



Reaching Out and Accepting Help

When a child is diagnosed with cancer, people instinctively want to help. Many families have found it useful to appoint a close friend or family member to coordinate offers of assistance. The lists below are based on the experiences of an Aunt who assisted a large family over the three-year course of her niece's illness. Although each of these items may not apply to your situation, they may help you think of other specific ways those who offer to help can assist your family.

25 Ways to Help ANY Family Fighting for their Child's Life

- 1) Bring Food** Take prepared food in containers that do not need to be returned.
- 2) Serve a Meal** Serve a meal and clean up afterward—it may give parents the only half-hour of spare time they get that day.
- 3) Make a Donation** Donate to an expense fund for the child's non-reimbursed medical expenses, such as co-pays, home-care medications, and travel expenses.
- 4) Organize Fund-Raisers.** Organize a fund-raiser, so the parents aren't forced to leave the child's side to raise money to pay for care and medications. Remember, insurance covers only about 80% of associated costs, and cancer bills often top \$1,000,000 after 3 years, depending on treatment.
- 5) Organize People.** Organize a small revolving group to do meals or grocery shopping, etc.
- 6) Check on Necessary Supplies.** Call from the grocery store and say, "I'm at the store...look in the fridge and tell me if you have (a) milk (b) bread (c) apples/bananas (d) lunch meat (e) butter (f) eggs (g) cereal. Then have them check reserves on (h) pet food (i) toilet paper (j) paper towels (k) laundry detergent (l) soap (m) diapers. Ask if there are specific brands they prefer or package sizes they need. Do this without expecting repayment, and consider it part of philanthropic giving or tithes and gifts.
- 7) Little Gifts Mean a Lot.** Presents are sweet and thoughtful, but daily necessities are also greatly appreciated. Consider a simple bag of apples and paper towels.
- 8) Do a Household Chore.** Clean the bathrooms or kitchen, change the sheets, or do a load of laundry. Bring the supplies you'll need with you, and be aware that it's often best to do noisy or disruptive tasks when the family is out.
- 9) Take on a Regular Task.** Offer to do a weekly task like drive a sibling to a lesson, picking kids up from school, packing lunches, or helping with homework one night a week. Knowing that they can rely on you doing something consistently gives the family a little predictability. Still, you should always confirm the routine, because their lives are always "up in the air" and a medical crisis may necessitate a change in plans.
- 10) Help Them Think (no kidding!).** Help one or both parents think through the week and obligations for the other children, such as soccer games and parent-teacher conferences. Ask if there are insurance forms to fill out, bills to be paid, and gas tanks to be filled. Going through a list like this can help them focus and organize thoughts that may otherwise be a jumble.

- 11) Take the Kids Out.** Take the siblings to dinner, the movies, or another event they'd enjoy. Or if the sick child is able, take him/her to the park, or for a slurpee or ice cream cone. This gives everyone a break and is usually great quality time.
- 12) Pay a Bill Anonymously.** Call the electric/gas/phone company—anonymously if you wish—and tell them you want to pay the current bill for the family.
- 13) Gift Certificates.** Give them gift cards for the grocery store, McDonald's, Starbucks, etc.
- 14) Give Them Supplies to Simplify Their Lives.** Stop by the house with a bag of paper cups, paper plates, and trash bags to make life easier.
- 15) Give the Parents a Short Break.** Offer to sit and read or play games with the sick child—either in the hospital or at home. An hour break from the stress of constant-care can be reviving.
- 16) Help Research Treatment Options, Medications, Alternative Medicine, etc.** Do the Internet research that is so critical in pro-active education and care, and provide them with printed pages in a file or notebook. Highlight the pertinent information so they don't have to read the entire report.
- 17) Give the Parents a Date Night.** Babysit one night a month so the parents can go out for a walk, go to dinner, or see a movie.
- 18) Thank-You's.** Provide stamped thank-you notes and offer to write some for them.
- 19) Help with Pet Care.** Take the family pets to the groomer or to the vet for checkup/shots
- 20) Help with Car Care.** Take their car to the shop for inspections and repairs, or fill up the gas tank and run it through the car wash.
- 21) Help with Kid Care Needs.** Take the kids for haircuts, medical checkups, and shopping for clothes, shoes, school or camp supplies they need.
- 22) Help with Holidays.** Help pick up holiday gifts and wrap them, or offer to put up their decorations.
- 23) Support the Mom and the Dad.** Determine the best way to emotionally support each parent separately. Mothers may want to talk, bake, rest, or shop; fathers may prefer to a chance to play golf or go to a ball game.
- 24) Help with Financial Chores.** Offer to come balance the checkbook, make deposits, pay bills, or just organize the medical bills.
- 25) Help with Seasonal Household Chores.** Make sure the walks and drives are plowed in winter, grass is cut in the summer, and leaves are raked in the fall.

***Things to Avoid Saying or Doing
When a Family is Dealing with a Child's Life-threatening Illness***

- 1) DON'T be judgmental.** Everyone differs in the way they run their family and handle stress. Never judge a parent with a sick child. Negative judgments are incredibly destructive and can forever damage relationships.
- 2) DON'T let your interest or involvement dwindle.** People tend to surround a family at the time of diagnosis then, understandably, go on with their lives. But the sick child and family continue the battle for years, and need ongoing support.
- 3) DON'T talk too much about new purchases, vacations, other volunteer or philanthropic causes, or how great your life is.** It's only a reminder of how horrid their lives are at the moment. While they want and need to share happy things in your life, be sensitive to their changed priorities and values.
- 4) DO be judicious about talking about your own, or other family, problems.** Learning of others' problems when they cannot help will tend to depress them and add to their stress.
- 5) DO take your cue from the parents regarding topics of conversation.** Sometimes they need a break from thinking about their problems, so talk about other light subjects with them. Don't be afraid to laugh with them or talk about funny things.
- 6) DON'T try to take over.** Parents need to feel they have control over something, since there is so much in their lives that they cannot control. Leave ultimate decisions to them and support them in those decisions, even if you do not agree.
- 7) DON'T yell at them or have cross words unless a situation is life-threatening.** Now is the time to exercise restraint and control over your own emotions. If you need to cry or scream, do it to someone who isn't consumed with fighting for his or her child's life.
- 8) DON'T try to help if you yourself are physically or emotionally weak or ill.** Find a way to help within your own abilities and limitations. If you cannot be there for the family physically, you can still help with less demanding (but equally critical) areas like financially, spiritually, or writing thank-you's.
- 9) DON'T avoid the family if you're close to them.** It's a sad fact that some people cannot deal with unpleasant events. More than any other time in your life, NOW is the time to let people know you care about them. It is inevitable that one day we will all need the same kind consideration. There are many ways to support a family and still "protect" yourself. (see "How to Help" list)
- 10) DON'T knowingly expose the child or family to a virus or other illness.** Children in cancer treatment have no immune system, so don't take a chance exposing anyone in the family to illness. The parents, too, are more prone to illness because it is unlikely they are getting sufficient sleep or eating nutritious meals.
- 11) DON'T EVER tell a parent that he or she is "lucky to have other children."**

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Please contact ptall@mindspring.com with any comments