

Helping Children Understand Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia

Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia not only affect the adults in the family but also younger family members. Children can experience an array of emotions when a loved one is diagnosed with this group of diseases, such as fear, confusion, anger, sadness, guilt and embarrassment. Sometimes children also worry that they might catch the disease.

Signs to watch for that may indicate your child is having problems coping with a loved one's diagnosis:

- ◆ Withdrawing from the person with dementia
- ◆ Having stomach aches, headaches or other physical pain
- ◆ Losing patience with the loved one
- ◆ Indicating reluctance to invite friends home
- ◆ Spending more time away from home

Hints for helping your child understand and cope with the disease process:

- ◆ Encourage your child to ask questions
- ◆ Answer their questions simply and honestly
- ◆ Keep an open line of communication at all times
- ◆ Educate your child about the disease and related issues with age appropriate materials
- ◆ As the child ages, provide more information as needed

Address some of the more common questions children have:

- ◆ Is this my fault? Can I catch this disease too?
- ◆ Will my parents get this and leave me?
- ◆ Does my grandparent/parent not like me any longer?

If the child expresses their feelings and emotions:

- ◆ Comfort the child and assure them it is not their fault.
- ◆ Let them know that these feelings are normal
- ◆ Avoid judging their feelings

Encourage your child to spend time with their loved one:

- ◆ They can act as little helpers, assisting with easy chores
- ◆ Their loved one may enjoy games like "Go Fish"
- ◆ Look over old photos with the loved one
- ◆ Have them read a book, sing, dance, or listen to music with their family member.
- ◆ Develop a memory box for the child with items to remind them of the activities they enjoyed or places they've been with the loved one

Always remain close by since the behavior of people with memory issues can be unpredictable. Remember that children take their cues from you and how you handle situations with the loved one. As the disease progresses, the child may become uncomfortable with the family member, so watch their responses and reactions to the family member. Don't force them to visit or interact if they seem fearful. Lastly, be sure to find time for yourself and your child.