

# Who are young carers?

*"I don't know how to define a young carer or what I'd look for, but basically someone who is caring for someone close to them, physically, mentally and emotionally, and it's stopping them from having what you would call a normal teenage life."<sup>1</sup>*

## Who is this chapter for?

- All staff
- School lead or staff interested in becoming/establishing a school lead within your school
- School leadership team
- Governing body

## This chapter will support schools to:

- inform staff of what it means to be a young carer and the emotional and physical impacts that caring may have.

## Synopsis

Young carers are children and young people who look after someone in their family who has an illness, a disability, or is affected by mental ill-health or substance misuse. Young carers often take on practical and/or emotional caring responsibilities that would normally be expected of an adult. The tasks and level of caring undertaken by young carers can vary according to the nature of the illness or disability, the level and frequency of need for care and the structure of the family as a whole.

## What does it mean to be a young carer?

Young carers can experience conflicting emotions, such as loving the person they care for, while resenting the burden of care, or being proud of what they do as carers, while resisting the restrictions made on their young lives. This can lead to the young person feeling guilty or confused and perhaps further isolated from their peer group.<sup>2</sup>

Research shows that 81% of young carers care for a parent, often a single parent, and 58% of care recipients are mothers because single parents are more likely to be mothers than fathers. A quarter look after a disabled sibling, often when parents reach breaking point.<sup>3</sup> It is important to remember that young carers helping to look after a sibling are often overlooked. It is also very important to remember that not every child whose parent or sibling is ill or disabled is necessarily a young carer.

A young carer may undertake some or all of the following:

- Practical tasks, such as cooking, housework and shopping.



- Physical care, such as lifting, helping a parent on stairs or with physiotherapy.
- Personal care, such as dressing, washing, helping with toileting needs.
- Managing the family budget, collecting benefits and prescriptions.
- Administering medication.
- Looking after or “parenting” younger siblings.
- Emotional support.
- Interpreting, due to a hearing or speech impairment or because English is not the family’s first language.

Some young carers may undertake high levels of care, whereas for others it may be frequent low levels of care. Either can impact heavily on a child or young person.

## What are the effects of being a young carer?

A young carer’s personal and physical development, physical and emotional health, as well as social opportunities can all be affected by the family situation and their caring role. Young carers learn practical and caring skills at an early age and can be wrongly seen as “copers”. However, it is important to remember that they are ordinary young people with the same emotional needs as others their age.

- A young carer’s physical health is often severely affected by caring through the night, repeatedly lifting a heavy adult, poor diet and lack of sleep.
- Stress, tiredness and mental ill-health are common for young carers.
- Many experience traumatic life changes such as bereavement, family break-up, losing income and housing, or seeing the effects of an illness or addiction on their loved one.
- Inappropriate caring roles during childhood can impact later in life, affecting a young carer during the transition to adulthood or in adulthood itself. This can include long-term impacts on physical or emotional health, further education and/or career opportunities.

## Why are young carers hidden?

Many young carers receive no (or very little) help during their childhoods. It is difficult to believe that their issues go unnoticed. There are specific reasons for this. Firstly, adults’ services often fail to recognise their clients’ needs as a parent and children’s services often intervene too late when a young person’s caring role has caused damage to their well-being and they are at crisis point. Adults’ and children’s services often struggle to work together effectively and fail to look at the needs of the whole family. Families are often wary of intervention by services and conceal illness, particularly mental ill-health and substance misuse, while some parents don’t recognise their child’s caring role. Young carers feel they will be bullied if other young people find out about their caring role.



## Other chapters to help you understand this topic

- 2** Young carers and their education
- 18** Identification of young carers
- 19** Pupils with parents affected by substance misuse
- 20** Pupils with parents with mental ill-health
- 21** Pupils caring for someone with a disability
- 22** Pupils caring for a sibling
- 23** Pupils from migrant families

## Key resources

### → Professionals website

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers Professionals website, is an open resource for all professionals and decision-makers who come into contact with carers' issues.

[www.carers.org/professionals](http://www.carers.org/professionals)

### → YCNet

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers' dedicated website for young carers, providing information, advice, email support and supervised message boards and chat sessions.

[www.youngcarers.net](http://www.youngcarers.net)

### → The Children's Society website

Information on and for young carers and their families.

[www.youngcarer.com](http://www.youngcarer.com)

### → Refugee Toolkit

Developed by The Children's Society Family Health Inclusion Project and funded by the Department of Health, this is a tool for all adult and children's services practitioners, education, health and other agencies in contact with refugee and asylum seeking families. Particularly those working with families affected by ill-health and disability and where there are young carers.

[www.refugeetoolkit.org.uk](http://www.refugeetoolkit.org.uk)

<sup>1</sup>Thomas, N. (2001). *A Study of Young Carers in Wales. Perspectives of Children and Young People*. University of Wales.

<sup>2</sup>Leadbitter, H. (2008). Whole Family Pathway. The Children's Society:  
<http://www.youngcarer.com/pdfs/Whole%20Family%20Pathway.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>Dearden, C. & Becker, S. (2004). *Young Carers in the UK: the 2004 report*. Carers UK and The Children's Society.