

The lives of young carers in England

Introduction and background

According to the most recent census (Office for National Statistics, 2011), there are almost 166,000 young carers aged 5-17 in England. They perform a range of duties including personal care, emotional support, housework and budgeting. Although some research points to positive effects of being a young carer, there is considerable evidence of negative impact on health, social activity, educational engagement and employment opportunities (e.g. Aldridge, 2008; Becker, 2007). Although young carers and their families have access to a range of services, a significant proportion have not disclosed their caring responsibilities. In addition, they are no more likely to be in contact with social services than their peers, and only a small number have had an assessment of their needs or been informed about sources of help. Many families do not see their children as 'carers' (Smyth et al., 2011), some carers do not recognise themselves in the role and there can even be reluctance or anxiety amongst families in disclosing caring responsibilities.

This report is part of a programme of research carried out by TNS BMRB in partnership with Professor Jo Aldridge, Director of the Young Carers Research Group based at Loughborough University. The research is made up of: a feasibility study aimed at finding the best ways to provide the DfE with accurate information about young carers; and qualitative research about young carers, their lives, and how they are affected by their caring duties.

The research involved 22 face to face visits conducted with young carers aged 6-17 and their families between January and March 2015. A number of recruitment approaches were used in order to obtain a broad sample. The visits lasted 3-4 hours and included discussions and interviews. There were also 10 telephone interviews with representatives of local authorities and support organisations which were carried out between October and December 2014. Finally, there was a 90-minute workshop with nine young people aged between 11-17 who attended young carers' projects, the aim being to validate key findings on the types of support which local authorities should provide.

Key findings

Understanding the context of caring: young carers and their families

- As in previous research, it was found that young carers were more likely to care for a mother than a father, and that lone-parent households were over-represented in the sample.
- Cared-for parents or siblings all had diagnosed physical or mental illnesses/disabilities. These were, however, often accompanied by other issues which had not been diagnosed. Parental mental health issues were particularly challenging for young carers because of their unpredictable nature. The unpredictable element also made it difficult for mental health services to provide timely support.
- Parents sometimes struggled to discuss their health issues with their children, particularly if they were under 10 or 11. Young carers clearly voiced a desire to better understand the condition of the person for whom they were caring.
- Older young carers aged 16 or 17 and those in lone parent households tended to take on greater caring

responsibilities and felt more responsible for providing support than younger carers or those who had not disclosed their caring responsibilities. Although young carers generally stated that they were happy to provide caring support, they were less comfortable with other responsibilities, such as managing household finances.

- Young carers found school holidays particularly difficult as their caring responsibilities increased and they were less able to engage in other activities both inside and outside the home.

Experiences and impact of caring on children and families

- Although caring was seen to be a very rewarding role by the majority of young carers, a number of adverse effects were also cited: anxiety, stress, tiredness, strain on family relationships, restrictions in social activities and under-engagement in education.
- Most parents were keen to reduce the impact of caring responsibilities on their children and for their children to receive support in making education transitions. They did



not, however, appear to be actively preparing for their children to cease caring responsibilities through discussions about how caring needs could be fulfilled as their children became older and more independent.

- In terms of coping strategies, older carers benefitted particularly from social relationships whereas younger carers benefitted from sharing feelings openly with parents. Many young carers in secondary school tried to finish homework before returning home.
- Young carers, while proud of their role, felt that the term had negative connotations. Those who did not receive formal support services did not identify with the term and parents and young people voiced concern about such labelling; parents felt that it reflected negatively on them.

Young carer needs assessments and uptake of services

- Formal or informal support helped to reduce the burden of young carers, but some parents were not comfortable disclosing their condition to health and social care professionals due to a fear of potential repercussions.
- There was confusion among both young carers and their parents as to whether children had received their own young carers' needs assessment. Children and parents felt that assessments could be improved by ensuring that they were conducted promptly following disclosure in a private setting, either face to face or by telephone and with clarity in respect of the outcomes of the assessment.
- Barriers to accessing young carers' services included parents' concerns about disclosure, lack of understanding of the support available and concern about the appropriateness and impact of support. Conversely, early and effective communication between professionals and families helped to allay parental concerns about the consequences of accessing such support.
- Young carers projects were an important source of support, enabling participants to open up in conversation. Projects provided not only fun activities but also information, advice and advocacy, although the nature and extent of provision varies across projects. As young carers became older they relied less on the projects and more on a wider peer group. Both young carers and parents expressed a desire for the projects to provide support for families to spend more time together.
- Although some young carers had a key worker who discussed the impact of caring and made referrals, social workers' contact with young carers was limited. There was a high degree of distrust of social services, particularly within families who had had direct experience in the past. At times, both children and parents were fearful that disclosure of caring duties might lead to family separation.

Support propositions: views of young carers and their families

- A number of factors were identified which would improve access to support for young carers. These included increasing the inclusivity and availability of services, for example access to central locations or transportation; ensuring that health and social care support services communicate the availability and nature of young carers' services quickly and effectively; standardising age appropriate activity and information across services; and improving support for cared-for family members.

- Young carers and their parents identified benefits from having someone to talk to, including other young carers of a similar age.
- Practical support through the provision of aids or equipment where those cared for had mobility and social care needs helped to reduce the caring responsibilities of children and young people, whilst information from professionals helped to alleviate anxieties arising from lack of knowledge.
- Young carers stated that support from teachers to complete their studies (particularly around stressful periods such as exam times) was the main way in which schools could support them. They also felt that it was important for teachers to have a clear understanding of the nature of caring responsibilities which they were undertaking.
- Information about managing finances was particularly relevant for older young carers, although younger children also expressed an interest in learning more about money. Support with life planning was also seen by young carers and parents to be valuable support, although this was most relevant for older young carers nearing independence.

The full document can be downloaded from :

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-lives-of-young-carers-in-england>