

What is a young carer?

A young carer is a child or young person under 26 years who provides support for a family member with a long-term illness, disability, mental health problem, alcohol or drug problem. They usually have more responsibilities than other young people their age. Young carers most at risk are those caring for parents, particularly sole parents. In some cases young people are caring on their own with little or no help.

How many young carers are there?

The ABS (2003)¹ estimates there are 90,200 young carers aged under 25 living in NSW (4% of all people under 25) and 347,700 young carers in Australia (5.2% of all people under 25).

What are the effects of caring?

Caring at a young age can have an impact on their educational, social and emotional lives, as well as have implications for their physical development, the quality of childhood and opportunities for the future.

The impact of caring on a child depends very much on the context in which it occurs. A child helping with the care of a beloved family member may gain strength and self-esteem from the experience. A child struggling to carry out tasks beyond their strength can suffer permanent physical and psychological damage.

Emotional effects

Young carers are often afraid to tell people what is happening in their home in case the family may be broken up. Peer pressure also dictates it is best not to be seen as different and open to ridicule.

Many times during caring the parent/child relationship will also be reversed which can lead to heavy emotional burdens for a young person who usually would not have to plan, worry about the future or provide emotional support. The anxiety about the well-being of the cared for can be heightened when they are away from home and often a lack of understanding of the extent of the illness or condition exacerbates the situation.

Physical effects

For young bodies performing heavy caring and domestic tasks, the physical effects of caring can be serious. Back injuries are common. The long hours demanded and the extent of the physical tasks required can also take a hefty toll.

Educational effects

Being late for school or missing it all together, failure to complete homework and lack of concentration due to tiredness or concerns at home can be detrimental to the young carer's education and development and also carer opportunities.

The ABS (1998)² estimates that only 4% of young primary carers aged 15-25 years remain in school, compared to 23% of the general population, and 56% of primary young carers are either not employed/or not at school compared to 15% of the general population in this age group.

¹ ABS (2003) Disability, Ageing and Carers, Summary of Findings, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Government, Canberra

² ABS (1998) Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Government, Canberra

Social lives and friendships

Many young carers will not tell their friends about life at home because of embarrassment and the belief that friends will not understand. Disruption to school attendance and lack of spare time and money can affect the development and maintenance of friendships. The health of the cared for and at times their special needs may also prevent young carers feeling comfortable inviting friends over.

In some cases, the cared for may restrict the young person's socialising, either directly, or by making them feel guilty or anxious about leaving them. Young carers can also feel nervous or worried about leaving the cared for alone, and may refuse to take part in social activities as a result.

Transition to adulthood

Young carers can gain a sense of maturity and responsibility in their caring role, and feel they are older than their years. They may also experience difficulty when the time comes to gain employment and move out of home due to disruption to their education, or concern for the person they care for. Many young carers describe the experience of missing out on their childhood.

Why are there young carers?

Children and teenagers become carers often for the same reasons that adults do – maybe there is no-one else to do it, the family may not receive enough services, they love the person they care for, or perhaps they do not even question their responsibilities because it seems like the natural thing to do. Most have a strong sense of responsibility and anxiety; few know of any way to access help that would allow them to keep their family together.

What help is available for young carers?

The Carers NSW Young Carer Project offers the following services:

- Activities - camps & day events
- Membership - Young Carer Club
- Newsletters - via post and email
- Counselling - Telephone group or face-to-face
- Telephone support, information and referrals
- Website www.youngcarersnsw.asn.au

Contact the Young Carer Project

Web: www.youngcarersnsw.asn.au

Email: yc@carersnsw.asn.au

Call: 1800 242 636 (free call except from mobiles) 9am – 5pm Monday to Friday