Supporting someone who is caring for a seriously ill child

PalliativeCare AUSTRALIA

When a family member or friend is caring for a seriously ill child, you may not know what to say or do. It can help if you reach out to the family as your desire to help may be of comfort to them.

Often people do not know what to say or do so they don't do anything, waiting for the family to reach out to them. Families can be left feeling isolated and hurt and they may not know how or when to ask for help.

There are many different ways to offer help. You may give your friend an idea of what you are able to do. If you're not sure how to support them, ask them what you can do to help.

It is important to remember that the aim is to support the family in a way that works for them. People can find it difficult to ask for or accept help, so try to provide support in a practical, sensitive way that is easy for them to accept.

Reach out

Even if you're not sure what to say, reaching out to the family is helpful. Simple gestures like a text, an email, or a card are some ways of showing that you care. Hearing "I've been thinking about you" can be a source of comfort and strength.

If you take a gift for the sick child, try to give a small gift or give some special attention to their siblings too. Helping to keep sibling's routines as normal as possible can also be a great way to show your support. Offering to take them to their after-school activities or looking after them while their unwell sibling attends medical appointments are some easy ways to assist.

The family will sometimes need to talk about their experiences, and other times they will choose not to. Watch for signs when they want to talk, have a distraction, or just want some quiet company.

Respect

Be respectful of the family, their home, their routine and their need for privacy. It is a good idea to check with the family before visiting. Be prepared that it might not be a good day or time for visitors or they might be too busy.

Don't be discouraged if they ask you not to visit. Every day is different for families who are caring for a seriously ill child. Stay engaged with the family and continue to offer support throughout the child's illness.

Be mindful of the child's illness. If you are unwell or have been around another sick person, don't visit until you are feeling better.

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Offer

Small practical offers are often welcome support, these may include:

- Delivering a meal that is easy to serve and in a container that doesn't need to be returned
- Helping the family to maintain their routine by providing transport and babysitting
- Minding their pets or taking them on walks
- Mowing the lawn or tending to the garden
- Doing the grocery shopping
- Picking up medications or supplies
- Helping with vacuuming, laundry, ironing or other household chores
- Helping answer phone calls, messages and other correspondence on behalf of the family
- Offering or arranging for care of their child

Offer tangible suggestions to help, phrased in a way that the family can comfortably decline. For example, send them a text that says "I'm picking up dinner, can I pick up dinner for you?" or "I am free on Saturday afternoon, would you like me to look after the kids?"

Sometimes parents may feel disconnected from their friends. Don't forget to include them in 'everyday' activities. This may include meeting up for a coffee, going for a walk or going to the movies.

Coordinate

There may be a roster to assist in coordinating the help being provided by friends and family. Rosters can help to identify tasks that support the family, which may include meals, transport and household chores. Rosters can also be useful for people who do not know how to help as it can list specific tasks identified by the family which they can volunteer to do. It may be helpful to appoint a trusted friend or family member to coordinate the roster on behalf of the family, to reduce the number of things they have to do.

Artwork by Anabelle, 15 years old

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Palliative Care Australia is funded by the Australian Government