

YNetwork **ACT**

**INQUIRY INTO YOUNG PEOPLE AT
RISK OF NOT ACHIEVING
SATISFACTORY EDUCATION AND
TRAINING OUTCOMES**

**ACT LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
EDUCATION, COMMUNITY
SERVICES AND RECREATION
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Who or what is a young carer?

Crudely described, a young carer is a child under the age of 18 who provides care to a parent, sibling or other relative with an illness, disability or mental, physical, chronic or terminal condition.

They are children under the age of 18 who are burdened with the responsibility of providing health care treatment ranging from dressings through to catheter bags, emotional support and assistance in the maintenance of a healthy, organised household.

"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, 9 years old

The responsibilities of young carers range from simple, daily tasks such as washing and cleaning through to more major tasks such as bathing, dressing and providing assistance with toileting etc to incapacitated family members.

How many young carers are there?

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimates that there are 33,800 Australian children under the age of 15 who provide care to a family member who has a long term illness or disability.

Of these, 14,500 have been deemed 'primary' carers or the person who provides the majority of care (ABS 1993). Recent criticisms of the methodology of the ABS survey suggest that such statistics are a gross underestimation and that the actual population of children providing care could be up to double that reported.

Initial research of the Young Carers Network, for example, has found that 12% of those questioned identified as providing care for a family member.

Either way, the growing population of young people providing care makes up a significant percentage of young people in general. Their roles and responsibilities ought, then, to be examined more closely in all arenas including education.

How are these young people affected?

The huge responsibility of caring at such a young age can have great impacts on the social, educational and emotional lives of young carers, threatening their physical development, the quality of childhood and opportunities for the future. Such effects 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.

The ACT Young Carers Network

The ACT Young Carers Network was founded in 1997 by Marymead Child and Family Centre and the Society of St Vincent de Paul. It was founded to address the needs of young people who were providing care within the home and to provide support services where required.

Since then, the network has grown to include a whole range of support services and interested community groups. It co-ordinates services, trains professionals on working with children who provide care and advocates on their behalf. As the awareness of young carers has risen so has the number of services committed to working with this group of young people.

Currently, membership of the ACT Young Carers Network includes a wide number of community organisations, health care professionals, counselors, teachers, disability workers and public servants.



The relevance of mainstream school programs for young people at risk

At present mainstream school programs are too rigid to meet the flexible needs of young people. The model of 9am to 3pm schooling does not allow for the changes to the flexible employment market and also impedes the duties a young person may be required to fulfill at home. There is very little scope in the willingness and abilities of mainstream schools to provide the flexibility for young carers to leave the school grounds during lunch time, to make phone calls or to reduce the amount of school work required at home. In the current climate young carers are expected to maintain a high level of class work, complete numerous assignments on time and participate in extra curricular activities. As well as this they undertake additional housework, provide medical care, supervise younger siblings, cope with the physical and emotional stress of worrying about someone and try to lead somewhat of a normal teenage life.

Relevance is an interesting concept in education. What is relevant to one group of people is not necessarily relevant to another. Relevance is also more than just a curriculum that addresses the issues of the students. Many young carers have been forced into undertaking traditional adult roles at a very young age. Some hold responsibilities at home that include distributing medicine, paying bills, cooking and cleaning, looking after siblings, negotiating with government bodies and budgeting the families' finances. Relevance for this group of young people has more to do with the way in which they are treated. It is difficult to be constantly faced with changing boundaries, to be treated as an adult at home but a child at school. Schools need to move towards viewing students as young adults and thus treating them with the respect and dignity to make choices in their lives. Schools need to move away from the discipline and punishment model of welfare to a supportive and nurturing model of raising adults.

Relevance, for young carers also relates to enhancement of knowledge that is useful in their daily lives. This means that schools need to develop curriculum that addresses knowledge on the patterns of illness and disability. Schools should also focus on issues such as first aid, budgeting, managing households and basic childcare. Education should support the gaining of knowledge in order to build resiliency in young people. Schools also need to look at granting status to young carers for the life skills they are acquiring in their daily lives, thus reducing their workload at school.

