

## Section 5: Supporting Young Carers

Supporting young carers is about providing practical and emotional support - helping to ensure they enjoy and achieve just like their peers.

Young carers aren't going to stop caring but as professionals we can help them feel less alone and enable them to learn and have fun, as children and young people are entitled to do.

This section contains information about some of the ways that you might be able to support the young carers you work with.

### In this Section you will find Information Related to:

- Early and Preventative Work
- Low Level Intervention
- Personalising Support
- Greater Sensitivity to the Individual
- Greater Sensitivity to the Family
- A Young Carer Card
- Support for Children Caring for those with Mental Ill-Health
- Providing Young Carers with Information
- Pupils Caring for A Sibling
- Migrant Families
- Barriers to Learning for Pupils from Migrant Families
- Child Interpreters and Translators
- Crisis and Emergency Planning
- Crisis and Emergency Planning, Points to Consider
- Transition
- Checklist: Young Carer Support Options

## Early and Preventative Work

Young carers can go unnoticed in school for years: under achieving and failing to respond to support that does not tackle the root causes of their problems.

Early identification, intervention and prevention are vital to avoid any negative impacts on their education and to ensure emotional and physical well-being.

Juggling the responsibilities of a caring role, along with the pressures of education can be exhausting and burdensome for a young carer. Schools must develop systems of support before young carers lives are negatively affected.

Teachers, social workers, school nurses and other staff are in a position to identify a young carer through absence, but it is more desirable to identify a young carer before they are rooted in a caring role, before their attendance or behaviour drops or a negative relationship develops with the school. Failure to prepare support can impact upon a pupil, leading them to spiral towards further problems and disengagement.

## Low-level Intervention

Some illnesses and disabilities are, by nature, extremely variable whilst others are degenerative, but all have differing impacts on a young carer's role. It is better to support pupils through early intervention rather than allowing them to struggle later on, if and when their circumstances become more difficult. Even when a young carer appears to be coping reasonably well and caring responsibilities seem limited, ensuring a support framework is in place and that the pupil is comfortable in accessing this framework (if they wish) is ideal.

Pupils who have already accessed low-level support are less likely to refuse further support should their caring role increase and their home situation worsen or become chaotic. Pupils who have met other young carers at peer support groups, for example, or those who have already talked with a member of staff, might feel more confident in seeking and accessing further support if and when their needs are greater. Moreover, preventative work, such as emotional literacy work and work around resilience, offered to young carers with low-level needs is valuable.

## Personalising Support

Even though young carers may share many specific barriers to their learning and achievement, each pupil's situation will be different. Personalised support, devised by the school in conjunction with the young carer and their family should recognise the pupil's specific needs as a young carer and take into account the family's situation and how it impacts on the young person's education.

## Greater Sensitivity to the Individual

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. It is vital that schools balance taking a supportive, flexible approach with giving the pupil a consistent message that their education is important. A personalised approach to education and support can work particularly well for a young carer.

A good assessment of a young carer's needs is necessary to inform personal support. Personal support could include:

- Flexibility around deadlines and extra support, for example when caring roles increase.
- An assigned member of staff to talk to.
- Provision in place so that young carers can access after school clubs and activities.
- Additional support which is needed to overcome barriers to learning. Teachers and schools should draw support from other in-school professionals and wider groups of practitioners.
- A review of support in the home for any pupil whose education is affected by caring responsibilities.
- A crisis or emergency plan which for some young carers may form an important part of a personal support plan.

Such support, together with regular communication with parents, will ensure that young carers are less likely to fall behind and schools will be able to

respond more quickly if any problems emerge. It should also address any barriers that parents face which prevent them from becoming fully engaged in their child's education.

If a pupil is struggling to keep up with their work due to their caring role, the answer should not immediately be for them to drop a subject. Letting a young carer reduce their timetable does not provide equal access to education with their peers, however for some pupils this may be precisely what will make the difference between succeeding with other subjects and failing at several. The decision should be carefully considered and long term implications need to be explained to the pupil and their parents in order for them to be able to make a well informed choice.

