

# Institute of Child Protection Studies



# 6

## Research to Practice Series Supporting Young Carers in Education

*The Institute of Child Protection Studies **Research to Practice Series** links the findings of research undertaken by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, to the development of policy and practice in the area of child, youth and family welfare.*

### About the Institute of Child Protection Studies

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University was established in 2005 to carry out high quality research, evaluation and professional development to enhance outcomes for children, young people and families. ICPS is based within the Learning Sciences Institute Australia, in the Faculty of Education and Arts, ACU.

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### Supporting Young Carers in Education

Issue 6 of this series discusses the impact that caring has on young people's lives, how it can affect young carers' education, what young carers want from schools, and how schools can support young carers. It is based on a project commissioned by Carers Australia and implemented by ICPS in 2006, and a number of subsequent papers, which explored the needs and experiences of young carers in education. More information about the project is provided at the end of the issue.

Carers Australia defines young carers as children and young people up to 25 years of age, who help care in

families where someone has an illness, a disability, a mental illness or an alcohol or other drug problem<sup>1</sup>. They report that there are at least 150,000 young carers in Australia under 18 years of age, and that over 300,000 young people in Australia have a caring role in their family. There is a higher prevalence of caring among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. On average, young carers in schools are aged 12 to 13 years, and there are 2 to 3 young carers in every classroom.

1. See report link in 'References and Useful Resources': *Young Carers in Education: Supporting rural and remote young carers.*

### The impact of caring on young people's lives

Young carers often undertake a range of tasks in their caring roles, such as household tasks, providing personal care and emotional support, supervising younger siblings and advocating for services. Although many children and young people undertake some household tasks at home, young carers often assume primary responsibility for these tasks, and do them with little or no assistance. They care for relatives for an average of 6 hours a day – in addition to their participation in education and/or employment.

Young carers have reported experiencing a range of positive and negative impacts on their lives, relationships, families, participation and future outlook. Many feel proud of the fact they can help to care for someone they care about, and say that caring has made them more active and motivated, and helped them to develop new skills and capacities. However, they also report negative impacts to their mental and physical health, such as feeling tired, stressed, anxious, depressed and overwhelmed. Although many young carers feel more connected with other family members, caring can place significant stress and strain on families. Many young carers and their families also experience financial difficulties, due to costs of care treatment and support, and a low capacity to access employment. Young carers can be at greater risk of homelessness and criminality, as a result of poverty and other complex issues.

As well as experiencing challenges participating in education, young carers report that caring also impacts on their social life, often feeling socially isolated, and upon their ability to participate in employment.



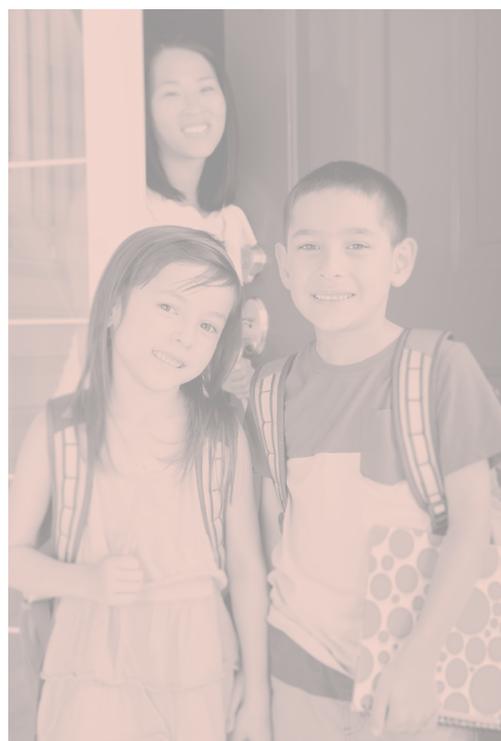
### Young carers' participation at school

UK research on young carers found that some of the difficulties they experienced in participating in education included absences, lateness, tiredness, difficulty joining extra-curricular activities, bullying, restricted peer networks, poor attainment, challenges with homework, anxiety and behavioural problems<sup>2</sup>. Some of these challenges were due to time constraints, and could be persistent or occasional. In the research project, ICPS found that school was important to many of the young carers spoken to, with the difficulties they experienced in participating often being out of their control. They suggested that when their attendance was poor it was due to the level of care responsibility they assumed, the lack of services available to support them and their relatives, and family issues such as poverty and isolation.

