

Being a Carer, Being a Student and Being a Kid

A resource for schools

Introduction

For many young carers school can be a place to make friends and engage with other young people. What is now known is that if young carers have supportive teachers who understand their situation, their schooling achievements and academic attainment can be much higher (Carers Australia, 2009).

Being a Carer, Being a Student and Being a Kid: A Resource for Schools provides information for principals, teachers and student wellbeing support staff about supporting students who are young carers.

The Department of Education has an obligation under the NSW Carers (Recognition) Act 2010 to support young carers enrolled in public schools to maximise their educational outcomes. The Act includes a Carers Charter recognising the role and contribution of carers in our community and to the people they care for. Under the Charter, NSW government agencies must take all reasonable steps to ensure that the officers, employees and agents of the agency have an awareness and understanding of the NSW Carers Charter, and that the agency reflects the principles of the Charter when providing services that affect carers.

The NSW Carers (Recognition) Act 2010 seeks to increase recognition and awareness of carers and to acknowledge the valuable contribution they make to society.

Young Carers

Who is a young carer?

A young carer is a child or young person up to 25 years old who provides care, assistance or support to another family member. They carry out significant or substantial caring tasks on a regular basis and assume a level of responsibility which would usually be associated with an adult.

The person receiving care is often a parent, but can be a sibling, grandparent or other relative, who has a disability, chronic illness, mental illness or other condition necessitating a need for care, support and/or supervision.

Some young carers can be reluctant to disclose their caring role or the full extent of this role.

Identification as a carer can result in bullying due to poor understanding of, and stigma attached to, those with disabilities. This may be exacerbated when young people are caring for family members with mental illness and/or alcohol and other drug issues. Alternatively, some young carers may be proud of the help they are giving but fear further problems for the family, and themselves, if other people know what is happening.

How many young carers are there?

It is difficult to accurately estimate the numbers of young carers across Australia. Australian research indicates that many young people who provide support or assistance to family members with an illness or disability do not see themselves as carers. Rather, they see themselves as young people who 'help out' at home. This fact contributes to the 'hidden' nature of caring.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019), there are approximately 235,300 young carers in Australia. Young people from Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are statistically more likely than their peers to be carers.

Are there cultural differences?

The definition of a carer may vary across cultures, and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who perform caring roles may not necessarily identify themselves as carers.

In Aboriginal families, young carers often do not self-identify because they see their caring role as a natural extension of family duty.

Refugee students and their families may have experienced events related to war or persecution that may affect their mental and physical health long after the events have occurred. For this reason, and because young refugees sometimes are separated from or have lost one or both parents, they may take on carer roles, including self-care.

Young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may be particularly uncomfortable sharing confidential information about what is happening at home without their parents' knowledge.

Experiences of Young Carers

The role of a young carer goes beyond the incidental help offered in the home by many children or teenagers. It is distinguished by the amount of time involved and may include a range of responsibilities, such as assisting with personal care, monitoring their relative's safety, looking after younger siblings, or undertaking different forms of housework. Young carers may also organise transport, manage household finances and advocate for their relative when dealing with government or other agencies. As well as these practical tasks, they provide emotional support to their relative.

Being a young carer can provide positive experiences, but also challenges that may require extra support.

Positive experiences associated with caring can include:

- close and warm relationships with those for whom they care
- pride in their practical management skills
- confidence and resilience in managing challenges.

Challenges associated with caring can include:

- low participation, poor attainment in school and disengagement from school
- impaired psychosocial development and high levels of personal stress
- socioeconomic disadvantage, isolation and associated lack of opportunity and life choices
- difficulties making transitions to independence.

A study undertaken by Cummins, et al. (2007) for Deakin University found that the health and wellbeing of carers is amongst the lowest of any social group. Young carers may lack sleep and neglect their own health and wellbeing due to anxiety and preoccupation with their duties. At the same time, young carers do not want to be defined by their caring role and are keen to be treated like any other young person. They want to be understood and their circumstances considered, but not seen as an excuse.

How can schools help young carers?

There are a number of ways in which schools can support young carers. The first is simply to be aware that the school is likely to have young carers amongst its student population and that, for a variety of reasons, they may be reluctant to disclose this role.

Awareness

Schools can assist by taking considered steps so they are aware of who young carers are within their population. This does not mean that everyone in the school needs to know this. Key staff members, who have a role to play, would be suitable. Some students may be open and identify proudly as a young carer. This can be validating and show the importance of the role they own. Other students may be reluctant to identify in public as a carer. This is okay. Sometimes the title is not essential when working with students to meet their individual needs.

