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LEUKEMIA

This tool is for **TEACHERS** and **ADMINISTRATORS** at a school where a student has leukemia.

HOW TO SUPPORT A STUDENT with leukemia



Leukemia is a serious illness affecting about one third of all kids with cancer under 15. When a child or teen is diagnosed with leukemia, his life changes dramatically. He will temporarily leave school and friends behind while undergoing treatments that will have short- and long-term effects. He will depend on many people around him as he faces cancer and as a school teacher, nurse or administrator, you play a key role in his journey to recovery.



The role of the **SCHOOL COMMUNITY**



Thanks to the advances in research over the last few decades, leukemia survival

rates for children and teens have improved significantly. Following recovery, most of them can expect to live a normal and active life. For this reason, we recommend that a student with leukemia be encouraged to remain in contact with his social circle and school community from the moment he is diagnosed. Research¹ has shown that kids who continue their relationships with family and friends while in treatment experience a smoother transition back to school. By working with the student's parents, you can contribute to his successful transition back to school. In addition, the student will appreciate receiving support from the entire community.

This tool highlights the importance of being informed about leukemia and educating others about it. It also provides ways of keeping in touch with your student and helping him prepare for the return to school.

BE INFORMED

and educate others



he effects of leukemia can vary from person to person. One student could be admitted to the hospital as soon as she is diagnosed, while another might attend school for a certain time before starting treatments. In all cases, a leukemia diagnosis can cause shock waves throughout the student's network. When this happens, one of the best strategies to adopt is to learn about the illness to better understand what your student is going through. You will also be better prepared to guide the student and her friends, who might also be upset by this unknown situation.

Communicating with the parents

Before educating others at the school about the illness, make sure that you have discussed it with the student's parents first. Be mindful that some parents may hesitate to share medical information about their child. When you talk to them, they might display sadness, anxiety and anger as they continue to cope with their child's illness. Their reaction is not aimed at you and by being proactive about being informed, you will be in a good position to work with them.



The school nurse can also help you find information. If your school does not have one, you could contact a school nurse through your school board.

The illness, in a nutshell

Leukemia is a type of blood cancer. It develops when cancer cells build up in the bone marrow and the blood. Bone marrow is the spongy centre inside of bones, where blood cells are made.

There are two types of childhood leukemia:

ALL

AML

3

Acute lymphoblastic leukemia, (ALL);

Acute myeloid leukemia, (AML).

Leukemia is the most common type of cancer in children aged 0-14. Cases of leukemia represent a third of the diagnosed cancer cases in that age group.

For teenagers aged 15 to 19, leukemia represents 12% of the cancer cases diagnosed annually.

Leukemia symptoms vary from person to person, which may include:

Bruises for
no reason

Low yet persistent
fever

Pinhead-sized
red spots under
the skin
(petechiae)

Prolonged bleeding
from minor cuts

Aches in the body
(arms, legs, knees
or back)

Fatigue, lack of energy
and shortness of
breath during normal
physical activity

Pale skin

Weight loss



Once leukemia has been diagnosed, treatments begin as soon as possible because ALL and AML are forms of cancer that can progress quickly if not treated.

Treatment is usually divided into three parts:



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Induction therapy: this initial therapy is very powerful, as this is when the child goes through chemotherapy. Typically, the student does not attend school for a certain time to undergo treatment at the hospital.

Consolidation therapy: usually takes place in four- to six-month cycles, at the hospital if the drugs are administered intravenously or at home if administered orally.

2

3

Maintenance therapy: consists mostly of drugs administered orally for two to three years. The student can usually live a normal life and go back to school.



How to speak to the student's classmates

When speaking to your student's classmates, encourage them to talk about their own feelings. Try to give them simple information about the illness and answer their questions in a reassuring manner. Here are some examples of information to give them:

Leukemia is not contagious. You cannot catch cancer by being near someone who has it.

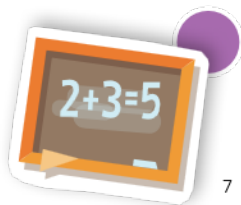
5 Leukemia is a serious, potentially deadly illness, but with appropriate treatment most kids will survive and return to school, enjoy plenty of activities, etc.

