The Child’s Worries About the Mother’s Breast Cancer: Sources of Distress in School-Age Children

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Purpose/Objectives: To describe children’s worries when their mothers are newly diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer.

Design: Descriptive, qualitative study.

Setting: Private family homes.

Sample: Case intensive interviews with 16 children who ranged in age from 11–18 years at the time that interviews were conducted and who had been 8–12 years of age when their mothers were diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer.

Methods: Semistructured interviews with the children were audiorecorded, transcribed, and inductively coded into categories of distinct worries about their mothers’ breast cancer.

Findings: The children voiced nine categories of worry during the interviews: worrying that the mother was going to die; feeling confused; worrying that something bad would happen; worrying about the family and others; worrying when the mother did not look good; worrying that their mothers would change; wondering if the family would have to cut back financially; worrying about talking to others; and wondering if they, the children, would get cancer.

Conclusions: Children of mothers with breast cancer experience multiple worries concerning their mothers, their families, and themselves. The data revealed that they attempted to make sense of their mothers’ illness for themselves and imagined how it might affect their own lives in the future.

Implications for Nursing Practice: Programs and materials need to be developed that help parents address the multiple worries that children whose mothers have early-stage breast cancer experience.

Key Points . . .

- School-age children commonly experience an array of concerns, worries, and confusion when their mothers are diagnosed with breast cancer.
- Even when parents respond to the questions that their children ask about breast cancer, children may remain confused.
- Reassurance from the parents that everything is going to be all right is not always sufficient in dispelling worry and concern in children.
- Nurses working in clinical settings are in the position to help mothers with breast cancer support their school-age children.

In 2001, 192,200 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer (American Cancer Society, 2001). Breast cancer continues to be a significant health issue for women. Many of the women diagnosed with cancer are of childbearing age and are likely to have one or more school-age children living at home. Potentially, thousands of children are affected each year by their mother’s breast cancer.

What do we know about the children’s experiences? To date, little research has been conducted to document the experiences of school-age children when their parents have cancer. When researchers have sought to understand children’s experiences, they have looked primarily to three sources: developmental theory, reports by parents of their children’s experiences, and, less commonly, reports by the children themselves.

Drawing from the developmental literature, Armsden and Lewis (1993) summarized selected conceptual issues that shed light on our understanding of school-age children’s experiences with parental illness. They identified four developmental issues of relevance to children’s experiences: security and separation anxiety, interpersonal understanding, conceptualizations of illness and death, and the role of fantasy. Armsden and Lewis maintained that security for children was threatened when illness demands in parents make those parents physically or psychologically unavailable to the children. Children struggle with separating their parents’ emotional response to the illness from themselves and their own reactions to what is happening. School-age children are caught between understanding illness as defined by physiologic stages and related symptoms and gauging illness based on the behavioral cues that they witness. Particularly during emo-