Collaboration to support young carers affected by family substance misuse and mental health issues

What is the initiative? Who runs it?

| Action for Young Carers: Education and Support (AYCES) | Carers Support Merton acts as the lead agency, in conjunction with four partners: Sutton Carers Centre, Riverside Community Association, St Mark’s Family Centre and South West London & St George’s Mental Health NHS Trust |

Who does it benefit?

Young carers between the ages of 10–25 in the London Boroughs of Merton and Sutton who are caring for a family member with a mental health issue or substance misuse problem.

What does it do?

AYCES brings together five different agencies to identify and support, over a five year period, a target of 500 young carers affected by parental mental ill health or substance misuse issues, who are currently not recognised or receiving support. It supports young carers and their families through information, peer support groups for young carers, mental health support groups for parents, whole-family support, educational support and opportunities to develop life skills.

When did it start?

2012.

Why was it started?

Carers organisations in Merton and Sutton already supported young carers and worked alongside community organisations and the local NHS trust. Both were receiving referrals from South West London & St George’s Mental Health NHS Trust that were complex cases. Carers Support Merton was also receiving increasingly complex case referrals from St Mark’s Family Centre, with families having additional
issues such as with divorce or separation, domestic violence and/or disabilities, as well as being affected by parental mental health or substance misuse issues. St Mark’s Family Centre had to refer numerous cases to Carers Support Merton as its parental mental health support group could only work with parents who had children under the age of 12. Neither Carers Support Merton nor Sutton Carers Centre had the capacity to support the number of referrals from mental health services that were coming in.

A decision was therefore made to create a joint project which could better support these young carers. A partnership was forged between the two young carers groups, along with South West London & St George’s Mental Health NHS Trust, St Mark’s Family Centre and also the Riverside Community Association, which had established connections with Sutton Carers Centre, and usefully had an underutilised youth bus. Much of what the new partnership delivers was being done before, however, it is now being delivered in a much more joined-up way with greater capacity.

Another reason for increasing capacity to support young carers caring for parents with mental ill health or substance misuse issues was the recognition that there was a shortfall in the identification of these young carers. One of the aims of the new partnership was to train professionals in the mental health trust and across the two local authorities to better identify and support these young carers through a whole family approach.

What are the aims and objectives?

Aims:
- To increase the identification of young carers who care for someone with mental ill health or substance misuse issues.
- To support parents with mental ill health and address the needs of young carers within a whole-family context.

Objectives:
- For a Development Worker in the mental health trust to train staff to identify young carers.
- To develop and embed practices to ensure young carers are recognised and supported by all staff in the mental health trust.
- To train staff and volunteers in social care and community settings to identify and support young carers.
- To provide individualised support to young carers and their families, including advocacy, family work and educational support.
- To provide group activities to young carers including respite and social networking peer support.
- To provide groupwork, information and other support as necessary to parents.

How is it funded?

AYCES is funded by the Big Lottery Fund’s Youth in Focus programme. The project is receiving just under £1,000,000 over five years.
What has it achieved?

“It makes me feel good, because I know there’s support for my mother – because she suffers from depression. They take me and my sisters out on trips and support us which keeps us busy and that’s less pressure on my mum.”

Young carer

“There’s no doubt I would not be in the place I am now without your support.”

Parent

“I’ve never known a family benefit so much from a young carers service. The support they receive is fantastic.”

Social worker

The young carers who AYCES supports have been very vocal about the positive impact the project has had on them. The schools that AYCES has worked with that were previously struggling with young carers have reported that they are noticing improved attendance, attitudes and behaviour from their young carers.

Young carers were involved with making a DVD called Our Voice, Your Resource which is used by the project for training and raising awareness with professionals. This DVD is shown at team meetings, in discussions with headteachers and now forms part of London Borough of Merton’s parental mental health training for its staff involved in children’s safeguarding. It will shortly move from being a standalone resource to something which is also an integral part of the training package for NHS staff.

Through resources such as the DVD, which is being well received by audiences, the project has generated an increased recognition of young carers among local authority, NHS and voluntary sector workers. Referrals to the AYCES project from these sources have increased. Referrals by the young carers projects to other projects have also increased as a result of the greater awareness of additional local support. For example, referrals have been made to Catch 22 for further one-to-one support for a young carer. Catch 22 has put on a drug and alcohol awareness workshop for AYCES. Rethink has also become connected with the project as it has led discussions with young carers on how to look after their own mental health while caring.

St Mark’s Family Support has set up another 12 week mental health support group exclusively for parents on the AYCES project. The 12 week course focuses on strengthening individuals’ mental health, while also recognising their needs as a parent. An advantage of AYCES funding a support group for just the parents it supports is that there is no need for parents to go through the local authority to access this provision, which helps families who were reluctant to engage with support previously.
How have carers been involved in planning and delivering this work?

From the outset, a consultation group was held with 14 young carers, ten of whom were caring for someone with mental ill health or substance misuse issues. The young carers highlighted the emotional impact of caring and their desire to see more support available for the person they care for, which would in turn relieve their stress and concerns. This consultation informed the development of AYCES.