Depending on the student's condition, she might sometimes be able to attend class. Other times, she might be absent for extended periods. Whether the student is at school, at home or at the hospital, she is the same person and remains your friend. It is important for the students to keep their friend in mind and give her regular updates on what is going on at school.

bloodcancers.ca: There are many tools available on the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society of Canada (LLSC) website that is dedicated to kids, parents and school personnel. You will find booklets, fact sheets and a video on childhood leukemia.

If the student's parents agree to it, you can send a letter to the other parents to inform them of the situation. The child's classmates will probably talk about leukemia at home and it will be easier for parents to guide their children through this difficult time if they are properly educated about it.

The student with leukemia might have a sibling who attends the same school. If this is the case, it could be appropriate to check up on him or her by developing a strategy with school personnel. This could mean assigning a contact person to the sibling to talk about his or her feelings. You might also want to integrate the sibling in the student's return-to-school process.





Keeping **IN TOUCH**



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ven though a student with leukemia no longer attends classes on a regular basis, he is still undeniably part of the school. With the help of his parents and other school staff, there are some things you can do to ensure that the student still feels connected to the school. Team up and act together to help the student regain a sense of normalcy and give him something to focus on during his treatments.





In addition, returning to school after an extended absence can be a nerve-racking experience. By keeping in touch with your student and helping classmates do the same, you will help make the transition back to school smoother. There are several initiatives you can take to keep in touch. Work with your colleagues to ensure that your approaches are consistent and coherent. You can, for example:



Call (or video call) your student for an update, write a note to him, or go pay him a visit.



Help the student's classmates write letters or emails.



Record video or audio messages in class and send them to the student.

Make cards, banners, drawings and crafts for the student.



Place a bag on the student's desk so classmates can put notes and messages in it whenever they want. Give the notes to the student.

Organize an awareness campaign on leukemia at school.



When the child's health allows it, he should resume some studies during treatment. Keeping up with schoolwork can make a big difference when returning to school. Depending on the hospital centres and the school boards, various catch-up programs may be available, like having teachers in the hospital or at home for a few hours a week. You can help develop a lesson plan for your student to ensure that the subjects studied at school and those studied outside of school are in line with each other.



THE RETURN to school

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nce the most intensive phase of therapy is over, the healthcare team will tell the parents when the child is ready to reintegrate school and slowly start to regain a sense of normalcy. The student will face many challenges and will need your support and understanding to find her place at school again.



Challenges and teamwork



Try meeting with the student before she officially returns to school. Ask about the student's concerns and desires concerning her reintegration. The student will then see you as a person she can confide in, an ally in her journey. Maintain constant communication with the other adults in her life to make sure you are all on the same page: her parents, your colleagues and the healthcare team,



if possible. From a medical perspective, leukemia treatments can affect the student. You will notice changes compared to before the illness. Some of these effects will disappear with time, others, however, might be permanent.

Emotional challenges

Even though your student's life is getting back to normal, it is most likely that she doesn't feel the same as before. Her appearance may have changed (weight loss or gain, hair loss, etc.) and these physical and psychological changes can cause anxiety and low self-esteem. During the first two or three weeks back at school, she might experience the "celebrity phenomenon," where she receives a lot of attention from the personnel and other students for a certain amount of time, which decreases over time putting her in a position to have to relearn her identity in school. This transition of status can cause her to feel insecure, as she tries to redefine herself. As a result, your student could be more emotional than usual and sometimes show sadness or anger. It is normal for children who have been at home exclusively for an extended period of time to miss their parents greatly upon returning to school. Even in this context, the school should not tolerate aggressive behaviour, but should exercise good judgment



