

Creating a welcoming
school environment

for a child with cancer





For a child living with cancer, going back to school is a way of acknowledging that life goes on despite the illness. School is a place where they can be with their friends, learn, and have fun. It can be a source of great pride as much as it can be a source of worry and anxiety.

Ignoring the fact that a child has cancer means neglecting an important aspect of their daily life. On the other hand, the disease doesn't have to take up all the space either. Students, especially in their teenage years, need to feel like they fit in, and they want to lead as normal a life as possible. We need to strike the right balance between compromises and demands.

As a member of the school staff, you are part of the broader team surrounding a child with cancer. Your input, support and kindness can make reintegration much easier. A safe, welcoming environment has a major impact on both the child and their family.

This guide provides you with tools to help you, your colleagues, and the child's siblings and peers support them in their new reality.



CREATING A WELCOMING SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT FOR A CHILD WITH CANCER

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----------|
| WHAT IS CHILDHOOD CANCER? _____ | 4 |
| Types of childhood cancer in 0-14 year olds* | |
| Treatments | |
| Post-treatment side effects | |
| PHYSICAL IMPACTS | |
| PSYCHOLOGICAL AND COGNITIVE IMPACTS | |
| HOW TO ADDRESS THE SITUATION? _____ | 7 |
| HOW TO EASE A STUDENT'S REINTEGRATION? _____ | 8 |
| Establish a reassuring communication channel | |
| Suggest appropriate adjustments | |
| HOW TO CREATE A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT? _____ | 10 |
| Providing a friendly presence | |
| Raising awareness among fellow students | |
| Creating a comforting environment for siblings | |
| MAKE A DIFFERENCE _____ | 14 |
| Factsheet | |





01 What is childhood cancer?

Cancers are when abnormal cells multiply in different organs or parts of the body. A pediatric or childhood cancer is one that affects a person under 18 years of age.



1 in every 400 children in Quebec has cancer



Types of cancer vary according to **age**



50% of cases occur before the age of 6



The 5-year survival rate is **84%** for the 0–14 age group (all cancer forms combined)¹

TYPES OF CHILDHOOD CANCER IN 0–14 YEAR-OLDS*

- + Leukemia (blood cancer)
- + Tumors of the central nervous system
- + Lymphoma (cancer of the lymphatic system)
- + Other solid tumors





TREATMENTS

The right treatment for each childhood cancer is determined by the child's medical team, and can last several months or years. In most cases, they require repeated hospitalizations and numerous hospital appointments.

- ⊕ Surgery
- ⊕ Radiotherapy
- ⊕ Chemotherapy
- ⊕ Transplant
- ⊕ Immunotherapy
- ⊕ Targeted therapy

A typical day in the hospital takes place between 8:30 a.m. and 4 p.m. The morning is usually devoted to blood tests and meetings with medical staff, including the oncologist. Treatments often take place in the afternoon.





POST-TREATMENT SIDE EFFECTS

Post-treatment side effects—physical, psychological and cognitive—are frequent, but are not inevitable and vary from one individual to the next. They depend on a number of factors, including the type of cancer, the treatments received, and the social context and vulnerabilities of each child. They can be visible or imperceptible, temporary or permanent.



PHYSICAL IMPACTS

- ⊕ Fatigue
- ⊕ Decreased physical endurance
- ⊕ Chronic pain
- ⊕ Delayed growth and puberty
- ⊕ Speech disorders
- ⊕ Loss of hearing or vision
- ⊕ Loss of motor skills
- ⊕ Changes in physical appearance: hair loss, amputation, scars, etc.



PSYCHOLOGICAL AND COGNITIVE IMPACTS

- ⊕ Attention span and concentration difficulties
- ⊕ Decreased learning ability
- ⊕ Emotional disturbance in interpersonal relationships with family and peers
- ⊕ Fear of failure at school
- ⊕ Concerns about changes in physical appearance



02 How to address the situation?

Communicating with children suffering from cancer and their family is essential in preparing for a student's return to school, and in staying informed about their condition. It is essential to consult them to discuss their wishes as to how they would like the situation to be handled. Here are a few examples of topics to bring up during this discussion:

- + Technical aspects: type of cancer, treatments, side effects, absenteeism, physical and cognitive challenges, etc.
- + Fears and concerns
- + How much does the child know about cancer
- + The child's wishes regarding involvement in the back-to-school process
- + The right way to handle the situation with school staff and fellow students
- + The attitude to adopt on a daily basis when dealing with the student
- + Topics and terms to avoid versus those to favor
- + **School awareness** and support resources available (Leucan, for example)

Family members may express sadness, anger, concern or even hostility during your conversations. Always remember that this is a time of upheaval and that these reactions are not directed at you.





