

Young Carers: Guidance for Schools and Local Authorities

Introduction

“If I’d have gone regularly to school I would have done all right. But under the circumstances I’d have felt I couldn’t have gone. It would have just made me feel more guilty that I was going if you know what I mean. I just didn’t want to do that.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“He can’t write, he can’t sign things – I sign everything for him – and he finds it hard to walk a lot, so I do the shopping. He tends to stay in the house . . . I was only young, must have been about ten when it all started”.ⁱⁱⁱ

Young carers are children and young people under 18 who help to look after a family member who is disabled, physically or mentally ill or has a substance misuse problem. Helping out around the house is a normal part of growing up, but young carers regularly carry out significant or substantial caring tasks and assume a level of responsibility which is inappropriate to their age. Caring can involve physical or emotional care, or taking responsibility for someone’s safety or well being. Many young carers spend a lot of time doing household chores or looking after younger siblings in addition to helping a sick or disabled parent with tasks such as administering medication, helping someone to get up and get dressed or helping someone use the bathroom. Some young carers help parents to look after a disabled sibling. The last census found 175,000 young carers in the UK. Local research has suggested there may be up to 30 young carers in a secondary school.

Most young carers are not known to be caring by school staff, so being a young carer can be a hidden cause of poor attendance, under achievement and bullying, with many young carers dropping out of school or achieving no qualifications. There are some simple and inexpensive steps that all schools can take in order to ensure that young carers don’t place their education in second place to their caring responsibilities. The Government has discovered that a very small number of pupils are responsible for a huge proportion of absenteeism. If some of these pupils are missing school because of an inappropriate caring role, following this guidance could reduce the authorised or unauthorised absenteeism that results from this hidden problem.

Most children affected by family disability, health problems or substance misuse do not become young carers and it is important to be wary of making assumptions about people with disabilities or other health issues and labelling young people or their parents. Support for young carers and their families should always aim to strengthen families and support parenting.

Identifying young carers

“I used to run away from school because I always wanted to be with my mum. I used to think that my mum was going to die. I was about eight....they treated me as if I was playing truant.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Prevention is better – and cheaper – than cure. Most young carers go unnoticed for years, under-achieving and failing to respond to support that does not tackle the root cause of their problems.

Increasingly Education Welfare Officers/ Educational Social Workers and other attendance professionals are able to identify that a young person missing school is a young carer after a home visit, but it would be even better to identify young carers or pupils at risk of becoming young carers before they became entrenched in an inappropriate caring role, or a negative relationship with their school.

Enrolment

Your enrolment process for new pupils and their families should attempt to establish:

- Does the pupil have parents or other family members who have disabilities or other long term physical or mental health problems?
- Does the pupil help to look after them and what impact does this have on his/ her education?
- Is the family in touch with support services that could reduce the pupil's caring role?

Some families may choose to keep their problems secret, but offering signposting and information about other services at an early stage may make all the difference.

Warning signs

Young carers are not easy to spot and many actively try to conceal their caring role from teachers, pastoral staff and peers for fear of bullying or outside interference in their families. All of the warning signs below could be indicators of another problem. However, staff noticing these signs should consider asking the pupil if they are helping to look after someone at home.

- Regular or increased lateness or absence
- Concentration problems, anxiety, tiredness
- Under-achievement and late or incomplete homework: may be a sudden unexplained drop in attainment
- Few or no peer friendships; conversely the pupil may get on well with adults and present as very mature for their age
- Victim of bullying, sometimes explicitly linked to a family member's disability, health or substance misuse problem
- Behavioural problems, sometimes the result of anger or frustration expressed inappropriately
- Unable to attend extra-curricular activities
- Difficulties in engaging parents; parents not attending parents' evenings

Keeping young carers in school

"I missed a lot of school because he wasn't well and I didn't like leaving him in case he fell over and he couldn't reach a phone or pull the cords... I went to it twice a week, that was it."^[iv]

In the past schools have been largely unaware of pupils' caring roles, but there have been a few instances of schools "turning a blind eye" to absence or incomplete work known to be the result of a caring role. It is vital that schools balance taking a supportive, flexible approach with giving the pupil a consistent message that their education is important. Most young carers say that when forced to choose between staying at home to look after a loved one and going to school, caring comes first. When more appropriate sources of caring are not immediately available to a family, schools can help pupils to balance their caring responsibilities with their education in several easy ways:

