General Hospital and co-author of *Raising an Emotionally Healthy Child When a Parent Is Sick*, suggests appointing a Captain of Kindnesses. This is an individual outside the immediate family who organizes well-wishers. Some of Rauch's ideas for the captain are:

- Organize meal delivery. See that meals are dropped off in a cooler outside the front door so there's no ringing of the doorbell or socializing. The dishes are left back in the cooler for friendly pickup.
- Have people chip in for gas cards to relieve the family's financial burden of driving back and forth to the hospital.
- Organize and maintain CarePages ([carepages.com](http://carepages.com)) or a Listserve to update friends and family about the mom's treatment.

with their children and recognize when a child needs services," Rauch says.

For Becky, having the facts was the most helpful part of her mom's treatment. "My parents always told me the truth. Sure, I still worried about her dying. But I never worried about what might be going on that they weren't telling us or that they were lying."

But what about death? This can be a hard reality for both children and adults to address.

"I didn't bring up death unless they did," Wendy recalls. "Becky brought it up in a roundabout way by asking what would happen if our dog died. I asked if she was worried about me, and she said, 'Yes.' I told her I'll die one day, like every other person, and some people die from cancer. That if I did, she'd be well taken care of and even though it would be very sad for a while, she'd always feel my love. Then I assured her I was not dying now—I'd tell her if things ever changed—and we should focus on having a super summer."

Rauch suggests, "When the question comes up, it's really helpful to ask the child, 'What's got you worried?' Maybe they know someone who died of breast cancer or maybe death is the only thing they know about breast cancer. If the parent is just going to be in treatment but isn't going to die, they're not so worried. If a mom has a metastatic disease, the goal is to carve out safety zones. To say: No one is worried about my dying of

breast cancer in the next couple of years. I'll continue treatments that will keep me alive, which we hope will be a long time. It's important for kids that parents be hopeful."

But the burden of hope does not rest solely on the mother. When children are in a dual-parent home, dads are a crucial ingredient.

"Kids may not want to burden a mom with their worries. For that reason, they may go to their dads," Rauch explains. "Dads need to check in with their kids: Ask how they're doing and what could dad do better—more like mom."

As for kids, allowing them to be proactive in mom's recovery is vital. Helplessness increases stress.

"Moms should remind kids that they don't cause mom's breast cancer and they can't make it go away. But they can make her smile," Rauch says. "Tell the child, 'Draw me those nice pictures and when I go in for treatment, I'll take one of your good-luck pictures.' It's a matter of putting it in boundaries."

Wendy agrees. "I focused on how it helped me when they set the dinner table, kept their rooms tidy, used good manners, did well in school and enjoyed their friends. Finding healthy and hopeful answers for my children led to answers that helped me as a patient."

For more information, visit Wendy's Web site at [wendyharpham.com](http://wendyharpham.com) or the PACT program at [mghpact.org](http://mghpact.org). ☺

## Available Programs

KIDSCOPE Inc. is an organization dedicated to helping children cope with a mom's cancer through the distribution of educational materials. The group's products include a 16-page Kemo Shark coloring book and a DVD with interviews and a narrated version of Kemo Shark. Both of these have been praised for their ability to facilitate open and honest conversation among parents and children.

"Parents can call their oncologist's office and/or the local hospital to learn about services for kids. The American Cancer Society, Wellness Communities and Gilda's Clubs have such programs, too," suggests Dr. Wendy Harpham, author of *The Hope Tree: Kids Talk about Breast Cancer*.

