

Helping Families to Cope: Delivering Bad news

Timing – As soon as a diagnosis is known, or a treatment has been planned, it should be discussed with the child and the parents. Do not delay communication in fear of saddening the patient or family. But it is also important to be prepared for this encounter. Try to anticipate what types of questions may be asked and consider your answers before the encounter.

Setting – Choose a calm, quiet setting that is comfortable for the patient. Make sure all members of the party are there who should be there for this first delivery of news.

Tailoring – Depending on the type of news to be delivered, tailor your tone of voice and approach. Be sure to be clear about what you know and what is uncertain. In these difficult situations, it is critical to be aware of the patient's cultural background. For example, most people who are Caucasian and African-American expect straight-forward, honest information, whereas people of Navajo background sometimes believe that the telling of bad news may lead to a worse outcome.

Asking and Listening – Ask the family periodically what questions they have. What is their understanding of what you have said? Listen to their concerns, maintain good eye contact, and do not jump in if there is silence. Most importantly, ask open-ended questions as much as possible to help you discover what the patient is really wondering about.

Offering to meet again – It can be difficult for parents and children to fully comprehend what you are saying the first time. Perhaps they have listened, but not completely heard all of the details. Or perhaps they will think of more questions at home. Always offer to meet again and discuss any confusing aspects of the conversation as well as new questions that may have come up.

Including the child – This will certainly depend on the age of the child, but do not underestimate a young child's ability to understand his or her body. Ask parents when they think it is best to include the child. Always explain to them that the better their child understands his or her illness the better able he or she will be to cope as well as collaborate on treatments.

Considering your own emotions – Delivering distressing news is never easy for a physician, and can seem even more difficult when the patient is a child. Be aware that your body language and facial expressions sometimes say more than words. It is appropriate to be saddened by the news one is delivering, but try to maintain a professional, yet compassionate, demeanor during your visit so as not to project your emotions onto your patient.