



YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL

NEW SOUTH WALES

Report to the Minister for Youth on Young Carers and Education

BACKGROUND

On 28th February 2008 the NSW Youth Advisory Council (the Council) identified the topic of young carers as an item for inclusion in their 2008 Work Plan. In particular, the Council agreed to monitor, and where appropriate provide advice on strategies to better identify and support young carers who are studying in NSW. In order to complete this item of the Work Plan the Council undertook a number of actions, including investigating the available research and statistics on young carers, attending relevant events, inviting a guest speaker to a Council meeting and organising consultations with young carers.

As part of its work the Council undertook an extensive literature review of information relating to young carers in NSW, Australia and internationally. The documents reviewed included:

- *Reading, Writing and Responsibility: Young Carers and Education*, Institute of Child Protection studies (ACU National), 2006.
- *Bring it! Young Carers forum 08 Background Paper: A literature review – Young carers and education*, Carers Australia, 2008.
- *Young carers in Education: Students with Family Caring Responsibilities*, New Transitions – Re-engagement Edition, Youth Affairs Network of Queensland, April 2008.
- *Carers Australia, Young Carers Research Project Final Report*, Department of Family and Community Services, September 2001.

In order to become better informed on the issue the Council invited Ms Ann-Marie Taylor from Carers NSW to their September meeting. Ms Taylor provided the Council with an overview of the services provided to young carers by Carers NSW, some background on young carers in the community, and advice on how best to approach undertaking consultations with young carers.

A number of Council members also participated in activities that further enhanced the council's understanding of the issues relating to young carers. These were:

- *Bring it! Young Carer Forum*, Carers Australia, Canberra, November 2008.
- *Young Carers in a Global Context workshop*, Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC), University of NSW, December 2008.

In collaboration with the Young Carers Team at Carers NSW the Council attempted to undertake face-to-face consultations with young carers in a variety of locations around NSW. The lack of young carer attendance at the face-to-face consultations organised indicated to

the Council that they would need to utilise different strategies to consult with this group, including online consultations, surveys and attending Carers NSW organised young carer activities.

This year the Council has been fortunate in having two members who are young carers. These members have provided invaluable personal contributions and information on being a young carer, and they are also connected with other young carers in their local community. They have also been able to bring to the Council their knowledge and experience gained from their connections with other young carers in their local communities and from their broader young carer networks.

ABOUT YOUNG CARERS

Carers NSW defines young carers as:

“a child or young person 25 years or under who provides support for a family member who has a long term disability, mental illness, other illness, drug or alcohol problem. Young carers usually have more responsibilities than other young people their age.”¹

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003) data indicates that there are approximately 347,700 young carers (5.2% of all people under 25) in Australia who provide support for a family member who has a disability, mental illness or other long term illness. Of these, approximately 90,200 are living in NSW. Two-thirds of those young people who take on the *primary* carer role are females, and females are slightly more likely to become young carers than males².

Young carers may undertake a wide variety of tasks in their caring role, including household tasks such as cooking and cleaning, paying bills³, providing personal care and emotional support to their relative, supervising younger siblings, and advocating for services⁴. Young carers may also have to assist with medications and deal with emergencies.

Over half of all young primary carers are caring for a parent. Of this group, they are more likely to be a sole-parent household and the parent being cared for is more likely to be the mother. Approximately one quarter of young carers provide care for someone with a mental illness, however this figure is likely to be an underestimate⁵.

Caring at a young age can have significant impacts on the education, health and wellbeing of young carers. Often the reversal of the parent/child relationship can lead to heavy emotional burdens for a young person who would not normally have to be concerned about planning for the future of the family⁶. Young carers are at risk for poor physical health due to stress, limited sleep and the physical demands of caring (eg. lifting and carrying, undertaking domestic tasks)⁷. Young carers can often become isolated due to the physical and emotional demands of their caring role, the family's limited income, the limited 'spare time' available to them, and a reluctance to share their experiences with friends due to embarrassment.

Education and the transition to further education provide significant challenges for young carers. Only 4 percent of primary carers between the ages of 15-25 years are still in education compared with 23 percent of the general population in that age group⁸. Many young people find that their caring role disrupts or interferes with their successful participation in educational programs⁹. Due to their caring responsibilities young carers frequently miss or are late for school, are unable to complete homework, feel worried and

¹ Young Carers NSW website, <http://www.youngcarersnsw.asn.au/MultiPage.aspx?PageID=69>.

² *Carers Australia, Young Carers Research Project Final Report*, Department of Family and Community Services, September 2001.

³ Young Carers NSW website, as above.

⁴ *Reading, Writing and Responsibility: Young Carers and Education*, Institute of Child Protection Studies (ACU National), 2006.

⁵ *Carers Australia, Young Carers Research Project Final Report*, as above.

⁶ *Facts about young carers*, Carers NSW Factsheet.

⁷ *Carers Australia, Young Carers Research Project Final Report*, as above.

⁸ *Carers Australia, Young Carers Research Project Final Report*, as above.

⁹ *Bring it! Young Carers forum 08 Background Paper: A literature review – Young carers and education*, Carers Australia, 2008.

distracted when they are at school, and feel limited connectedness with their school community¹⁰.