Today there is a young carers steering group which acts in a consultative capacity monitoring developments of the AYCES project and contributing ideas and proposals. This steering group follows on from a similar group in the pilot of this project; like the pilot group it is involved in business planning throughout the project delivery and evaluation.

Young carers were involved in the interview process for the recruitment of the two Family Support Workers and the Young Carers Lead in the mental health trust, as is standard practice within these organisations. There is also the opportunity for older young carers and other young people to become volunteers and with the supervision and support of paid staff, organise and run activities for carers younger than themselves. Volunteers are able to gain accredited training certificates in recognition of their involvement.

AYCES young carers have also been involved in designing publicity and training resources for the project, including leaflets and postcards, social networking sites, the AYCES logo and the DVD for training professionals. Young carers will soon have the opportunity to take part in training professionals from social care, housing associations and the NHS about the impact that caring for someone with mental ill health or substance misuse issues can have on a young person’s life and how they can identify and support them.

How is the initiative run?

The AYCES partnership has employed two full-time Family Support Workers within both carers centres as well as a full-time Young Carers Lead at the mental health trust. These employees are located across three sites: Carers Support Merton, Sutton Carers Centre and South West London & St George’s Mental Health NHS Trust. In addition, a part-time Group Facilitator and two Crèche Workers are employed for a parent support group.

The Young Carers Lead encourages staff at South West London & St George’s NHS Mental Health Trust to identify young carers who are affected by parental mental ill health or substance misuse issues. Since the Young Carers Lead comes from within the mental health trust, NHS staff seem to be more accepting of her role and aware that she is the person to speak to about young carers’ issues. So far, awareness raising work within the NHS trust has been somewhat informal, although the Young Carers Lead has delivered a more structured training session with social workers employed by the NHS trust, and there are plans to roll this training out further. Training staff and volunteers who work in community settings should also help young carers to be identified in situations where the person being cared for does not access mental health services.
Referrals to AYCES can be made by any professional in the two boroughs who has identified a young carer. A referral pathway has been created to be used by the two carers centres. Assessments are tailored to each family. The Multidimensional Assessment of Caring Activities, for instance, is used if a Family Support Worker wants to further understand what tasks a young carer is carrying out. Some assessments may also seek to identify friends and extended family who could be relied upon for support.

Bespoke support plans for each family allow different combinations of support to be accessed from any of the partners, regardless of who makes the initial referral and assessment. Families may have many interactions with the service over a long period or they may need only a one-off intervention. Re-assessments are conducted every six months by the Family Support Worker to evaluate the successes and identify any changes to be made. Evaluation is measured jointly between the family and their Family Support Worker; and new action plans are agreed upon by the two parties.

Support may include help with accessing education and training opportunities, developing life skills and future aspirations, and emotional support. Young carers can benefit from peer and social networking support and respite activities. One-to-one support with a Family Worker will involve agreeing targets with young carers which are reviewed each week to ensure the support is moving at a correct pace for the young carer. Parents can access a 12 week support group for parental mental health issues at St Mark’s Family Centre, which specialise in this work.

Case notes are written for each interaction with a young carer and their family and are logged on a case management system and in their file at the carers centre.

**What methods have been particularly effective?**

This model of partnership working is proving to be effective, with increasing numbers of professionals from different backgrounds being able to identify young carers. The partnership is allowing the load to be spread, with specialist professionals within the partnership taking on specific pieces of work.

As each of the five organisations already had a link with at least one of the other partners, this really helped to get the partnership off the ground.

**Have there been any challenges along the way?**

Frequently, the families affected by mental ill health and substance misuse issues have other issues in their household such as domestic violence, family separation and inadequate housing. Family members may also have other health problems, such as a physical disability or chronic illness, which can exacerbate their substance misuse or mental ill health. These family situations are often much more complex than the cases that the partners had experienced previous to the AYCES partnership. It is essential to take full advantage of the multi-agency, whole-family approach when working with such complex families.

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It is felt that complex cases, such as those involving domestic violence, can require double the attention of other cases, which is a strain on the capacity of the workers. Without reducing time spent on development and awareness raising, there is a need for more staff hours for direct work with young carers and families – especially for the complex cases the project is now working with.

**What hints and tips might help me get started?**

- Think about who you know and other organisations who you work with for opportunities to create a larger scale partnership. Not all of the five AYCES organisations had worked together previously, although they were somehow connected to each other. The four voluntary organisations worked within the same NHS trust catchment area for example. Together they were able to form a larger scale project than was possible in isolation and secure £1m in funding.

- Mediation, family work, group work and one-to-one skills are important assets to look for in the staff you recruit, as is creativity and tenacity.

**Are there any useful documents or resources that could assist me?**

A shorter version of the **AYCES young carers’ training film** can be viewed on YouTube.

You can request the full length DVD from AYCES.

The **Press release** about the project.

The Social Care Institute for Excellence **Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family** pages on [www.scie.org](http://www.scie.org).

**Where can I get further information?**

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