

Being a carer, being a student and being a kid: A resource for schools

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.

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. These tasks can include, but are not limited to:

- assisting with personal care
- monitoring a relative's safety
- looking after younger siblings
- housework
- organising transport
- managing household finances
- advocating with government or other agencies for a relative.

As well as these practical tasks, they provide emotional support to their relative.

Many 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. Many young carers also see themselves as young people who 'help out' at home rather than as a carer.

The definition of a carer may vary across cultures.

Experiences of young carers

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

Positive experiences:

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

Challenges:

- 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.

Young carers may lack sleep and neglect their own health and wellbeing due to anxiety and preoccupation with their duties.

How can schools help young carers

Awareness

Not everyone needs to know who a young carer at school is but identifying suitable staff members such as a Head Teacher, Wellbeing or Assistant Principal can ensure reasonable steps are taken to provide them support.

Some students may be open and proudly identify as a young carer, while other students may want this to remain private. Both situations are okay and should not impact the support a school can give in meeting a young carer's individual needs.

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.

Students who are young carers are often significantly over-represented in certain communities and specific groups including:

- 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.

Providing a supportive environment

Schools support all students, with a variety of needs. Some useful strategies and tips may include:

- nominating a staff member with whom the student has a positive relationship to coordinate support for the young carer
- respecting a young person's privacy at school, and not discussing their situation with others, except in situations where duty of care responsibilities takes priority
- asking the young carer what would help them and valuing their contributions
- developing an agreed plan of support with the student and their family,

which identifies the specific school support required, who will provide that support, who will be informed and how this will be reviewed

- supporting attendance at school and in school related activities
- providing strategies for flexibility in their study commitments including negotiable timelines, advance notice and/or flexible deadlines for homework
- providing support leading up to exams and other high demand times in school
- supporting and empowering young carers by providing opportunities for them to phone or message home to check in on relatives during recess and lunch
- offering lunch time support or facilities to complete homework during the school day
- organising a meeting with the careers advisor and/or the School Counselling Service to provide support or explore opportunities with their consent
- helping them to access educational or job opportunities as well as educational sponsorships or scholarships that are available to them
- 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
- asking young carers if they need help finding information about external supports and/or assistance.

Liaising with parents and families

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

Some strategies and tips include:

- negotiating agreements around regular contact and for communicating during emergencies
- using the [Opening the school gate: Engaging migrant and refugee families](#) resource for schools
- using 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](#).
- listening to what the young carer has to offer during discussions with the family.

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.

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.

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](#).

External support and resources

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

Resources		
Carers NSW Australia	1800 242 636 M-F 9am – 5pm	The Carers NSW website offers information for young carers including real-life stories, factsheets and the YC Bytes podcast. The website also includes information for parents and professionals working with young carers.
Children of parents with mental illness (COPMI)	Contact Us	COPMI provides information and resources for children and young people living in families where a parent has a 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.
Youth Law Australia	Contact Us	Youth Law Australia offers free confidential legal advice and information to young people under 25 years old 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.
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.
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.

Legislation and guidelines

[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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