

Communicating Under Pressure

A hand holding a compass over a desert landscape. The hand is wearing a green long-sleeved shirt. The compass is a standard analog compass with a white face and black markings. The background shows a desert landscape with sand dunes and a clear sky.

Helping Children with Life-Threatening Illness
and Their Families
Feel Heard, Understood and Involved in Decisions

Opening Case

 5-year-old girl
with relapsed cancer
deteriorating
overnight

Parents ask: 'Is there
anything more we
can do?'

ICU team asking for
urgent decisions

Emotion.
Uncertainty. Time
pressure.

Audience Reflection

Think of a difficult conversation you had with a family



What made it difficult?



What do families remember most in these moments?



UNDERSTANDING THE MOMENT

What Families Experience

FEAR AND SHOCK

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

LOSS OF CONTROL

FEAR OF MAKING THE WRONG DECISION

The Core Principle



In urgency, slow the conversation down



Pause → Listen →
Clarify → Guide



Connection before
information



**A PRACTICAL
COMMUNICATION
FRAMEWORK**

SPIKES Framework

S – Setting up the conversation

P – Perception: what the family understands

I – Invitation: how much detail they want

K – Knowledge: clear information

E – Emotion: respond with empathy

S – Strategy: shared plan

NURSE: Responding to Emotion

N – Name the emotion

U – Show Understanding

R – Show Respect

S – Offer Support

E – Explore concerns

Empathy in Practice

“I can see how painful this is.”

“Any parent would feel overwhelmed hearing this.”

“I wish the situation were different.”

“We will walk this journey with you.”

COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN

Talking With Children

Use

- Use age-appropriate language

Encourage

- Encourage questions

Avoid

- Avoid false reassurance

Allow

- Allow expression of fears

Supporting a Child's Sense of Control

Choices about activities

Who visits

Where they spend time

Comfort and symptom
preferences

PALLIATIVE CARE COMMUNICATION

Reframing Hope



Hope does not
disappear



Cure → Comfort



Survival →
Meaningful time



Treatment →
Quality of life

What to Say in Difficult Moments

“I wish we had better treatments.”

“We will continue caring for your child.”

“Tell me what matters most to your family.”

“What worries you the most right now?”

**SUPPORTING
OURSELVES
AS
CLINICIANS**



Clinician Self-Care

Difficult
conversations
are
emotionally
demanding

Debrief with
colleagues

Acknowledge
emotional
impact

Support each
other as a
team

CLOSING REFLECTION



A Story That Stayed With Me

A child nearing the end of life asked a simple question

“Will my parents be okay?”

The conversation shifted from medicine to meaning

Presence mattered more than treatment

Final Message

- We cannot always change the outcome
- But we can influence how families experience the journey
- Compassionate communication reduces suffering