- Adopt a Young Carers Policy (exemplar below).
- Most young carers will meet the definition of a child "in need" under the Children Act 1989 and may be entitled to an assessment from Children's Services. A small number will be at risk of significant harm. Where you suspect that this may be the case, the school's child protection procedures should be followed.
- Ensure that there is a named member of staff that pupils can talk to and whose role is well understood by staff, pupils and parents.
- Speak to pupils who you believe to be carers in private, not in class.
- Where possible, speak to the pupil's parent: see "Adults' Services" below.
- Offer disabled parents support with getting their children to school. Some parents have fluctuating conditions, such as MS, which mean that they can support their children to get to school on some days but are immobile on others. The implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act means that local authorities must provide adequate support to disabled parents with getting their children to school.
- Allow young carers to telephone home if they are worried about a relative. A young carers card scheme can help young people identify themselves and access facilities such as a phone or an early lunch pass without having to explain their personal circumstances.
- Negotiate deadlines for homework at times when the pupil's caring role increases. Consider giving lunchtime detentions rather than after school detentions. Implement Education Maintenance Allowance guidance on writing EMA contracts that do not unfairly penalise young carers.
- Education Welfare Services, Home School Liaison workers, Inclusion Officers and other attendance professionals can play a key role in supporting the family and seeking the involvement of other services.

Tackling stigma in schools

Much of the bullying experienced by young carers results from the stigma associated with some disabilities and health conditions such as mental ill health or substance misuse. Strong Bullying, Inclusion and Anti-discrimination policies can reduce this, as can teach pupils about disability and mental health problems in assemblies and PSHE lessons.

How can Adults' Services help schools?

Where education professionals become aware that a child they support could be affected by a family member's health condition or disability, they should

attempt to signpost the family towards appropriate support services. The cared-for person may be entitled to an assessment of their needs from social services such as a Community Care Assessment or Care Programme Approach assessment.

The school should have made links with these services and understand their referral criteria:

- Adult Social Services
- Adults' Mental health teams
- Drug and Alcohol Services
- Citizens Advice Bureaux and other voluntary sector services.

Schools can offer leaflets and other information where a family is unwilling for school staff to refer them. A Young Carers Service, where available, may be able to carry out this work for schools.

How can specialist Young Carers Services help schools?

*"It's not just the caring that affects you. What really gets you is the worry of it all. Having a parent who is ill and seeing them in such a state...you think about it a lot."*¹⁶

Most areas have a voluntary sector Young Carers Service which is likely to offer trips, activities, one to one support such as mentoring, and whole family support such as signposting to Adults' services and advocacy.

Most Young Carers Services also offer teacher training, assemblies and PSHE lessons. Some can run lunch time young carers clubs or after school homework clubs for young carers. There is a database of Young Carers Services at The Children's Society's website www.youngcarer.com

Young carers can access information on disabilities and health conditions, support via email and moderated chat sessions at www.youngcarers.net which also has a section for Education professionals.

Funding sources

Some voluntary sector Young Carers Services have been able to access grant funding specifically to work in schools. Schools and local authorities in some areas have allocated inclusion/ attendance resources to identifying and supporting young carers who are at risk of missing substantial amounts of schooling, often in partnership with a voluntary sector organisation.

Exemplar School Policy

At _____ we believe that all children and young people have the right to an education, regardless of what is happening at home. When a young person looks after someone in their family who has a serious illness, disability or substance misuse problem, he or she may need a little extra support to help him or her get the most out of school. Our Young Carers Policy says how we will help any pupil who helps to look after someone at home.

Our school:

- Has a member of staff with special responsibility for young carers and lets all new pupils know who they are and what they can do to help.
- Runs a PSHE lesson on the challenges faced by young carers during year____.
- Can put young carers in touch with the local Young Carers Service. We can also put families in touch with other support services.
- Is accessible to parents who have mobility and communication difficulties and involves them in parents' evenings.
- Respects your right to privacy and will only share information about you and your family with people who need to know to help you.
- Will consider alternatives if a young carer is unable to attend out of school activities e.g. detention, sports coaching, concerts, due to their caring role
- Allows young carers to telephone home during breaks and lunchtimes.
- Complies with the Disability Discrimination Act by offering disabled parents support to get their children into school.

Legislation and guidance

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Articles 28 and 29. Children and young people have the right to the best available education and to opportunities to develop their personality, mental and physical ability to their fullest potential.

The Children Act 1989.

The Framework for Assessment of Children in Need and their Families, which gives guidance on S. 17 of the Act, has a section on young carers which states that effective support will require "good quality joint work between adult and children's social services as well as co-operation from schools and health workers . . . Young carers can receive help from both local and health authorities." See paragraphs 3.61-3.63.