- **Positive aspects of education for young carers**

Young carers reported that they valued school because it offered them time out from their caring responsibilities, without having to feel as much guilt as they would have otherwise; gave them with opportunities to connect with others; and was a place where they could receive support and information from people who were understanding and caring, including peers, teachers and other young carers.

*"I like seeing my friends and being in familiar surroundings. You can have a break away from home. You can muck around with friends at lunch time and stuff." (12 years)*



Additionally, some young carers believed that their caring roles had a positive impact on their education and experiences at school; feeling more motivated to work hard and prove to themselves that they could achieve, and because they were aware that if they needed to care for their relatives into the future, they needed an education in order to get a good job. A number of young carers also felt that because of their knowledge and skills in caring, they were motivated to seek future employment in human services.

***"I made myself a commitment that I'd actually do something – not make my sister's life my life – to not let it keep me back. I had a goal and I worked to it." (17 years)***

<sup>2</sup> Dearden and Becker, cited in *Reading, Writing and Responsibility* (p 15). See 'References and Useful Resources'.

- **Negative aspects of education for young carers**  
In the study, 44% of young carers suggested they felt they had not achieved as highly in school as they could have due to the pressures of caring, physical and emotional issues, not having enough time to complete homework and catch up with schooling, and having a school system that was inflexible and unresponsive to their needs, skills and experiences.

Young carers reported that they missed sleep and felt tired and lacked energy at school, which was sometimes due to their care responsibilities or because they were up late completing school work. Some young carers reported that while at school they were worrying about their relatives at home, and found it difficult to concentrate.



*“Kids who have caring responsibilities – they have to drop out sometimes. It’s not “I don’t want to go to school anymore” but it’s I just can’t.” (17 years)*

***“I get up at 6:30. By 7:30 I’m getting everyone’s breakfast. Get back from school at 3 and help around the house. Cook tea. I got to bed about 11.” (Female young carer, 15 years)***

Young carers’ participation in school, and their social development, was sometimes hampered because of their caring duties. Issues included a lack of time to socialise with friends after school, including in extra-curricular activities such as sports, difficulties in engaging with others who understand, losing friends because of home life, bullying and harassment, feeling uncomfortable and unsafe (particularly with the way teachers and peers spoke about illness and disability), and expressing anger and other emotions negatively.

***“They found out by accident. My friends were over and met my Mum. From then on I was the “crazy kid”, the outcast. When it got around, I lost every friend I ever had.” (18 years)***

*“In year 1 I was moved to another school because the bullying got so harsh. I was beat up and teased because of my sister and the school didn’t do anything about it. So I just moved schools. It happened again so I had to move again. I stopped telling people about what I was doing because it wasn’t safe.”(15 years)*

### What young carers want from teachers and schools

Many young carers reported that schools and teachers were unable to adequately support them if they didn't know they had care responsibilities at home. When they had identified themselves, some reported positive outcomes; with teachers being more understanding, more willing to be flexible and helping them to find the supports they needed. However, many reported negative outcomes, such as the loss of anonymity, receiving inappropriate responses, disbelief and breaches of confidentiality.

*“Sometimes teachers were a bit more flexible. They didn't really know what was going on but they knew that something was up so they let you have an extension or something and that's good.”(17 years)*

*“Some of my teachers were a bit nosy, asking specific questions about my Mum that was not necessary for them to know. And also some of them would bring it up in front of other people, like other students that maybe didn't know my situation and the teachers would refer to stuff like me having to help my Mum go to bed etc. It was not so good when that happened.”(16 years)*



A number of young carers reported that when they identified themselves as being a young carer they were no longer hidden from view, from scrutiny, or from unwanted intervention. The majority of young carers in this project felt that until schools could counter negative consequences of being identified, with useful and concrete supports, they would not feel comfortable in people knowing about their home lives. This suggests that identification of young carers in schools should not be the only strategy that schools adopt to support students with care responsibilities; and that identification of students should only occur after schools have developed a series of strategies and policies to address their needs.