The availability of alternative educational programs

Young carers only represent a small proportion of students in alternative education programs. This is mostly due to the fact that a vast majority of alternate programs have been established to cater to young people who have behaviour problems. This is not the case with young carers who often remain invisible in a school because they do not cause disruptions in classes. The other issue for young carers in alternative education programs is that these often provide an alternative model of education within a mainstream framework. For example the majority of them still expect students to be at school from 9am to 3pm, they often require a high level of parental involvement, they do not provide flexibility in terms of undertaking work at home and do not provide credit for skills obtained outside of the school.

There are only three fully flexible education programs operating in the ACT. Each program has both its positive and negative aspects for young carers:



Ginninderra District High School Alternate Program (GAP) whilst located in a mainstream high school, GAP provides young people with the opportunity to undertake flexible study in year 10. Students are only required to attend school for 6 hours per week, although this is negotiable. The majority of work is undertaken at home at a self-directed pace. The disadvantage of this program is that it is located on the Northside of Canberra and transport can be a problem for some students

CIT CAGE Program is a modular based self-directed year 10 program. The course was initially developed for adults to obtain a year 10 certificate and thus is built upon the student having high levels of maturity, motivation and self-direction. The success rate of young people in this program is poor. The program does cost more than mainstream school and as many families with ill or disabled members live on or below the poverty line, this excludes a high number of young carers.

“Out of School” Flexible Learning Program (at Youth in the City) provides flexible modular yr. 10 and 12 courses in the City. The program also focuses on developing basic literacy and numeracy skills. The program is run with a teacher and a youth worker which means that the holistic needs of the young carer is met. Access to this program is difficult due to the programs number restrictions and transport requirements.

At present there are no flexible programs for young carers on the Southside of Canberra. This means that access for young carers in the far south of the ACT is very limited.

For young carers who have obtained a year 10 certificate and wish to proceed further and obtain a year 12 certificate their access to education becomes even more limited. There is no home based flexible year 12 courses offered in the ACT. Whilst a college timetable offers more flexibility in class times, the enrolment of part-time students is not encouraged. This is mainly due to the restrictions of school based management. Current education policy states that schools can only include full-time students in their enrolment figures. The money allocated to a school is devised from these enrolment figures. As such schools who enroll part-time students do so with no financial support from the Education Department.

There is also no availability of evening classes in either the High School or College systems. For some young carers evening classes would make education possible. This is particularly so for secondary carers with two parents. If one parent is disabled then the young person could provide care during the day and attend school during the evening whilst the second parent attended work during the day and provide care in the evening.

Support for families and young people to encourage retention in education and training including financial support and support for schools and other agencies

There are no formal support mechanisms in schools for the identification of young carers. As such there are no specific education policies on the type or level of support the student or family requires. The invisibility of young carers also means that agencies receive no specific money for working with young carers, nor do they have young carers as a specific target group. Support for this group of people is undertaken on an ad-hoc basis and is often only offered when the young person undergoes a visible crisis or starts displaying behaviour problems.



Retention rates for young carers are very low. Very few make it all the way through to year 12 and even less manage to undertake additional tertiary education. This is often for one of two reasons:

- The demands placed on them at home make attendance at school very difficult thus forcing the young person to leave school early
- The lack of support and stigma that a young carer faces at school makes them disillusioned and unwilling to participate in education.

Young carers and their families need the following support to ensure retention in education:

- In home respite care
- Flexible hours of school
- Access to phones in school
- Additional respite and financial support to enable students to participate in excursions and camps.
- Counseling particularly in stress management, grief and loss and in building resiliency
- Family counseling
- Reduced amount of homework
- A home school liaison officer to act as a communication source between the school and home as well as assisting the student to negotiate with the school
- Increased financial support as most families are unable to cover the additional costs of education
- An increased level of compassion and understanding by the school
- An increase in awareness of the issues relating to disease and disability in an attempt to remove stigma and assumptions.

If schools were able to better meet the needs of young carers and their families then the retention and participation rates of this group will increase.