DCSF Advice and guidance to Schools and Local Authorities on Managing Behaviour and Attendance: groups of pupils at particular risk (replaced Circular 10/99 Social Inclusion: Pupil Support):

- "Young carers should not be expected to carry inappropriate levels of caring which have an adverse impact on their development and life chances. However, there are children and young people who undertake caring roles. Young carers of a sick or disabled relative at home may be late or absent from school because of their responsibilities. A study in one authority suggested there may be up to 30 young carers in a secondary school."
- "In a genuine crisis, a school can approve absence for a child to care for a relative until other arrangements can be made...."
- "Schools should consider designating a member of staff to have responsibility for young carers. They can also contribute to schemes that support them, working with local authorities and voluntary agencies."

Also, ***Effective Attendance Practice in Schools: An Overview*** of attendance guidance states that schools should have “support systems in place for vulnerable groups which provide” among other things, signposting and access to external support for parents and pupils” and “training for staff on specific needs of pupils e.g. young carers”.

The National Carers Strategy (1999)

Chapter 8 of this Government strategy states that “schools need to be sensitive to the individual problems faced by young carers” and that “The Government will draw schools’ attention to effective practice in meeting the needs of pupils who are young carers, for example, through link arrangements with young carers’ services. . . . Schools might find it helpful to have one member of staff to act as a link between young carers, the education welfare service, social services and young carers’ services.” It suggests that there may be 30 young carers in every school.

Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995; Carers and Disabled Children Act 2001; Carers (Equal Opportunities) Act 2004

Between them these Acts give young carers varying rights to an assessment of their needs, which must take into account their right to an education. See the SCIE practice guide to the Carers (Equal Opportunities) Act 2004: www.scie.org.uk, commissioned by the Department of Health.

The Children’s Society Young Carer’s Initiative is funded by DCSF to develop Key Principles of Practice in supporting young carers and their families. Key Principle 4 states: *Young carers will have the same access to education and career choices as their peers:*

Standard: Schools and colleges take responsibility to identify young carers at an early stage and ensure that they have the same access to a full education and career choices as their peers.

Performance Indicators

4.1 Governing bodies in schools make provision for policy and practice that supports young carers and promotes good communication with their families.

4.2 Schools and colleges have inclusive policies that enable the identification of young carers and to deliver effective methods of supporting them to achieve their full potential whilst recognising the positives of any acquired skills and attributes.

4.3 Schools and colleges provide clear, accessible, up to date information regarding health issues and local community services to all pupils in school. And have procedures for referring to other agencies and sign posting the direction young carers can take in order to gain additional support for them and their family outside of school.

4.4 Schools and colleges are accessible to parents who are disabled or have a long-term illness. This includes ensuring that communication strategies

include provision for any parent with a visual, hearing or communication impairment. (As covered in the Disability and Discrimination Act with regards to access to goods, services and facilities)

4.5 The curriculum promotes a fuller understanding and acceptance of, and respect for, the issues surrounding disabilities and caring as well as promoting positive images of disability and impairment.

4.6 Staff will have access to information and training to enable them to recognise the indications that a child has a caring responsibility as well as increasing their understanding of such responsibilities .and to ensure that any who are children in need are identified or feel able to ask for help, are listened to and offered direct services and protection, if needed.

4.7 There is a named member of staff to lead on young carers

4.8 Individual plans recognise the child/young person's specific needs as a young carer

4.9 Local authorities consider how best to support those parents who find it difficult to escort younger children to school.

4.10 Admission authorities consider the responsibilities of young carers and the impact of any family disability or illness on those young carers when setting admission criteria for their schools

Further information

- DCSF 2006 guidance on young carers in *Advice and guidance to Schools and Local Authorities on Managing Behaviour and Attendance: groups of pupils at particular risk* (www.dfes.gov.uk/behaviourandattendance)
- Teachernet guidance at www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/atoz/y/youngcarers/ and at www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/library/youngcarersandschools/ which includes case studies from teachers themselves.
- The section for education professionals at www.youngcarers.net/professionals
- The Children's Society's *Principles of Practice* for all services coming into contact with young carers and their families: www.youngcarer.com
- Young Carers Research Group Reports: *Young carers in the UK 2004* and *Young carers in schools*. www.carersuk.org/Policyandpractice/Research
- DCSF guidance on Home to School Travel and Transport 2006 <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/DFES-00373-2007.pdf>

^[1] *Young carers in their own words*, 2000, Ed. Bibby, Becker.

^[2] Ibid

^[3] *Making it Work*, Frank, 2002, The Children's Society and The Princess Royal Trust for Carers.

^[4] *Growing up caring*, 2000, Becker and Dearden

^[5] Ibid.