



# West Cork Young Carers

## Help and Support for Young Carers

### **Raising Awareness & Supporting Young Carers In School**

A Young Carer is a young person (up to the age of 18) whose life is affected by a caring role in some capacity. More simply put “children and young people who provide care to a family member” The person being cared for may be a parent, sibling, other family member or friend and may not necessarily be living in the same house as the young carer themselves

Many will be late to school and unable to complete their homework on time. When at school, Young Carers may have difficulty concentrating due to anxieties about the person they care for. In addition to academic problems, many Young Carers have difficulty integrating socially within the school environment, with some being teased or bullied by their peers.

In spite of these problems, a number of Young Carers will not be identified as such. This is partly because Young Carers and their families often remain silent about their caring responsibilities due to fears around Social Services involvement and the reaction of peers, or because they are unaware that help may be available.

If a student answer yes to any of the following questions then they are carrying out caring duties and would be able to access the information, supports and events detailed in our website.

- Do you care for a grandparent, parent, brother, sister or other family member?
- Do you help someone to dress or undress because they are unable to?
- Do you help someone to walk, get up the stairs, get in and out bed?
- Do you help someone to use the toilet, have a bath or shower?
- Do you help someone to eat and drink?
- Do you give medicines to someone, give injections or change dressings?
- Do you prepare special food or diet because of the medical needs of the person?
- Do you do housework because another adult is unable to?
- Do you keep someone company, read and talk to them?
- Do you look after brothers & sisters because an adult is unable to?
- Do you help the main Carer carry out any of the tasks above?

The main aim of this project is to raise teachers' and other professionals' awareness of Young Carers and their needs and to provide some suggestions as to how Young Carers can best be supported within schools.

Young Carers are often difficult to identify because they keep their caring role hidden and secret. This is because many Young Carers fear that they will become marginalised from peers, that the cared for person could become institutionalised or that they may become caught up in child protection proceedings, or simply that they don't want to be thought of as any different to other students.

Despite these difficulties in identifying Young Carers, the impact of caring responsibilities may be manifested in a number of ways, and a combination of factors may indicate that a child or young person is caring.

It is important for front-line teaching and youth-work staff to be aware of these issues, as they are often the people who will have the greatest opportunity to spot the signs and identify the problems at home. The success of West Cork Young Carers Project relies heavily on professionals in regular contact with young people to make the young people aware of the project through our contact leaflets and posters.

#### Possible Signs Related To Identifying Young Carers Within Schools

- **Tired during school hours**  
Young Carers may feel tired at school due to extensive caring tasks and/or stress suffered at home. Young Carers who are frightened of being identified as such may spend many hours working until late at night on their schoolwork. They may be awakened during the night to help the person they care for. Some Young Carers have been known to start working after school hours, at weekends and during holidays to help with financial problems experienced in the family.
- **Academic performance below potential**  
Many Young Carers struggle at school because of the home situation, despite strong academic ability. They are often unable to complete or hand in homework on time, and offer poor excuses for their failure to do so. Homework may also be rushed and not up to an acceptable standard, and performance at school can be erratic and unpredictable. School work may suffer because the young carer is taking too much time off school to help out at home.
- **Lots of time spent daydreaming/short concentration spans**  
Young Carers often spend time at school worrying about what is happening to the person they care for when they are not there to look after them. They may find it difficult to focus for any length of time due to feeling tired and/or stressed.
- **Express a negative attitude**  
Young Carers may not appreciate the relevance of certain topics being discussed and activities promoted in school. They may feel that their priorities in life are not appreciated or understood.

- **May look and act depressed and unmotivated**  
Again, this may be as a result of the young person feeling tired and isolated. Young Carers often feel guilty for money being spent on them personally when there are limited finances in the home. They can also feel guilty for being well while the loved one is ill, or for not being able to cope when the cared for person's health deteriorates. Young Carers may be quiet, withdrawn and morose.
- **Major swings in temperament**  
Extrovert behaviour – on days when they feel 'in control'  
Aggressive behaviour – when they are feeling pressurised and defensive  
Introvert behaviour – when they feel they are not coping  
Emotional behaviour – when they are feeling guilty because of their own good health
- **Attention seeking**  
This behaviour can be more apparent in Young Carers who are helping to care (especially for siblings). Young Carers may feel that they need to fight for personal attention due to the cared for person's needs being prioritised. They may exaggerate stories and illnesses in order to gain attention.
- **Social interaction**  
Young Carers recognise that they are different in their outlooks and interests while at the same time they may wish to conform. Their solution is not to highlight their differences, but to find a close friend who in turn has similar experiences or is able to support the carer when mixing with groups. Young Carers' interests and priorities in life may differ to such a degree that Young Carers find many children of their own age group immature and selfish. Young Carers often do not have time to socialise with their peers outside school and will not ask other children back to their house. They may experience a strong sense of isolation and alienation from other young people, and often find it easier to relate to adults than to their peers.
- **Eating habits/poor hygiene**  
Poor eating habits may develop for a number of reasons. These may include a loss of appetite due to tiredness/stress, or avoiding food because of the feelings of guilt caused by spending valuable money on themselves. They may feel that by eating less they are saving money. If the cared for person has poor eating habits, the young carer may fall into the same routine. Young Carers can often display poor hygiene and cleanliness – they may be so rushed to get ready in the morning that they are unable to prepare properly. There may not be anyone at home taking on basic tasks such as washing and ironing the clothes on a regular basis or with enough money to buy new clothes.
- **Shows leadership qualities/parental skills**  
Some Young Carers are used to being in control of situations and this is how they are able to cope at home. They tend to be very organised whilst at the same time being flexible enough to change focus at short notice. Young Carers with primary responsibility at home often assume a parental role towards their

