

Section 3: Young Carers and Barriers to Learning

Not only do young carers experience the same pressures as all those their age, they also have many added responsibilities that would normally be expected of an adult. As a result, they can often encounter barriers to learning, the impact of which can be variable, severe and enduring.

It is important for schools to ensure that young carers have the same access to education and career choices as their peers. This means removing or lowering any additional barriers to learning, caused by family circumstances.

This section outlines some of the educational barriers faced by many young carers, along with steps that can be taken to support those facing such barriers.

In this Section you will find Information Related to:

- Attendance
- Addressing Attendance Issues
- Behaviour
- Bullying
- Transport
- Young Carers Top Ten Tips for School

Attendance

Caring responsibilities can lead to lateness or absence from school. This may be as a result of physical caring responsibilities and/or the emotional burden of caring for a family member. Absence often forms patterns and can occur either over extended periods or can be shorter and more frequent in nature. Punctuality can also be compromised when young carers are held up with caring tasks.

Young carers often make enormous efforts to manage their caring responsibilities and maintain full school attendance. However, some may struggle to cope all the time and subsequently their education, physical and mental health may be affected. They can often feel as if they have somehow failed or feel extremely guilty for not coping. Furthermore when forced to choose between staying at home to look after the person they care for or going to school, caring will come first for many young carers. This can in turn create isolation from peers and from friends and the young carer may then prefer to stay at home where they feel valued and safe.

Addressing Attendance Issues

Patterns of non-attendance are often an indicator of a young carer's underlying need, such as insufficient support for a parent during the day. Schools should also look for and address secondary barriers to learning that may stem from a pupil's caring role, such as anxiety or bullying which can then impact on attendance.

By working alongside pupils and their families, schools can help address needs and resolve the underlying causes of absence. Ensuring that support is in place is paramount (See Section 5, Supporting Young Carers). If the person with care needs has appropriate support in place, pupils should feel more confident in coming to school and less anxious about leaving that person.

The family may welcome efforts to advocate for this on their behalf. Your school should respect a family's decision should they be unwilling to discuss support needs. You should, nevertheless consider and address the pupil's welfare using your usual assessment procedures.

It is vital that schools balance a supportive, flexible approach towards the young carer and their family and give a consistent message of the importance of education to the pupil. Drawing up a care plan for a young carer may help to prevent future school absence (See Section 4, Identifying Young Carers).

Behaviour

The difficulties faced by young carers at home can in turn lead to negative behaviour within school. Worry, stress, pressures, confusion, a disrupted or chaotic family situation and feeling misunderstood or unsupported can all lead to poor behaviour in pupils. The link between a young carer's family situation, their caring responsibilities and their behavior should not be ignored and needs to be addressed in an appropriate and sensitive way.

It can be easy to miss or overlook the reasons behind poor behaviour but an increase in awareness amongst staff members of a pupil's caring role and home environment will result in a more appropriate response to the pressures that the young carer is under. Problems often occur when staff have not been informed and consequently handle a particular situation inadequately.

Young people all react to situations differently. The behaviour of one pupil may be up and down just as their caring role and family situation is up and down, whereas another pupil may have been the 'model' student who then 'cracks' after years of caring. If the root of the problem is not addressed and the young carer feels that no one understands them, their behaviour is unlikely to improve.

Of course, young carers should be expected to follow the same rules as any other pupil and young carers themselves often say that they want to be treated like their peers. However, by seeing and understanding that the root of the problem may be coming from the pressures and emotional turmoil that many young carers face at home, issues can be handled with greater sensitivity and understanding and thus positive outcomes are more likely to be achieved.

Pupils will not open up to every member of staff, only those with whom they feel comfortable and trust. It is, therefore, important that young carers are aware of available staff with whom they can share details of their home life.

Young carers tend to appreciate being asked by staff how they are or how the person they care for is, provided it is done so privately.

Bullying

Young Carers may experience bullying due to a number of different reasons:

- They may have greater maturity than (and therefore not be accepted) by their peers.
- They may have minimal social skills.
- They may find it harder to make and sustain friendships.
- They may be withdrawn.
- They may be over sensitive.
- They may have untidy or unclean clothing or general appearance.
- They may be teased or ostracised because of family circumstances.
- They may be seen as isolated or different.
- Fellow pupils may make fun of them or their family's problems.
- They may find it difficult to have a social life, or be isolated from peers.

To help support young carers who are bullied, schools can:

- Make sure that any bullying policies reflect the specific needs of young carers.
- Train peer mentors on the specific issues that affect young carers.
- Set up a peer support group within school.
- Ensure that staff are available to offer emotional support and understanding.
- Ensure tight confidentiality, so that young carers can identify themselves as young carers, access support discretely and know that conversations and questions about their home life are carried out in private.
- Work towards an environment where disabilities and issues around caring are taught and understood.

- Address bullying through good partnership working between the school and outside agencies.
- Try to ensure that young carers are able to attend after school clubs and activities where they can build peer groups.

Transport

Family circumstances can make transport to and from school difficult and so young carers may often be late to school or even miss it altogether. The implementation of the *Disability Discrimination Act 2005* means that local authorities must provide adequate support to parents with disabilities who need support in getting their children to school.

There are several reasons why young carers may have transport problems in getting to school:

- A parent may be unwell and therefore unable to transport their child to school.
- An older young carer may be responsible for escorting a younger sibling when a parent is unable to due to their illness or disability.
- Another family member, perhaps a sibling, may be unwell or need to attend an appointment.

It is important to be mindful that a family's needs can change and parents with episodic illnesses may find transport difficult at times when they are unwell.

Young Carers Top Ten Tips for School

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers organises an annual Scottish Young Carers Festival (funded by the Scottish Government) for young carers to have the opportunity to have fun, relax and forget about their daily worries. The young carers are also consulted on a range of issues including education, health and young carers' projects to find out what services they want.

Below is some feedback from them on how you can help make their school day easier:

1. Recognise that our responsibility as carers can affect our education and schoolwork.
2. Find out about us, what we need and how we are not like other students.
3. Take time to find out about individual problems at home. Sometimes we're too embarrassed to tell you ourselves.
4. Don't automatically punish us if we're late. Sometimes we can't help being late because we're helping out at home.
5. Provide more support such as lunchtime drop-ins or homework clubs.
6. Be flexible - give us more time and help to do homework and/or coursework.
7. Include information about young carers and disability issues in PSE lessons.
8. Let us phone parents if we need to find out if they are ok.
9. Make sure there is a clear and up to date notice board showing where we can get support in the community.
10. Make sure that teachers are offered training on young carers and disability issues on In-Service training days.

