Tips and Advice for Explaining Diabetes to Children

by AFRA WILLMORE

Explaining Diabetes to Children

Most adults have a natural instinct to protect children. From harm, from fear, from bad news. It's a worthy instinct but sometimes keeping children in the dark is not the correct way to deal with issues.

It's natural to want to shield them from the more difficult aspects of life, but one thing I have learned as a parent is that children are far more resilient than you give them credit for.

I remember taking my children to see *Jurassic Park* at the theater years ago and was astounded to see that while the adults were jumping out of their skins and hiding their eyes behind their hands most of the children were giggling and finding the whole thing hilarious!

Let's be honest. We've all told children little "white lies" too. Whether it's to maintain a delightful tradition at Christmas or when a tooth is lost or to hide a painful truth it usually seems kinder to gloss over the facts to avoid any upset.

However, when it comes to diabetes knowledge is power, and explaining the symptoms, treatment, and consequences of diabetes fully to children may turn out to be an act of kindness which could save someone's life –possibly their own.

Here are a few tips on explaining diabetes to children.

How to Explain Diabetes to Children

Let's assume you are explaining diabetes to them because you or someone else close to them has been diagnosed with the condition. (If it is the child has been diagnosed, there should be support from the pediatric team. If there isn't – ask for it.)

So, firstly, make sure YOU know lots of basic facts. You can ask your healthcare provider for reading materials if you aren't entirely sure of your facts. Alternatively, there are some great resources written especially for children available from the Diabetes Research Foundation Institute website.

Timing is Everything

Choose a time when you won't be rushed or disturbed to have a chat and maybe start by reassuring the children that it is entirely possible to live a long, happy and healthy life with diabetes.

Don't make light of the condition, however – they need to understand that without the proper care and attention to diet, lifestyle and medication someone with diabetes can become very ill. That will help them know when you refuse their kind offers of candy or homemade cupcakes, or when they see you taking what will possibly look like

a huge array of tablets.

Teach the Signs of High or Low Blood Sugar

You (and they) especially need to know what the signs of high or low blood sugars might be and if they are old enough, what THEY can do to help.

You can show them an emergency checklist – maybe keep it in the ‘fridge if you or whoever has been diagnosed is prone to dangerous swings in blood sugar.

There’s a useful video made by St John Ambulance you could watch with older children which outlines how to recognize an emergency and what to do.

I’m lucky in that I have always been able to feel a hypoglycemic episode coming on and when I warn them that I feel ill my children know how to deal with the situation. If in doubt teach your children to call 911 and tell the operator about diabetes. Even tiny tots can learn this emergency measure.

Do Your Research Before the Discussion

Anticipate any questions they might have and find out the answers. Their main concerns might be that you (or whoever has been diagnosed) is going to die. They might be frightened about needles on your behalf. Just thinking about shots can freak some children out!

Focus On the Positives of Diabetes and Bust the Myths

Focus on the positive and maybe share anecdotes about celebrities they might admire who live full and active lives with diabetes.

A few minutes searching the internet throws out dozens of famous names who all live with diabetes. For example, did you know that Tom Hanks, Halle Berry, baseball pitcher David Wells and former American Idol judge Randy Jackson have Type 2 Diabetes?

It might be a good idea to do a bit of myth-busting too. Take Halle Berry for instance – slim and apparently the picture of health. She’s a great example to prove that not everyone with diabetes is obese or even overweight.

Being overweight or eating lots of sugar does not cause diabetes – although they can be factors in a lifestyle which means developing diabetes is more likely.

Explaining Lifestyle Changes

Many people still believe that those with diabetes can’t eat anything sweet or chocolate and should buy specialist food products labeled “diabetic.”

In actual fact, people with diabetes, just like everyone else, can eat pretty much anything in moderation. Everyone, including those with diabetes, should aim to eat a balanced, healthy diet, low in saturated and trans fat with elements of lean protein, non-starchy vegetables, whole grains, healthy fats, and fruit.

On the subject of food, why not lighten the mood and end your session with the children by getting them to help you prepare a healthy meal or treat. There are thousands of recipes online including a huge selection of sweet and savory ideas on the internet!

There are vegetarian and vegan options, recipes which cater for specialist diets like dairy-free, gluten-free, nut-free and recipes which are suitable for freezing.

How about a tasty and moist apple and cinnamon cake? Barbecued fruit, homemade burgers or mini muffins?

Children always seem to be more willing to try new foods if they have had a hand in preparing them so taking this opportunity to get them more involved in helping in the kitchen could be the first step in making big lifestyle changes which could lead to the whole family becoming healthier.

By helping them understand diabetes and teaching them what healthy eating looks like, you will be going a long way towards helping them avoid developing the condition later in life.

Let’s face it – it’s OK to learn how to live with the condition, but it would be a lot easier and better for long-term health to never develop it in the first place.