Schools should be aware that students, who may be young carers, are significantly over-represented in certain communities. Australian research has identified the following specific groups that may require interventions appropriate to their particular circumstances to assist in their caring situation.

- Families living in poverty
- rural and remote communities
- single parent families
- families where there is a member with a mental illness
- families where there is an alcohol and/or other drug dependency
- families where there is a member with a physical disability or chronic pain
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families
- families from culturally diverse backgrounds, in particular refugee families.

A school culture that is supportive, and inclusive creates an environment that encourages self-identification as a young carer. Some indications that a student may have a caring role include:

- persistent lateness or absences
- low levels of attendance at out-of-school events
- homework that is lost, incomplete, late or disorganised
- fewer resources for school
- untidy appearance
- making frequent phone calls
- often rushes home after school
- reluctance to speak about home life
- low attendance rates of family members at school events
- awareness of topics that may be beyond their age (e.g. illnesses, paying bills).
- over-sensitivity, anxiety or depression
- a tendency to be bullied or get into fights.

Providing a supportive environment

Although school can pose challenges for young carers, it can also be an important source of support. For some, school can be a form of respite from complex home lives. Schools can also offer social contact with peers, access to supportive adults in teachers, principals and counsellors, referrals to support services as well as access to sport and extracurricular activities. For some young carers, school is one of the few places they can connect with their friends if they had little time or money to socialise outside of school.

Public schools aim to provide a safe and secure environment that promotes mutual respect and access for all students. The **NSW Anti-Discrimination Act (1977)** indicates that it is unlawful to discriminate against a person, either directly or indirectly, because of their responsibilities as a carer. In this context, it is important that school principals ensure student welfare practices in the school encompass the particular learning needs of young carers and identify strategies to meet these needs.

Schools support all students, with a variety of needs. Carefully considered support options for young carers should be part of this process. Some useful strategies may include:

- nominating a staff member with whom the student has a positive relationship to coordinate support for the young carer. Developing this and an agreed plan of support with the student and their family should occur early.
- asking the young carer what would help them and valuing their contributions.
- respecting their privacy at school, and not discussing their situation with others. There may be times your duty of care responsibilities take priority and this will need to include the principal.
- identifying the specific school support required, including who will provide that support, who will be informed and how this will be reviewed.
- supporting attendance at school and in school related activities where possible. In exceptional circumstances, principals are able to grant an exemption from attendance at school when it is necessary or desirable that this occur (refer to the Guidelines for Exemption from School).
- asking young carers if they need help finding information about supports and/or assistance – for example respite care, NDIS, resources, peer support and financial support. Provide appropriate referrals (see Resources section).
- private phone access during recess and lunch breaks. Young carers require opportunities to make phone calls if their relative is unwell so that they can check on them. This can mean that they will have more confidence to engage in schooling.
- providing strategies for flexibility in their study commitments. Young carers may benefit from having flexible deadlines for homework and advance notice about forthcoming tasks and timelines as negotiated and within reason.
- offering lunch time support or facilities to complete homework during the school day.
- organising a meeting with the careers advisor and/or support from the school counselling service to explore opportunities and transition supports that can respond to the unique needs of young carers with their consent.
- ensuring that procedures are in place for young carers to access educational sponsorships or scholarships available to them, if appropriate.
- helping them to access educational or job opportunities
- engaging in active listening and appreciating the point of view of the young carer.
- providing support leading up to exams and other high demand times in school.
- ensuring that young carers are provided with the same options to take part in school activities and be part of the school – this may include scheduling activities during school hours when they can participate more easily.

Liaison with parents and families

Many families will be more likely to engage with school if they feel that their circumstances are understood and supported. When making decisions about how to communicate with the families of students who are young carers, the following suggestions may be considered.

- Develop positive lines of communication with parents/families of young carers and negotiate agreements about processes for communicating between the family and the school. Lines of communication should be established for regular contact and for communicating during emergencies.
- Approach the young carer's parents and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with cultural sensitivity. There are a range of strategies available in [Opening the school gate: Engaging migrant and refugee families](#)
- Use professional interpreters and translated documents (do not rely on the young carer) for family members who do not speak or understand English well, the deaf or hearing impaired and those with a speech impairment. Translations of many key Department of Education documents are available on the Department's website.
- Listen to what the young carer has to offer during discussions with the family.