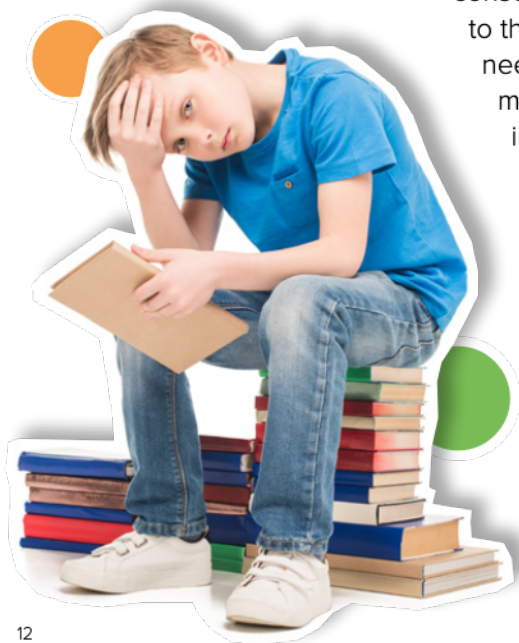


when dealing with these reactions. Even though your student's health has gotten much better, she might fear that it will deteriorate again. While she may be getting her life back to normal, the fear of a relapse can cause much anxiety. Rest assured, however, that going back to school and exterior factors such as tiredness and physical activity won't increase the chances of a relapse. In addition, the chances of childhood leukemia recurring are slim.

Physical challenges

During your student's reintegration, it is possible she will still be taking medications that can cause side effects, which will have to be taken into account. Ideally, concrete measures should be implemented to accommodate the student and ensure her comfort. For example, if the student has lost some or all of her hair, she should be allowed to wear a hat. As the student might experience dry mouth, she should be allowed to carry a water bottle at all times and,

consequently, be allowed to go to the bathroom as often as needed. In addition, your student might need to eat at regular intervals during the day. If that is the case, make sure that she is allowed to eat snacks more frequently. Even though your student is back in class, it's possible that she will still experience fatigue. The personnel should be aware of this and respect her pace. The student might still be physically weak. To help, you could assign a friend to carry her backpack or to help her get around.



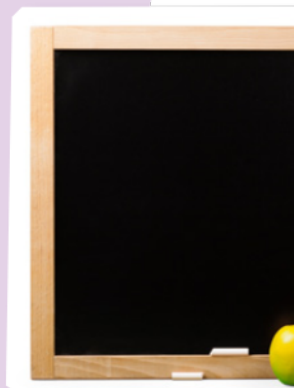


When it comes to physical activities, your student may have to wear a central catheter as part of her maintenance treatment, which will prevent her from participating in some activities or require special aids to take part. If she is still physically weak, she should be careful. Physical activity is an important factor in your student's well-being. She should be able to participate in most activities so long as they are adapted to her condition. Of course, physical education teachers will have to be informed of the student's limitations.



A student who is recovering from leukemia still has a weakened immune system. As she is still extremely susceptible to infections, the student might have to regularly miss school.

The inconsistency could make the transition back to school even more difficult. Be prepared to repeat the efforts for a smooth transition with each attempt to return to class.





Cognitive challenges

Treatments for leukemia can have effects that will affect your student's academic performance. Some of these impacts might be temporary and disappear with time, others might be permanent and require changes to suit her needs. The student might experience some concentration, attention or memory issues. Some kids with leukemia report having a hard time analyzing and structuring their thoughts when they go back to school. In some cases, the parents might request a neurocognitive assessment to provide more insight into the child's abilities. If they do decide to do so, they might come to you to discuss it.



Once the student is back at school, she might compare herself to her previous self, remembering her former academic abilities (especially if she is a teenager or young adult). Realizing how things have changed can cause a degree of anxiety. There are steps you can take to ease the transition back to school, such as, by making the integration progressive and giving the student a lighter work load. With the school team and her parents, assess which scenario is more likely to help your student succeed. Other measures could include giving the student more time to hand in assignments, not giving her any homework at first, pushing back an exam or switching courses with equivalent alternatives. In the end, trust your experience and skills, and encourage the student to persevere and face reasonable challenges. Encourage her to try again, while respecting her abilities. Making the student feel proud of herself will help her regain greater self-confidence.





Social challenges

Adjustments will have to be made during this transition period. The student who returns to school after receiving a great deal of attention over the last few months will have to get used to some sense of normalcy, even though special accommodations have been made to meet her needs. Classmates will also have to adapt to these changes. Some may question the student's illness, or tease or ignore her. Be aware of these reactions. Maintaining a fair and balanced relationship with the student will make the classmates realize that they are on an equal footing and foster positive relationships. It will also help the student regain a "normal" identity in the school, which is what she may want most of all.

A VALUABLE guide

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ver the course of your career, you have guided many students through their academic journeys. Each one has benefited from your support in

their own way. The student dealing with leukemia will also face her own challenges. She will need your attention and understanding during the journey toward recovery and upon her return to school. By working with her parents and others, you will serve as a valuable guide on her journey back to a “normal” life.