### **Greater Sensitivity to the Family**

Caring and family responsibilities can sometimes be extremely variable. For some, family circumstances can often move from one crisis to another, whilst for others, situations may be stable for a long time with some periods of uncertainty and instability. As such, particular sensitivity should be shown to the family as a whole, in order to support parents' engagement with the school and their child's learning. Schools need to be understanding of a parent's disability and how it affects them; for example they may require frequent hospital visits or have difficulties visiting the school.

### **A Young Carer Card**

Schools might want to consider introducing a 'young carers card'. This could be credit card sized and display the pupil's name and signature of an appropriate member of staff.

A Young Carer's Card offers the following benefits:

- Pupils will no longer have to repeat their family situation to staff.
- It will set out any agreed situations where a young carer requires some flexibility due to their situation.

There are many situations whereby a pupil may need some flexibility, such as:

- Homework and coursework deadlines.

- Needing to call a parent during break times so they are not worrying about them.
- Not being able to attend after school detentions.

The Young Carer's Card should be reissued annually along with frequent reviews of the young carers' needs. Schools should be aware that in the event a card is lost or stolen, a pupil's personal details may be compromised and therefore consider carefully how this scheme is implemented.

### **Support for Children Caring for those Misusing Substances**

Young people who care for a parent affected by substance misuse (drug and/or alcohol) may undertake physical tasks, such as domestic chores, dealing with bills, or nursing a parent suffering from substance withdrawal, but it is often emotional support that is prevalent in their caring role. Due to stigma, fear of intervention from services and not wanting to 'betray' a parent, young carers of a parent affected by substance misuse can be even more reluctant to tell anyone about their family situation, than those looking after someone with a physical disability.

Not all young people who live in families where there is substance misuse have a caring role or experience difficulties at home. The focus of this section is on parental substance misuse, but it is worth noting that there are also cases of young people helping to care for a sibling affected by substance misuse.

Both research and practice have shown that children of parents who have a substance misuse problem can experience very chaotic lives lacking in routine. When in school, they may be worried about the safety of their parent and fear what or who they will find on returning home. They can be angry, confused, ashamed or even feel guilty. They can feel like their parent loves drugs and/or alcohol more than them. They may be embarrassed about the state of their home and feel unable to invite friends home. They may also have to deal with the aftermath of substance misuse. In addition, parents affected by substance misuse may experience impaired patterns of parental care. This in turn may lead to a higher risk of:

- Physical neglect or abuse.

- Threat of domestic abuse.
- Poor or limited diet.
- Missed health appointments, such as the dentist or vaccinations.

This group of young carers may experience bullying, stigma and isolation and display behavioural difficulties. In addition, where children are caring for a relative with drug or alcohol problems, the incidence of missed school and educational difficulties is much more marked. It is estimated that 34% of young carers in this category have missed school to provide care for a parent and 40% have either missed school or show indicators of other educational difficulties.

Parents may worry about discrimination and the impact their substance dependency may have on their child. Issues surrounding their child's schooling, such as problems with behaviour or attendance problems, can cause further stress.

Like many young carers, these children need someone to talk to and for their needs to be understood. They need to understand that they are not responsible for their parent's choices and that it is not their fault. Early intervention is crucial.

## **Support for Children Caring for those With Mental Ill-Health**

Mental ill-health is often misunderstood and there is still great stigma associated with it. Research, guidance and practice highlights that children and young people who care for a parent or family member with mental ill-health are often more reluctant to tell anyone about their family than those who care for someone with a physical disability. The main focus of this section is on parental mental ill-health; however, a young carer could also be looking after a sibling who is experiencing mental health difficulties. It is also important to remember that not all children whose family members have mental ill-health will experience difficulties or be young carers.

Young carers looking after a parent with mental ill-health are often hidden because:

- There is no visible illness or disability.
- The illness may be episodic.

- The young carer/and or the family is reluctant to seek support.

