



## The Family Experience in Pediatric Oncology

*Your child doesn't get cancer; your family gets cancer. It is not some isolated thing, but something that forever shapes your family. It makes you appreciate a healthy child in a way that I could never understand before.*

—Mother of a child with leukemia

*I wouldn't give it up for the world. If a genie popped out of a lamp tomorrow morning and told me, "I can put you back . . . before you ever even started going to Boston, before anything was wrong, and I can make it so that it doesn't happen," I'd tell him no. I'd tell him, "Get back in your lamp."*

—24-year-old lymphoma survivor

*Don't be scared that you have cancer; be proud that you have it. It's almost like getting struck by lightning. It means you can win the lottery.*

—8-year-old melanoma survivor

### Key Concepts

- ◆ *The diagnosis of childhood cancer is a family diagnosis, because it has an impact on the entire family system.*
- ◆ *When a child is diagnosed with cancer, family life changes in two dimensions—the present and the future.*
- ◆ *Stages of development of the children and of the family influence the process for the family and the psychosocial work.*
- ◆ *The practical and emotional needs and resources of each family member play a role in assessment and intervention.*
- ◆ *The needs of siblings of children with cancer require unique understanding at diagnosis and throughout the course of illness.*

Although adults interact and understand themselves in many different societal contexts, the primary influence on children is the family. Family life itself is all-consuming during the decades when families are raising children, and families work diligently to maintain stability and integrity during this time. When a child is diagnosed with cancer, the homeostasis of family life is changed, altering the family's energy, focus, and mission. Even in an era of greater treatment success rates, childhood cancer imposes a threat to one of the weakest members of the family system and introduces vulnerability into the whole system. Everyone is affected. Because childhood cancer is a family affair, psychosocial interventions are best conceived within the context of the developmental levels of the children involved and with consideration of the family's developmental stage.



### Impact on the Family

*It magnified everything that we had before, good and bad things. We learned to be more patient and forgiving. We became more thoughtful about our own and other people's feelings and limitations.*

—Parent of a child with Ewing sarcoma

As treatment is initiated, the "new normal" (Woodgate, 2006) begins to emerge. New goals and aspirations become ensconced in an old framework, an interesting dichotomy between what was then and what is now. The rhythm of