younger siblings.

- **Physically ill**  
Young Carers may display a range of symptoms of poor physical health because of extra caring responsibilities carried out at home. These can include general illnesses such as flu as a result of the young person feeling rundown and exhausted. They may also include specific ailments like backache caused by heavy lifting tasks, i.e. moving a disabled parent.
- **Bullying**  
Many Young Carers can experience bullying as a result of their caring role. They may be perceived as different or threatening to their peers. Younger children often have a lack of understanding of the illness or disability of the parent, which is reflected in their thoughtless attitude towards the young carer. Young people in home situations with depression or drug/alcohol problems can experience severe victimisation and stigmatisation from peers.
- **Absence from school**  
If a young carer has been ill, they tend to take longer to recover because of the stress and tiredness and the need to 'keep going' at home. Being ill may gain the attention of family and friends and the young carer may wish to prolong this. The young carer may have a history of frequent and unexplained absences because of changing circumstances at home.
- **Parents**  
Parents may be difficult to contact and may not attend open days or parents' meetings. They can be wary or defensive when attempts are made to contact them. Parents may display signs of guilt because of feeling they are holding back their child and piling too much responsibility on their shoulders. Teachers may be passed notes from parents requesting that their child stay at home. The young carer may leave school to use the phone or insist on keeping their mobile on to ensure they have an avenue of contact with the parent.
- **Not making use of leisure or extra-curricular activities**  
The young carer may have little time or money to focus on their own leisure needs or to pursue their own interests.

Young Carers may be identified in school or their caring responsibilities made known to the school. In such cases, the school's response can have an enormous impact on the young carer, with sensitive support from schools proving to be hugely beneficial in reducing Young Carers' anxiety and stress.

Many Young Carers and their families have complex needs that require multi-agency support, and schools are one of the agencies that are often involved. Schools clearly have a responsibility to address Young Carers' needs when their educational achievement and pastoral welfare is affected by their caring role

Teachers/youthworkers can find out about the work of the West Cork Young Carers Project and suggest that the young carer gets in touch. Either by giving the young person our information leaflet or directing them to our website at

[www.westcorkyoungcarers.ie](http://www.westcorkyoungcarers.ie)

Teachers should tell only those staff that need to know, and only with the young person's permission. Most Young Carers say they want teachers to know, but they do not want to be treated any differently. Communicate information about Young Carers and their families only on a 'need to know' basis and inform Young Carers beforehand of your intentions regarding the information provided.

### Suggested Actions By Schools To Support Young Carers

- Teachers should speak to the young person in private and not in front of their peers. They should establish what the young carer needs and how they can help.
- Teachers should allow the young person the use of a private phone to contact home during break or lunchtime. This will help to reduce any anxiety they feel about the welfare of the cared for person, thus defusing stress and improving attendance and concentration. Young Carers often stay off school when the person they care for is doing badly, rather than spend all day worrying about them.
- It's important to be flexible. By the time many Young Carers set off for school, they may have already helped an adult with washing, dressing or using the bathroom, as well as getting younger brothers or sisters ready for school. It may not be their fault if they are late.
- Young Carers may get little support at home with homework, and little time to do it. Lunchtime homework clubs can help or giving discretionary extra time for homework. Provide a quiet place to do homework during the school day and help on catching up with any missed work.
- School Chaplains can help by asking pupils if anyone at home is poorly and if they help look after anyone at home.
- Parents who have care needs can often be scared of services taking their children away, so teachers should approach the subject with sensitivity.
- Support parents with mobility problems in visiting the school and attending school events, for example by ensuring that the premises are wheelchair accessible. Maintain regular phone contact with parents who are unable to come into school.
- Challenge bullying or isolation of Young Carers and where necessary help them to integrate into existing groups run in the school.

- Incorporate information on Young Carers into lesson plans for the Guidance Curriculum.
- Designate a named person as a link person for Young Carers, someone they can go to with issues and requests for assistance at school.

Young Carers need to hear that their education is important and that their school will look for ways of supporting them. Be flexible in relation to punctuality, attendance and completion of homework. However, a balance does need to be struck that ensures these Young Carers do receive a full education and are not set apart as being different from the rest of their class.