Some young carers go to great lengths to conceal the mental ill-health within their families and make up excuses for their parents behaviour. They can also experience significant confusion and emotional upheaval due to the episodic nature of mental ill-health. Parents may worry about discrimination and the effect their illness has on their child. Issues surrounding their child's schooling, such as behaviour or attendance problems, can add to stress which may further aggravate their illness. Parenting ability may also be impacted.

Young carers whose parents have severe mental ill-health can live under large psychological stress which can affect their own emotional health and well-being. Unemployment, poverty, familial stress and a lack of support can all affect the young carer negatively. Sometimes stigma and fear of intervention can prevent families asking for help when it is needed. The added emotional role is often the hardest for the child and can frequently result in a role reversal between parent and child.

### **Providing Young Carers with Information**

A parent's behaviour or even treatment is often not explained to the child or young person and this can lead to misunderstanding and confusion. Research indicates that age-appropriate information helps children to cope because:

- Children often imagine that things are worse than they are and so providing information therefore reduces fear.
- Understanding the illness can help the child empathise with and respect the person they care for.
- The child will realise it is not their fault.

### **Pupils Caring for A Sibling**

Almost a third of young carers have responsibility for the care of a brother or sister. Sibling carers, more so than those caring for a parent, are often

unidentified and their caring responsibilities, needs, experiences and feelings can go unrecognised in schools and by professionals.

Young carers caring for a sibling are often involved in tasks such as:

- Communicating for their sibling.
- Looking out for their sibling and protecting them from other children - particularly emotionally.
- Supporting their sibling with homework.
- Emotional support.

There are also many positive aspects to caring for a sibling as the young carer develops various life skills, including relationship skills. Despite this, their lives can also be heavily restricted and they can experience negative impacts, such as:

- Lack of quality time with parents.
- Reduced parental attention and support from parents.
- Lack of time and space for themselves and activities geared to themselves.
- Social exclusion and prejudice because of the sibling.
- Friendships and leisure may be difficult. Young carers may find it hard to invite friends home for example.
- Impacts due to poverty and limited transport opportunities, where families need to prioritise a disabled child.

Sibling carers can worry about their brother or sister and often lack information or understanding about their siblings illness or disability. In addition to feelings of frustration, guilt and anger (feelings which are shared with other groups of young carers) sibling carers may also feel:

- Embarrassment about their sibling's behaviour.
- Insignificance due to limited parental attention.
- Anxiety about who will care for their sibling in the future.

## **Migrant Families**

Young Carers from migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking families often face long waits to entry into school and once in education they often face additional issues specific to their caring role and family situation, which can impact upon their wellbeing and educational achievements, as well as their transition into the school and the community.

Not only may young migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking people have the responsibility of caring for someone in their family, but they have the added impact of coping with this responsibility in a strange culture and unfamiliar surroundings and in a new language, alongside the stigma of being a refugee.

## **Barriers to Learning for Pupils from Migrant Families**

Migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people who take on a caring role need support and understanding in managing these responsibilities and their education, because the additional burden of having to care for a family member who is mentally or physically unwell can be detrimental to their own integration into the school and community. Young carers from migrant, refugee and asylum seeking families can experience:

- Racist bullying.
- Loss of identity.
- Loss of friends and family from the country they have come from.
- Concerns about the future, such as fear of returning to their home country.
- Lack of English skills and knowledge of systems, such as the education system.
- Stresses in the family, such as poverty or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Disruption to education due to migration.

## **Child Interpreters and Translators**

Following migration, children often acquire competence in the new language before their parents due to their young age, because of their integration in school or because they have been learning English in their home country. As a result, the role of interpreter or translator often falls to the child. Pupils can often be absent from school as they attend appointments with their parents to take on the role of interpreter and/or translator.

Children should not be expected to interpret information that is inappropriate for their age or that the parent may want to be kept confidential and all services including schools need to be aware of this.

