

Helping Kids Thrive



When a mom receives a cancer diagnosis she is confronted by a number of fears, not least of which is how will she continue to care for her children while she seeks treatment, and what will happen to those children if she dies. Nanny Angel Network knows a mom's primary focus is the health and well-being of her kids.

That's why NAN developed a Child Life informed childcare program that not only gives mom the time to rest, but reassures her that her kids will have the tools they need to cope with her illness, strengthening their resilience so that they can handle whatever life throws their way.

Child Life is a branch of psychosocial healthcare that helps children navigate stressful times so that they can handle life changing experiences that might otherwise throw them off their normal developmental path. A parent's cancer diagnosis can be one such traumatic event in a child's life, which if untreated can lead to a lifetime of issues and unfulfilled dreams. As NAN's Child Life Specialist Cassandra Di Clemente explains, "research shows that kids who experience trauma can grow up to experience a range of mental health disorders from anxiety and depression to suicidal ideation. They can withdraw from their friends and family, struggle in school and stop doing activities that they once loved. All of this can impact their ability to advance in life."

At NAN, our Child Life specialists help families navigate the difficult journey of coping with a cancer diagnosis so that their kids can continue to thrive. "Many parents don't know how to help their kids cope with a serious illness in the family, they think that their children are too young to understand, or that

they might scare them with too much information." Child Life specialists like Cassandra understand that we can support these kids by helping them understand what cancer is. "Studies show that if you have a conversation with a kid, using age appropriate words that they can understand, they have the ability to comprehend it and they cope better because of it."

Cassandra works closely with NAN families to ensure that each child receives an individualized program, customized to their age, and matches them with a volunteer that is best suited to help that child cope with their parent's illness. She works closely with NAN's volunteers to train them on how to use play to help children cope with different types of emotions.

In 2019 NAN developed specialized coping kits, a monthly activity that volunteers can use in their visits. The NAN slime kit provides a tactile kinesthetic release when kids are anxious, nervous, or excited. For children who are feeling alone or isolated there is Kindness Bingo, where kids are encouraged to do five kind acts to help alleviate feelings of loneliness that often come with a parent's hospitalization. The dragon breathing exercise helps kids learn deep breathing methods. They decorate their own fire breathing dragon out of a toilet paper roll and put streamers on the end so that it looks like fire is coming out. "Kids love the art activity, but what we're really teaching them is how to take a deep breath

in, because to make the fire come to life they have to breathe in really slowly, which is a great tool they can use when they're feeling anxious", explains Cassandra.

While many of NAN's clients have young children, Cassandra wants parents to understand that NAN's Child Life approach works equally well for older kids. "A five-year old copes best through play. Whereas a 15-year old needs someone to talk to and be there for them through all their different emotions. Our goal in the home is the same, to give them some undivided attention, follow their lead in moments of stress or struggle and respond by giving them the appropriate tool to cope."

This is never more critical than for a child who loses a parent. NAN provides up to a year of bereavement services and Cassandra and her team are on hand prior to the parent's death to help explain what is happening to the children. Once the parent dies, she works with the family to help them create rituals that reinforce a connection with the parent that has died, so that they can continue to live with the memory of that person in their lives. "That's a part that every family struggles with. It's hard to think about that person, but you need to leave some space, especially for kids, for that parent to live. I help families navigate that and find a way that feels authentic for them."

Cassandra believes that ultimately the NAN program highlights how resilient children can be when given the right tools, guidance, and emotional support to cope. "Often a parent will say, 'I was so afraid that they wouldn't be able to handle this conversation, but you've shown me that my kids are strong, and they'll be ok.' That's the best part of this work for me, getting to show parents that their child is able to conquer this."

