

TEACHERS' GUIDE

YOUNG CARERS



Who is a young carer?

Young carers are people up to 25 years old who help to support a family member or friend who has a disability, long-term or terminal illness, mental illness, a drug or alcohol dependency or who is frail.

At least one in ten children in Australia has some level of responsibility as a carer in their home.

Young carers often perform tasks not normally undertaken by children their age. Responsibilities may include shopping, cooking meals, looking after younger siblings, doing housework, helping with mobility, providing emotional support, taking care of medications, managing family finances, helping communicate and personal care.

Young carers struggle to engage with education not because they are uninterested or lack ability but because their caring role can place intense demands on their time and energy.

Did you know...

- There are 2-3 young carers in every Australian classroom (on average)
- Just 4% of young carers aged 15 to 25 are engaged in the education system (compared with 23% of other young people).

Identifying young carers

Young carers may appear tired, miss class, have difficulty attending school excursions or fall behind in their assignments. At first glance, you may not always be able to tell which students are struggling because of family carer responsibilities, and which students are simply disengaged.

Identifying young carers is particularly difficult because they may not feel comfortable telling you about their situation. For young people, a sense of belonging is very important, and they may be reluctant to stand out from their peers. Others may not even realise that they are young carers and that support is available.

1. Find the young person at a time when they are not surrounded by their peers.
2. Ask them an open-ended question, using non-judgemental observations. 'I noticed that you didn't complete the last assignment, and you've been a bit tired lately. Is everything okay at home?'
3. Give them the option of talking to you or another member of staff.

- Young carers often get lower numeracy and literacy results in school than their non-caring peers (Australian Institute of Family Studies report, 2017)
- Two thirds of young carers tend to be female, are financially disadvantaged and come from non-English backgrounds.

Supporting young carers

Young carers report that teachers can make a huge impact on their lives just by being aware, by listening to them and by believing their stories.

Show confidence in their ability

Young people want to feel that you believe they are capable of great things, even if circumstances get in the way. This is a tricky balance. Young carers' stories can be harrowing, and you may want to show sympathy. There is certainly room for showing concern, but don't treat carers like victims, or release them from all responsibilities. Instead, look for ways that young carers can stretch themselves and grow intellectually, even with the pressures of being a carer.

Be responsive and empathetic

Instead of overwhelming young carers with sympathy, offer empathy. By asking questions like 'What's that like for you?' you'll create an opening for them to express their emotions and let off steam. With this insight, you can come up with a customised approach that works for your student.

Be flexible

Look at your school's policies on assignment loads. Find out how much leeway you have for flexibility around extending deadlines where the young carer has been busy looking after a family member and around allowing make-up assignments if the young carer couldn't complete an assignment in time.

How Carers ACT can help

Carers ACT has a dedicated Young Carer Coordinator who can work with your school and your young carers to:

- 1 organise tuition to help young carers complete school work
- 2 arrange short-term replacement care to give young carers a break
- 3 assist young carers to attend school activities
- 4 give information and advice to young carers
- 5 refer them to counselling and peer support groups
- 6 organise fun activities with other young carers
- 7 provide information and advice to teachers
- 8 give talks at your school about young carers
- 9 help your school form a young carers group

Useful resources

- 1 **School colleagues** who already have a good relationship with (and therefore insight into) the student.
- 2 **Student Services staff** and /or pastoral care personnel.
- 3 **Carers ACT's Young Carer Coordinator:**
Phone: 1800 960 990
Email: young.carers@carersact.org.au
- 4 **Young Carer website:** <http://youngcarers.net.au/resources/for-education-staff/>
- 5 **Young Carer factsheets** (on our website carersact.org.au).

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