### **Crisis and Emergency Planning**

Drawing up an emergency plan for a young carer may help to minimise impact if a young carers' situation at home becomes more difficult or if there is an emergency. If a family member needs to go into hospital or if their condition deteriorates having a plan in place can help to reduce the risk that a young carer may suffer in attendance, attainment and emotional health and wellbeing. For some pupils, their situation can become more difficult over time and for others, situations can vary between periods of stability and chaos.

The deterioration in health of a family member or the admission of a parent to hospital can put great stress on a family. As well as transport to school, other school routines such as completing homework on time, attending after school clubs or communications between the family and the school, such as important deadlines or paying school dinner monies, can suffer. In these situations, young carers and their families can need increased support.

It is therefore advisable to draw up a plan in advance of a crisis or emergency, or the increase of a caring role, alongside other agencies involved with the family, including adults' services, the school and the young carer. Crisis plans are most effective if your school adopts a multi-agency approach and any contingency plans that may have been drawn up with other professionals or agencies should ideally be linked to the school plan. Remember pupils (and their families) are the experts in how their caring role and their family situation changes, and how these affect their schooling so they must be involved in the formulation of any such plans. Knowing that there is a plan in place can significantly reduce the worry for both pupils and parents.

## **Crisis and Emergency Planning, Points to Consider:**

- What other agencies need to be involved, when they need to be involved and how to refer.
- An assessment or review of the pupil's and the family's needs.
- How the school will communicate with parents.
- What additional support is required from the school and when.
- Transport to and from school.
- Ensuring continued attendance.
- Flexibility with coursework deadlines and how this will be implemented.

In a genuine crisis schools might want to consider approving absence for a child to care for a relative until other arrangements can be made. The school could set a time limit for the absence and set some school work so the pupil does not fall far behind while at home. It may also be appropriate for a pupil whose close relative is in the final stages of terminal illness to take time off school to be with them.

## **Transition**

As with all pupils, transition from one educational stage to another requires particular care. This is even more vital with young carers as there are particular issues if acknowledged and addressed that can make a crucial difference. It is good practice to build strong links and communication between staff leading on young carers within establishments, feeding into each other to provide support during the transition process.

Providing opportunities for families to inform the secondary school that a pupil has caring responsibilities before they start is valuable so that support can commence from the outset. Primary schools may also be in a position to encourage the pupil and their family to advise the new school of their family situation or to set up a meeting with the secondary school's Young Carers lead.

Hertfordshire Young Carers Project has developed a transfer plan to support young carers as they move from primary to secondary schools and suggest that primary schools should:

- Make available to the secondary school and the parent (s)/guardian (s) an outline of the support currently being received by the pupil, such as that by a family worker, school nurse or other agency, as well as any additional support offered by the primary school.
- Organise an additional visit to the secondary school with parent (s)/guardian (s) to discuss family circumstances and give the young carer the opportunity to explain what it is like for them (The young carer could have this information written down if preferred).
- Introduce the young carer to the link worker or named person in the secondary school.

The secondary school also has a role to play during this transition and it is useful if:

- The school has a relevant member of staff to liaise with feeder schools (primary and junior high) and ascertain whether there are young carers transferring to secondary school.
- The School Lead is aware of the caring circumstances and the support the young carer has received during their time at primary school.
- The School Lead (or appropriate staff member) meets with the young carer while they are still at primary school to explain how they support young carers.
- The School Lead (or appropriate staff member) makes contact with the parent (s)/guardian (s) to explain the support that is available prior to the young carer joining the secondary school.
- A relevant member of staff offers a home visit where this is appropriate, as in some cases parents are unable to attend open evenings and parents evenings.

## Checklist: Young Carer Support Options

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Please tick the options you would find helpful	✓
Access to telephone to call home if worried or concerned.	
Support to enable homework and coursework to be completed.	
Weekly/fortnightly lunchtime peer-support group for young carers.	
Respite, such as outings, trips etc.	
A named person to talk to when things get tough.	
Information about the illness or disability of the person you care for.	
Information about being a young carer.	
Support to write a crisis plan in case the person you care for needs to be admitted to hospital.	
What else would you find helpful?	