03 How to ease a student's reintegration?

Childhood cancer and its treatment has many physical, psychological and cognitive impacts. It's important that these impacts are taken into consideration by teaching staff. Special treatment should be avoided, as it can lead to feelings of isolation in cancer patients and resentment among their peers. Certain accommodations can be made to suit the student's condition, but the evaluation criteria should remain the same as for everyone else.

ESTABLISH A REASSURING COMMUNICATION CHANNEL



Appoint a contact person within the school team to follow up with the young person and their family.



Agree on a procedure for disseminating relevant information to teaching staff to avoid problematic or embarrassing situations.



Set up a communication mechanism in case contagious diseases are circulating in the school. Leucan can provide a sample letter to be given to the parents of students to be sent before the child's return to class.





SUGGEST APPROPRIATE ADJUSTMENTS

- ⊕ **Wearing a hat or a scarf:** Hair loss is often a difficult experience for young cancer patients, and the source of much anxiety. If they want to hide their hair loss, it's a good idea to give them the option of wearing a scarf or hat.

- ⊕ **Physical Education and Health class:** A doctor's prescription is required to take part in this class. What's more, the situation needs to be reassessed on a regular basis as treatment progresses.

- ⊕ **Pairing up with a peer:** Frequent and sometimes prolonged absences can cause students to fall behind in their schoolwork, giving rise to fears of failure. Pairing up with a buddy is a fun and comforting way to keep up with the coursework.

- ⊕ **Taking medication or other medical requirements:** The student may have to take medication, eat snacks or drink a lot, for example. Having a place where they can do this discreetly is desirable.

- ⊕ **School timetable and rhythm:** Reduced and adapted schedule are strongly recommended when necessary for the student. The goal is to maximize skills development while taking into account the challenges the student is facing.

- ⊕ **Types of schooling:**
 - **Stable schooling:** it is sometimes possible to stay in school even during treatment;
 - **In-hospital schooling:** hospital teachers ensure pedagogical follow-up with the patient's school, using a hospital-school-home communication system;
 - **Home schooling:** the qualified teacher is appointed by the school board;
 - **Schooling via videoconference.**



04 How to create a welcoming environment?

Going through disease makes young cancer patients evolve rapidly. They may feel that their concerns and interests are different from those of their peers. Besides, the return to normal life is stimulating for some, while for others it leads to feeling disheartened from having fallen behind so much on school work. The staff's approach has a major influence on the quality of the student's reintegration into the school environment.

PROVIDING A FRIENDLY PRESENCE

Here are a few tips to help you prepare to welcome the student and work with them on a daily basis:

- + Show support and understanding without being too overprotective. Their behavior is subject to the same requirements as their peers;
- + Listen to them if they want to express their emotions, but also respect their silence if they don't want to talk about it;
- + Whenever possible, let students make their own decisions and choices;
- + Pay particular attention to the way their peers approach the situation.





RAISING AWARENESS AMONG FELLOW STUDENTS

Other students are bound to have questions and express fears about their classmate's particular situation. Here are a few tips to help you guide them:

- ⊕ Answer your students' questions and let them express their concerns;
- ⊕ Plan a time for class discussion. Young cancer patients often prefer to answer their peers' questions directly, rather than be the object of a silent, distant curiosity;
- ⊕ Reassure your students that cancer is not contagious, that the sick person is not responsible for their condition and that the cause of the disease is unknown;
- ⊕ Suggest that your students do some research on cancer to learn more about their classmate's illness;
- ⊕ To complement your intervention with students, **invite Leucan to make a class presentation.**

If you notice that the student with cancer is being teased or bullied by other students, talk to the students concerned to make them aware of the feelings of isolation and rejection that their behavior may provoke.





CREATING A COMFORTING ENVIRONMENT FOR SIBLINGS

When cancer strikes, it turns a family's world upside down. The siblings of children with cancer also experience the psychosocial repercussions of the disease, and are affected in various ways.

