

Explaining bad news to children can be one of the hardest things to have to do as a parent/carer. Sometimes it can be tempting not to tell children bad news, but children, like adults, need to know what is happening. Keeping children 'in the dark' can lead to other difficulties where a child's fantasies can be far scarier than the reality of the news. Also, if and when children find out the truth, they can feel angry and upset that they had not been told sooner.

Children like adults, need plenty of time to make sense of and deal with the news. There are no 'perfect' ways of telling children bad news, no ways that can protect children from the upset and pain of the news. But there are ways of helping children make sense of the bad news and this leaflet describes some of those ways.

## What do I say?

It is important to explain the news in a truthful, sensitive manner and by using 'age appropriate' language that children can understand. Often a balance can be found between telling the raw truth and being sensitive. Children can find it difficult to take in a lot of information, so it can be useful to explain the news in stages. This gives children time to come

to terms with the news and to think of questions, thoughts or feelings.

Explaining bad news to children doesn't just inform children about what is happening, it also opens up a line of communication between them and their parent(s)/carer(s). This is very important, as children need to feel they are able to ask questions or discuss the news at a later date.

## I don't want to upset my child

It is very natural for parents/carers to try and protect children from any bad news. However, this protection can sometimes mean that children are deprived of the truth. This also means that children don't have the chance to discuss the news, to be upset with parents/carers, and to get support when they need it.

Very often children will have already overheard conversations or will have some idea that something important is happening. Sharing the bad news with children means they will have an opportunity to ask questions and discuss their fears.

Very often there is no way of protecting children from the pain and upset of the bad news. This can be

very hard for parent(s)/carer(s) who naturally want their children to be happy. But if the news is painful and upsetting, then it is natural and appropriate for children to feel this way.

## Helpful hints

- ◆ Tell children the news in a truthful and sensitive manner;
- ◆ Always try and use age appropriate language – Try not to use abstract or complicated explanations;
- ◆ Make sure you have plenty of time afterwards to spend with your child – to answer questions or just to support your child;
- ◆ Take care of yourself – It can be very upsetting and painful to have to tell children bad news;
- ◆ You don't have to do it all yourself – ask a close family friend or relative to help you and your children;
- ◆ Remember there is no 'perfect' right way of telling children bad news;

◆ It can often take a few explanations before children can understand what is happening – One explanation may not answer all your children’s questions and fears;

◆ It is always useful to tell the child’s teachers about what is happening – they may be able to offer support or keep a watchful eye;

◆ It is very common and natural for children to ask questions ‘out of the blue’ and at a later date;

◆ It is common for children’s behaviour and emotions to be different after they have been told the news. They may want to keep close to you, have difficulty sleeping etc. This is natural and things should get back to normal after some time.

*If you have any questions or concerns about yourself and/or your child, please contact Zig Zag Children’s Service.*

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

**Telephone the service on**

**020 8539 5592**

**You can leave a message outside office hours**

**Or write to**

**ZIG ZAG Children’s Service**

**Psychological Support Service**

**The Margaret Centre**

**Whipps Cross University Hospital**

**Barts Health NHS Trust**

**Whipps Cross Road**

**Leytonstone**

**London E11 1NR**

Barts Health **NHS**  
NHS Trust

**EXPLAINING BAD NEWS**

**TO CHILDREN**

**Information for**

**Parents and Carers**



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