

Connecting Youth Carers to Life Opportunities & Personalised Support

YOUNG CARERS: The Facts

Who or what is a young carer?

Young carers have been defined as 'children and young people who are placed in a position of responsibility for the care of a sick, disabled, chronically, mentally, physically ill or frail relative in the home'.

"I usually get up at about 4:30am so that I can get Mum out of bed, wash her, take her to the toilet and get her dressed. Then I get my brothers up and get them ready for the day. I'm usually really tired at school and I'm always getting in trouble for not doing all my homework. I just wish someone else could help me." (Samantha, 9years)

How many young carers are there?

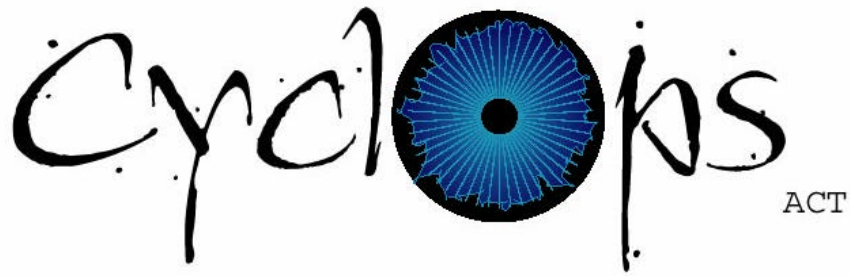
Within Australia, it has been estimated that some 388 800 young carers – young carers accounting for ten percent of Australia's children and youth population. 18 800 of those identified are the main providers of care (primary carers) to their family member (CA 2002:6), often solely responsible for the intimate care and support of the care recipient. Many identify as starting their caring as young as six though the majority of them are between 12 and 14 years of age. Half of all primary young carers are caring for a parent with another third caring for their own partner or child. If caring for a parent, it is more likely to be their mother and also likely to be in a sole-parent household – often sustaining them in a position of financial disadvantage.

What do they do?

Young carers are responsible for providing health care treatment ranging from dressings through to catheter bags; emotional support and assistance in the maintenance of a healthy, organised household. Young carers' responsibilities range from cleaning and cooking through to more major tasks such as bathing, dressing and providing assistance with toileting etc to incapacitated family members. Some young carers caring for a family member with a mental health condition are also required to provide other types of support sometimes including restraint of suicidal relatives, and emotional and behavioural monitoring. Often providing primary care, young carers take on significant caring responsibilities.

How does caring impact on their lives?

It is important to note that caring can be, when well managed, an incredibly positive experience for children and young people who are able to "care for" those they "care about" – many young carers report that their caring experience has developed their life



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skills, their feelings of connectedness, positive relationships in the families and a sense of purpose within their communities. Unfortunately, however, young carers are often unsupported and therefore responsible for inappropriate levels of care and / or types of care.

In these cases, care undertaken is that commonly assigned to adult parents or professional adults employed by the community. The work is often physically and emotionally demanding with negative impacts being sustained in the areas of physical health, emotional and mental well-being; social participation, relationships with peers and family, finances, education, employment and transition into adulthood. Such effects may include:

Feelings of isolation and alienation

Low self-esteem

High levels of anxiety and stress

Physical injuries as a result of heavy lifting

High levels of school absenteeism and lateness with homework

A "false maturity": child carers often miss many normal developmental stages

False fears of "catching" a non-contagious illness eg. Multiple sclerosis

Feelings of guilt

"I feel very proud of Mum not giving up, and sad and angry that it's her and not me (she doesn't deserve it)... My friends have a rough idea of what I do but I don't feel I can talk to them about it... it's the emotional side of things that gets to me. I think I need someone to talk to, someone who can understand how I feel, and a good solid punching bag"
Steven, 14 years

Whether or not tasks administered are deemed appropriate, young carers are affected – be it physically, socially, emotionally or behaviourally.