Tips for Talking to Your Children About Rheumatoid Arthritis

by MARIAH LEACH

Explaining Rheumatoid Arthritis to Children

Explaining a chronic autoimmune disease like rheumatoid arthritis (RA) to little kids isn't always easy. Fortunately, there are six strategies that might help.

Try to Be Honest and Hopeful

The reality of being a parent with RA is that your RA will undoubtedly impact your kids' loves. Maybe you'll have to take them with you to an appointment or to pick up prescriptions at the pharmacy. Maybe there will be days when you won't be able to carry them or get down on the floor with them to play.

Your kids will notice if there's a change in your behavior, so trying to hide your pain or exhaustion will probably only worry them. In my experience, honestly really is the best policy. Of course, the last thing you want to do is scare your kids.

So while being honest, it's also a good idea to be hopeful and reassuring. Answer their questions and give them age-appropriate facts (more on that below,) but try to keep it optimistic. Let them know that while sometime you might not feel well, your doctor and medicines will help you feel better soon.

Keep the Facts Age-Appropriate

I know my kids will continue to learn about RA as they grow, so for now, it's enough for them to have the facts they need to start understanding how RA impacts our lives. When discussing RA with your child, it's important to think about what they can understand and handle at their current age.

For example, my five-year-old understands that sometimes arthritis makes my joints hurt or it makes me feel extra tired. He knows that arthritis is why I need to visit the doctor and take medicine. And I can tell him if I'm having a stressful day, and he knows this means he needs to be gentle and be an extra good helper.

My three-year-old, on the other hand, isn't mature enough yet to understand (or care!) if I hurt too much to pick him up or get down on the floor and plan. He just feels frustrated. So with him, I try to remind him about my "owies" calmly and then focus on the alternatives. Maybe I can't ride bikes around the block right now, but we can still snuggle on the couch and read a book.

Read a Book Together

Speaking of reading a book, if your child is still struggling to understand what you are going through a book might help!

Unfortunately, I haven't yet found a good children's book that focuses specifically on RA, but there are a number

of options that address chronic illnesses more generally that may help your kids understand some of the symptoms that they can't see.

Examples include:

- *Ravyn's Doll: How to Explain Fibromyalgia to Your Child* by Melissa Swanson
- *Why Does Mommy Hurt?* By Elizabeth M. Christy
- *What Does Super Jonny Do When Mom Gets Sick?* By Simone Colwill.

For older kids who are interested in learning more about how RA works, Jumo Health offers the doctor-developed Medikidz comic book to explain the condition in detail.

Connect the Conversation With the Real World

While you can't stop RA from impacting your kids, you can use it as an opportunity to help them understand important things about the real world.

From talking about RA, my boys have learned what a joint is, how an immune system protects you from germs, and why it's a good idea to visit your doctor for checkups.

Beyond having fun pointing out all the different joints in our bodies, RA has also taught my boys empathy and compassion. We all want to teach our kids not to judge a book by its cover, and RA helps remind them not to judge people by how they look on the outside. It also helps them learn that you can still be strong even if you face challenges in your life.

Let Kids Know How They Can Help

Little kids love to help! Depending on their age, their "help" may not be all that helpful, but there are still benefits to encouraging them to do so.

My husband and I use RA as an opportunity to teach our kids that in our family we face problems as a team, and it's important that everyone contributes. I also think my kids appreciate the ability to do something practical to help mommy feel better.

As they get older, there will be more practical chores and tasks that they can to actually help take some of the physical burdens off me when my RA is flaring.

Remember to Keep the Conversation Going

Explaining RA to your kids is not a "one and done" conversation. Instead, it's a topic that will come up over and over again as they grow.

I think this is good news because it means you don't have to force an extended conversation that addresses every single issue. Instead, I wait for situations to come up naturally. Then I spend a few minutes making a point about RA, I answer any questions they might have, and I move on when they lose interest.

Treating RA as a natural part of a conversation in our family helps it seem less scary and overwhelming – and it also makes it easier for my kids to accept that RA is just one part of our lives.