Explaining COPD to Children

by YVONNE BANKS

Explaining COPD to the Kids in Your Life

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) can be distressing for the patient, but it can be to those close to them as well. Children may have difficulty understanding COPD and why they can't jump into grandpa's lap or why grandma can't come to their birthday party.

It is hard for everyone involved and explaining COPD can be challenging. It is important to talk to them anyway so hopefully they can grasp the idea of why their loved one can't do the things they used to.

Helping Children Understand COPD

To choose the right words to explain a loved one's COPD diagnosis to a child, you need to consider their age first and make it age-appropriate. The following may help you in the conversation you have with your child:

Younger Children

Children between three and five years of age react mostly to feelings rather than facts. Let them know they didn't do anything to cause their loved one's illness.

Be brief and to the point, but understand you may have to repeat the information later.

Children at this age have many questions about everything, so make sure you include some time to answer their questions. They can be very sensitive to changes in people's moods so do not assume you are hiding anything from them.

When explaining the diagnosis of COPD, you will want to use a different term or explanation of what it is. You can say, "Grandpa is having trouble with breathing. He might not be able to take you to the park anymore, though he still loves you very much. Maybe we can think of something you can do with him that won't make him tired."

Kids

They will need to be given more factual information about COPD, since they will have a better idea about how the body works by this age. Be prepared to provide explanations to their questions and answer "why" questions.

They may have questions about who will take care of them if you need a babysitter and Grandma cannot help, for instance. They need to be reassured everything will be OK and taken care of.

Teens

Teenagers will be capable of understanding more than young children, so you should share details of both the

progression of COPD and the treatment options available. Teenagers understand more about how the respiratory system works so this will be easier for them to grasp.

They may be willing to take care of the loved one and participate with the care. They should be reassured that COPD is not infectious.

It is best to answer their questions as best as you can and acknowledge their feelings. The teen may be concerned about the loved one’s life expectancy so support them as you explain that it depends on the severity of the condition.