A whole-of-family approach is effective when supporting the needs of young carers in schools. A whole-of-family approach involves sustained communication and collaboration with other agencies in order to negotiate the different needs of family members.

Other considerations for young carers

Bullying and harassment

Being a young carer may make students vulnerable to bullying and harassment. Some young carers are bullied because their family is perceived as 'different', others because they spend a lot of time 'caring' and are less able to participate in social activities.

Bullying has three key features. It:

- involves a misuse of power in a relationship
- is ongoing and repeated
- involves behaviours that cause harm.

Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. Bullying can be easy to see (overt), or hidden (covert), such as spreading rumours about another person or excluding them.

Bullying can also happen online using technology such as the internet or mobile devices. This is known as online bullying or cyberbullying. For more information visit: <https://antibullying.nsw.gov.au/>.

Privacy

School personnel are obliged to respect students' privacy and keep personal information confidential. The dilemma of establishing support mechanisms for young carers, while respecting privacy, requires careful consideration and planning.

Appropriate staff in schools, such as the principal or school counselling staff, may be able to identify those students who are carers through information provided on enrolment forms or through interviews, or simply 'knowing' the student through talking with them. Information from previous schools is often important, especially where it provides advice on the welfare and learning supports the student found helpful.

Staff should decide, in consultation with the young carer, the way that personal information will be shared and with whom and involve the young carer, and where appropriate, their family in conversations and meetings that involve individualised or school support plans.

Before developing plans and strategies, schools may find it useful to visit the Department's **Legal Services** site for guidance regarding privacy and information management.

Child Protection

In some situations, a young carer's wellbeing may need to be monitored in relation to possible risk of harm as a result of their situation.

Children and young people with carer responsibilities may be more vulnerable to abuse or exploitation. Concerns about neglect may be an indicator that additional supports, such as respite, or resources are needed by the family.

If a staff member has reasonable grounds to feel concerned about the safety, welfare and wellbeing of a child or young person they must convey their concerns to the principal, who will follow the procedures outlined in the Department's Child Protection Policy: **Responding to and reporting students at risk of harm.**

Resources

A range of young carer information and support materials are currently available online and via phone.

Resources		
Young Carers NSW	1800 242 636 M-F 9am – 5pm	<p>Young Carers NSW is for young carers and the people who support them. It is a part of Carers NSW.</p> <p>The Young Carers NSW website offers information about programs for young carers, including respite, camps, support and study groups, counselling and peer online chat forums. Young carers can read stories about other young carers and can post questions on the site. There are links to other specific online help sites for young people.</p> <p>The Young Carers NSW website also includes information for parents and professionals working with young carers.</p>
Children of parents with mental illness (COPMI)	Contact Us	Provides information and resources for children and young people living in families where a parent has a mental illness. There is a workers' resources tab on the main page which provides information and practical ideas for teachers and support staff working with children and young people who live in families where there is mental illness.
ReachOut	Contact Us	ReachOut is an online mental health organisation for young people. Their website includes information and resources specifically for young carers.
Legal advice for young carers under 18 years old	Contact Us	The National Children's and Youth Law Centre offers information about most areas of the law that might be relevant for young carers. Information about rights and getting help is offered in youth-friendly language.
Career Gateway	1800 422 737 M-F 8am – 6pm	Carer Gateway is a national online and phone service that provides practical information and resources to help carers locate their nearest existing support services.

Resources		
Health direct after hours GP helpline	1800 022 222	If you or someone you care for has an urgent health concern at night or over the weekend and you are not sure what to do, you can contact the afterhours GP helpline.
Commonwealth respite and Centrelink centres	1800 052 222 business hours or 1800 059 059 outside business hours (emergency)	Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centres (CRCCs) aim to contribute to the support and maintenance of caring relationships by facilitating access to information, respite care and other support appropriate to carers' needs and circumstances, and the needs of the people they care for.
The Carer Line	1800 242 636 M-F 9am – 5pm	Speak with the young carer team to find out about young carer support services. Interpreting available.
Mental Health Line	1800 011 511	The Mental Health Line is a 24-hour telephone service operating seven days a week across NSW that connects the people of NSW with the appropriate care or service.
Carer Recognition Act 2010 Guidelines		
Guide to the NSW Carers (Recognition) Act 2010		
Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW: Carers responsibilities discrimination		

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