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ABC TV's program *Compass* highlights the issue of young carers

On Sunday 7 October, ABC TV screened a special Carers Week edition of its program *Compass* to highlight the issue of young carers.

Carers Week (14-20 October 2007) is a national week dedicated to spreading the word about the valuable role carers play in our community.

Compass profiled the lives of three young carers: 17 year old Hayley Wilson who is in her final year at school, and is the primary carer for both her parents; 23 year old Ken Blood who combines full time work with caring for his father who has MS and Alzheimer's Disease; and Lorna Downes who is an education and training officer with Carers NSW, and, as a child helped to care for her mother.

High school student Hayley Wilson, who appeared in *Compass*, said the program helped boost awareness of young carers.

"The program shows there are young carers out there who aren't paid, who are just kids trying to complete their schooling and create a sense of identity for themselves.

"There is little recognition of young carers in the community and schools. Many people do not know what we do, or even sometimes that we exist. This program was a really good way to make people aware of young carers and the issues that affect us," said Hayley.

CEO of Carers NSW, Elena Katrakis, said in addition to the lack of awareness, young carers faced many other challenges at school.

"Young carers may not have enough time to complete homework, may have increased absences, and feel tired, worried or distracted at school. Others may not have enough time to attend extra-curricular activities such as sports and camps, and so miss out on valuable opportunities for exercise and social interaction," said Ms Katrakis.

"This can have a real impact on young carers' schooling and future, with statistics showing that only 4% of young primary carers aged 15-25 years remain in school, compared to 23% of the general population, while 60% of young primary carers in the same age group are unemployed or not in the work force, compared to 38% of the general population.

"Many young carers can also be reluctant to tell people about their situation due to the fear that they may be seen as different which, particularly at school, can lead to bullying. Others feel they shouldn't discuss their family's problems, find it hard to ask for help or may not even realise that they are young carers.

"This is compounded by the fact that many teachers often do not know about young carers, even though there are estimated to be two or three young carers in every classroom in Australia," said Ms Katrakis.

To counter this problem, in September 2007 Carers Australia launched a high school kit to help teachers identify and raise awareness of young carers.

"Teachers have a great capacity to provide support, guidance and mentoring to children and young people, particularly those experiencing difficulties.

"This resource will help teachers identify and understand the needs of young carers so they can get the most out of their schooling and achieve their goals in life," said Ms Katrakis.

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Background

A young carer is a child or young person who provides care at home for someone who has a need for support because of a disability, mental health problem, chronic condition or frailness due to age.

Young carers may assist with tasks such as shopping, cooking or housework and they may be responsible for feeding, toileting and bathing the person requiring care. Most young carers also provide emotional support.

There are an estimated 90,200 young carers aged under 25 in NSW, and 347,7000 throughout Australia, according to recent ABS statistics. Some young carers can be as young as six years of age.

Carers NSW is the peak body for carers in New South Wales and the only state-wide organisation that has carers as its primary focus.

The kit can be downloaded from www.carersnsw.asn.au (click on young carers).