Schools and agencies need support in terms of additional funding for young carer specific workers and home/school liaison workers to build bridges in the communication between school and the family. These workers would also be able to provide the additional support that the young person required.

Teachers and Community Workers need information about the additional stress facing young carers, their issues and needs. They also need to be given ideas, tools and strategies on how best to meet these needs.

Support and programs available for young people at risk of not developing adequate literacy and numeracy skills

Young carers often have low levels of literacy and numeracy due to gaps in their schooling, and the inability of parents to assist in the learning process. As a result young carers have a high need for tutors and additional support in school to achieve adequate levels. Currently there are no free tutor programs for young people at risk of not achieving education.



There is very little recognition of the fact that often young carers do not receive support from parents in undertaking school work. Parents are often either ill themselves or constantly caring for someone, which leaves them with no time or ability to monitor homework or assist with assignments. They are also unable to generate sources of information or assist young people with things like access to libraries. Due to this the level of work a young carer produces is often below the schools expectations, not from lack of ability but from lack of resources. A parent's illness or disability can also impede their participation in school events such as parent teacher nights. This can mean that low literacy and numeracy levels can go unchecked for long periods of time. It also means that a young carer also faces further disadvantage at school.

Attendance and truancy

Poor attendance from young carers is often attributed to the additional duties they are required to perform, increased illness in the family, increased stress levels, avoidance of school punishment for previous unexplained absences or for being late and avoidance of the stigma they face at school.

Often schools are unaware of the fact that a student is providing care at home. This can mean that a student is in trouble for constantly being late to school or not handing in assignments on time. Consequently if a young carer is running late or hasn't completed homework they are likely to miss schools altogether. This makes it all too easy for a pattern of truancy to occur which will eventually lead to a young carer dropping out of school completely.

Gaps in service

The major gaps in services for young carers include:

- Lack of flexible education programs
- Lack of free tutoring programs
- Lack of school home liaison services
- Lack of funding for respite services
- Lack of financial resources for young carers to attend excursions and extra curricular activities
- Lack of flexibility in the delivery of year 12 programs
- Lack of good counseling services



RECOMMENDATIONS

- **That the Department of Education and Community Services appoints a home school liaison officer to work in a cluster of schools. This worker would undertake the following tasks:**
 - 1. Provide communication between the school and home**
 - 2. Provide additional support to young carers**
 - 3. Provide case management services**
 - 4. Establish young carers support groups**
 - 5. Act as an advocate for a young carer in the school.**

- **That mainstream schools are directed through, and supported by, policy which enables them to be more flexible in terms of hours of operation, curriculum, cost and assessment process. Schools should be allowed and encouraged to provide a supportive, flexible and affirming environment to all young people based on the principals of full service health promoting school concepts.**

- **That the Department of Education and Community Services funds and supports the establishment of a flexible education centre on the Southside of Canberra.**

- **That the following changes are made in the functions and training of schools and teachers:**
 - 1. Teachers be made aware of the needs of young carers and be provided with strategies on how best to support them**
 - 2. Schools and teachers to increase the level of information given about illness and disability throughout the curriculum in order to reduce the stigma associated with these**
 - 3. Teachers have an increase knowledge of what it means to live with someone with a chronic illness or disability**
 - 4. Schools recognise the difficulty of parental involvement in the school and devise strategies to overcome the barriers**
 - 5. That teacher training is changed to allow perspective teachers to be trained in issues relating to young people at risk.**

- **That support programs and the availability of community services to be better publicised in schools to enable students to access support and information without having to identify as “at risk”.**

- **That the ACT Department of health increase funding for in home respite services to allow young carers to attend school, and provide more access to transport services to allow young carers to access extra curricular activities.**

- **That schools develop policies that allow for the recognition of prior learning and acknowledge the skill carers have developed on their school certificates.**

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- **That schools develop strategies for the identification of young carers.**
- **That the Department of Education and Community Services and the Department of Health co-fund the Young Carers Network in order to ensure the on-going support and advocacy role this network performs.**