- ⊕ Fear of losing a sick sibling
- ⊕ Fear of getting cancer
- ⊕ Confusion, worry, anger, resentment or jealousy about the situation and the unusual reactions it provokes
- ⊕ Anxious about the future and the unknown
- ⊕ Feeling of losing their place in the eyes of their parents
- ⊕ Frustration at seeing their daily lives disrupted and feeling that their own needs are being neglected
- ⊕ Missing a sibling—or a parent—during the hospital stay
- ⊕ Guilt over negative emotions towards the child with cancer or their family
- ⊕ Helplessness in the face of questions from classmates





This wide range of emotions can provoke a variety of reactions in siblings. Significant behavioral changes and physical discomfort (nausea, headaches, stomach aches, etc.) may be observed.

HERE ARE A FEW TIPS FOR SUPPORTING THE SIBLINGS OF A STUDENT WITH CANCER:

- ⊕ Be aware of the stress this child is under;
- ⊕ Report any unusual reactions or behaviors and any changes in school performance to the parents;
- ⊕ Communicate regularly with the family;
- ⊕ Don't hesitate to refer the child to a resource person who can offer professional help.
- ⊕ Give them a chance to express themselves, and listen carefully;
- ⊕ Answer any questions to the best of your knowledge to reassure them;





MAKE A DIFFERENCE

FACTSHEET



Every situation is unique.



The student needs to feel like a normal person and lead as normal a life as possible.



Frequent communication with the child and their family is essential.



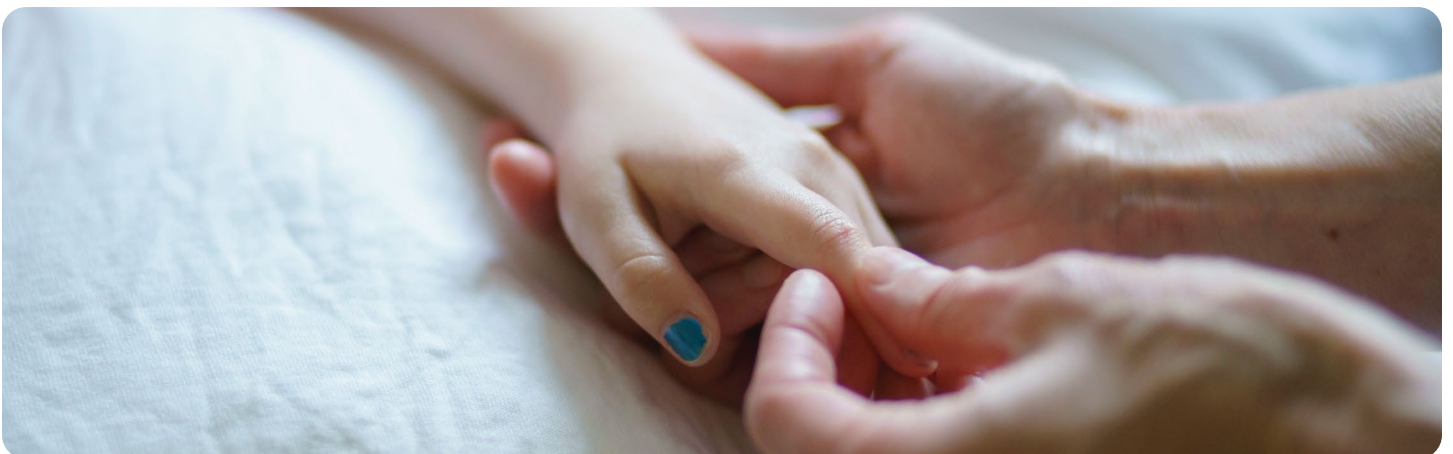
The presence of a reference person (a member of the school staff), chosen by the child, is very reassuring.

Actions to take

- Raising awareness among fellow students
- Create a comforting environment for siblings
- Suggest appropriate adaptations
- Answer questions to the best of your knowledge

Keywords

- FLEXIBILITY
- LISTENING
- KINDNESS
- COMMUNICATION
- SUPPORT
- UNDERSTANDING





If you have any questions or concerns, or in the event of a delicate situation, do not hesitate to call on a resource person who will be able to offer professional help.

Leucan is always there to support you.

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