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### Changes in Family Functioning during the First Year of Pediatric Cancer Treatment: A Mixed-Method Pilot Study

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*Children's Mercy Kansas City*

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## INTRODUCTION

- A new diagnosis of pediatric cancer is a major family stressor.
- Upholding consistent rules and routines may promote adjustment.
- However, numerous challenges may interfere with family practices during the first year of treatment.

**This study examined family rules and routines during the first year of cancer treatment, and associations with caregiver distress.**

## METHOD

- Mixed-methods design
- **Participants:**  $N = 44$  caregivers of children (age 18 mo-17 yrs) with new diagnosis of cancer within 1-year
- **Measures:**
  - Semi-structured interviews
  - Psychosocial Assessment Tool 2.0 (PAT2.0)
  - Response to Stress Questionnaire (RSQ)
- **Analyses:**
  - Interviews coded for key themes
  - Independent samples  $t$ -tests

# Caregivers often relax family rules and routines during the first year of cancer treatment.

*Qualitative interview themes (% families reporting theme):*

**Changed mealtime or eating routines (57%):**

With him not having the best appetite, he just kind of eats whenever. Whatever he wants just to get something in him.  
- Mother of 6-year-old

**Changed bedtime (50%) or school routines (54%):**

If he sleeps a lot during the day, then I don't necessarily make him be in bed by 9:30.  
- Mother of 12-year-old

**Relaxed screen time rules (43%) or behavior expectations (27%):**

As far as the phone and how much they play with their iPad things like that, that's gone up a lot cause... I think I just let 'em be happy, you know.  
- Father of 9-year-old

I definitely think we're more lax since she's been diagnosed. I know they told me you know stick with it, keep the same discipline. But, it's hard when you feel bad.  
- Mother of 4-year-old

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## RESULTS

- Caregivers with elevated psychosocial distress reported more changed rules/routines ( $t(42) = -2.50, p < .05$ ).
- Caregivers who reported more cancer-specific stressors reported more new rules/routines ( $t(42) = 2.07, p < .05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

- Changes in family rules and routines are common during the first year of cancer treatment and may be related to psychosocial distress and treatment demands.
- The long-term impact of these changes warrants further study, because increases in lax parenting during cancer treatment have been associated with adverse short- and long-term child outcomes.
- Identifying protective factors from families who reported fewer changes in rules and routines may elucidate mechanisms of prevention.

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