## What young carers want teachers and schools to know

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### **That young carers exist and that they assume significant care responsibilities:**

- Young carers usually are not lying when they share their experiences
- Young carers will sometimes need flexibility in their attendance and assessment
- Young carers will often feel tired, anxious and distracted
- Not all young carers will identify themselves as carers
- Not all young carers know that they are young carers
- Sharing information about their home life can sometimes be difficult

### **That caring is a normal experience:**

- A large number of children and young people help care for a family member
- Young carers do not want to be treated differently to others
- Young carers are not usually being 'exploited' by their parents
- Caring does not always negatively impact on young carers' education – sometimes there are even positives

### **That young carers need understanding:**

- Young carers may need some 'space', especially when they are feeling stressed or tired
- Young carers are bullied and harassed because they are caring or because of their relative's condition
- Young carers do not feel safe or comfortable in what they consider a hostile environment
- Young carers do not always want sympathy, but they often do need concrete support

### **That young carers have a range of skills and experiences:**

- That need to be valued and validated
- That can be applied at school
- That might be recognised through vocational education

### **That young carers need support:**

- Young carers need someone 'safe' who will listen and support them
- Young carers need someone to advocate for them at school
- Young carers need someone to ask them if they are alright
- Young carers need someone to help connect them with supports

### **That young carers need their privacy:**

- Young carers do not like people knowing about their situations – particularly if there is a chance of negative consequences
- Young carers are happy for supportive teachers to share their situation – but only for the purposes of increasing understanding or for engaging supports
- Young carers often will not identify if they are afraid that their privacy will be broken

## Young carers identified that they wanted schools to provide:

- **Personal support and advocacy:**  
Having someone within the school who was available for them to talk to, who listened, was empathetic and helped them resolve their problems.
- **Integrated promotion and understanding of delivery:**  
More education in schools about caring, disabilities, mental illness and alcohol and other drug use; to raise awareness of teachers and students and also to disseminate information to young carers.
- **Flexibility in school delivery:**  
Building flexibility into school policy to support young carers with homework, coursework and subject completion; and to recognise and integrate their skills into their learning and assessment. Also, exploring options for home-schooling or alternative education.

## What young carers would like their schools to do

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### Support for young carers:

- Support groups where young carers can meet and develop friendships
- Expand existing programs to become more inclusive of young carers (i.e. cross-age tutoring, special education settings, one-on-one educational support)
- Provide 'time-out' and other young carer-friendly spaces on site and allow young carers to have space and time when needed

### Curriculum:

- Develop curriculum that reflects the experiences of people with conditions and their families, challenges stigma and promotes diversity
- Integrate self-care, 'caring' and help-seeking skills into mainstream programs

### Delivery:

- Work with community education programs (including VET) to provide a variety of delivery modes (including home schooling, distance education, take-home work)
- Work with young carers to credit pre-existing skills and experiences in nationally recognised packages (such as Certificate IV Disability Work) to enable time off from study

### Policies and programs:

- Review policies to ensure they are inclusive for young carers (e.g. no mobile phones)
- Provide training for teachers:
  - on issues affecting children and young people (including caring)
  - on illnesses, disabilities, mental health, alcohol or other drug issues
  - on how to minimise stigma, discrimination and harassment of people with conditions and their families
  - on how to create a supportive school environment for all young people
  - on how to best support young carers in schools

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

Developed by Carers Australia, this website provides information and resources for young carers and those who support them. It includes a section for education providers, with useful information, resources and links to assist teachers and schools to better support young carers to participate in education.

## Section 4

### About the Project

The *Young Carers and Education* project was commissioned by Carers Australia in 2006, and has helped to inform the implementation of a number of programs to support young carers in education. Fifty-one young carers between the age of 12 and 21 participated in the project

More information and the full research report is available at [www.acu.edu.au/icps](http://www.acu.edu.au/icps).

### References

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