

When someone is ill – Advice for adults

When someone close to a child or young person falls ill

This text refers to both children and young people, but in the running text we have chosen to simplify by writing 'children'.

Illnesses and accidents affect the whole family, both emotionally and practically. Children have resources to cope with a lot. They often have the ability to accept the situation as is. If we allow children to be involved in what happens during a period of illness, we make it easier for them to deal with the situation.

What does a child need to know?

In the past, adults were supposed to withhold difficult things from children, but now we know that this makes a difficult situation even more difficult. Children can sense when something is wrong with an adult and if they get no information, they make up their own explanations using their imagination and are then left alone with their worries.

Adults in the family often know the child best and can tell them in a way that suits the child. Regardless of age, all children need to know what the illness is called, what is being done to help and what will happen in the near future, including in the child's everyday life. The child also needs to know that it is never the child's fault that someone is ill and that it is okay to have a good time and laugh occasionally even if someone in the family is ill. Talk to the child when you feel up to it, perhaps together with the family, and give the child the opportunity to ask questions. If it is too much, ask another adult with whom the child feels safe to help you. If it is difficult for your family to work together for the best of the child, ask for help.

Strive to maintain daily routines. It will show the child that you care and daily habits give a sense of security. The child needs to be able to lead a normal life supported by having contact with friends and leisure activities. It may be useful to inform school and child care staff about the situation. It may be beneficial for children to get separate support, individually or in groups, where they can meet other children with similar experiences.

Age-appropriate information

Children and young people need age-appropriate information in order for them to understand and process what is happening. Encourage the child to ask questions.

Pre-school children age 2-6 live in the present, they see themselves as the centre of the world and may therefore believe that the illness is their fault. A change in everyday routines can be more frightening than the fact that someone is ill. Talk about what has

happened or what will happen in a way that is easy to understand.

Children age 7-12 are interested in concrete reality. You can explain a bit more to them and search for facts together. They may have a hard time putting feelings into words but can answer questions about things that they are thinking about. School-age children are beginning to become aware of the risks we live with. It can therefore be important to explain that it is very rare that something will happen to the rest of the family or the child itself, despite the fact that someone close to the child has fallen ill.

Teenagers and young adults understand the full meaning and consequences of having an illness. Provide information about the illness and treatments. Respect the integrity of the teenager. Teenagers can become extremely tied to the family or choose to distance themselves from the family. Let the teenager decide if and when he/she wants to come with you to the hospital.

Severe illness in a parent can make the parental detachment process harder. Many teenagers and young adults do not know much about common reactions after receiving bad news or in the event of illness. If you do not know what a normal reaction is, you may interpret your own reactions as odd and abnormal. Please remember the young people who have left home.

If you need more information

More information can be found on the joint website of county councils and regions 1177.se.

This material has been prepared based on material from Region Östergötland and Region Örebro län.