Although 3.6 percent of young people aged under 18, and 9.2 percent of those aged between 18-24, are carers, many educational institutions are unaware that they have young carers in their classes¹¹. Many teachers and school administrators are concerned only with a young person's scholastic progress, and view absenteeism and incomplete homework as misbehaving and limiting the chances of success for the student, rather than as a result of caring responsibilities. Young carers may also have difficulty in participating in extra-curricular activities or social events, which limits their ability to form connections within the school community. Research indicates that young carers may be reluctant to identify themselves as carers at school, preferring to maintain their privacy, as they feel there may be negative consequences associated with identifying as a young carer. These negative consequences could include bullying and peer rejection, school staff who do not understand, and the information not being kept confidential¹².

The transition from school to further education can be very difficult for many young carers. The lack of financial and institutional support for the role of young carers can make it difficult for them to prioritise further education over employment. Young carers face a number of barriers to further education including lack of financial capacity, restricted time to study due to caring responsibilities, and lack of qualifications¹³.

¹⁰ Carers Australia, *Young Carers Research Project Final Report*, as above.

¹¹ *Bring it! Young Carers forum 08 Background Paper: A literature review – Young carers and education*, Carers Australia, 2008.

¹² *Bring it! Young Carers forum 08 Background Paper: A literature review – Young carers and education*, as above.

¹³ *Bring it! Young Carers forum 08 Background Paper: A literature review – Young carers and education*, as above.

COMMENT

A number of key issues were identified by the Council during their research and discussions on young carers and education.

- Through literature reviews and from anecdotal evidence provided by young carers the Council has become aware of a number of issues for young carers relating to their eligibility for the Centrelink Carer Payment. The current legislation governing Carer Payment restricts people who are involved in education or employment activities for more than 25 hours (including travelling time) a week from receiving the payment. This excludes young people who are still at school or in higher education and working part time to support themselves from receiving the income support and may provide incentives for young carers to leave school early. The payment criteria also means that young carers often absent themselves from school for certain periods in order to meet the requirements to receive the payment.
- A significant issue that needs to be addressed in relation to young carers is that of identification. It is widely recognised that there are many young carers who remain hidden and who have not sought help from community services and/or are not accessing government support. Carers Australia suggests that the barriers to identification are two-fold:

“1. the barriers to self-identification relate to the attitudes or cultural backgrounds of the young carers and their families

*2. the barriers to young carers being identified **by others** include inadequate awareness and knowledge by the community in general and, more specifically, by those with whom the young carer has regular contact.”¹⁴*

There are a number of reasons that young people may choose not to identify themselves as young carers, including the perceived stigma of being associated with disability or illness, the wish not to be labelled by others, or the fear that child protection services could see them as ‘at risk’ and remove them from the family¹⁵. Young carers may also feel that they cannot trust anyone enough to ask for help, and may be worried that information will not be treated with confidentiality¹⁶.

The identification of young carers in the community is crucial as it enables them and their families to access practical help and services, counselling and respite, and financial assistance. It is also important for the young carer to be able to engage with peers who may also be caring and receive assistance and support at school specific to their needs as a carer. Young carers who are not identified and who do not receive support can experience social isolation, struggle at school and in making the transition to further education, and can experience long-term health problems¹⁷.

- As mentioned above, there is often a failure by people and services that have contact with young carers to identify them and provide them with appropriate support. Research

¹⁴ *Bring it! Young Carers forum 08 Background Paper: A literature review – Young carers and identification*, Carers Australia, 2008.

¹⁵ *Bring it! Young Carers forum 08 Background Paper: A literature review – Young carers and identification*, as above.

¹⁶ *Carers Australia, Young Carers Research Project Final Report*, Department of Family and Community Services, September 2001.

¹⁷ *Bring it! Young Carers forum 08 Background Paper: A literature review – Young carers and identification*, as above.

suggests that many carer, health and disability services are not aware that young carers exist or how to identify them. Similarly, education professionals are also unlikely to be able to identify young carers, and if they do so, are not able to provide them with appropriate support and advice¹⁸. The lack of awareness of the role of young carers among teachers and education professionals, and the inflexibility of schools and the school curriculum combine to create a huge barrier to young carers successfully participating in education.

Many young people do not inform their schools that they are young carers as they are fearful of a breach of confidentiality, bullying and peer rejection, and a lack of understanding from teachers and school staff. The lack of a coordinated Government approach to young carer support in schools can make self-identification a daunting and unrewarding prospect for many young carers. However when the school culture actively recognises and supports young carers, school can play a pivotal role in improving young carers experience of education and their quality of life. School can provide a “locus of support” for young carers, with teachers who are understanding, counsellors to provide support, and friends who offer assistance¹⁹. School can also provide young carers with an opportunity to connect with their peers and with adults they trust, as well as the wider community²⁰. A more flexible study curriculum and supportive environment can go a long way to making education more accessible to young carers.

- Research and anecdotal evidence suggests that many young carers are not aware that there are sources of help within the community that they are able to access. Many young carers may not even be aware that they can identify themselves as such. When young carers and their families do not access available services the position of the family becomes more difficult, causing the young carer to undertake even more hours of caring and limiting their interaction with school, their peers, and eating into their leisure time²¹. Isolation of both the young carer and the family can become a serious issue.

Research by the Institute of Child Protection Studies indicates that the main reason that young carers are unable to attend or to remain at school is because they are needed at home to care for their relative. The research suggested that young carers and their families were not receiving support as the services did not respond to their needs, were not accessible, or that the family were not aware of the services and what they might be entitled to²².

Better promotion of the services and programs available to young carers and their families, including respite programs, will enable young carers to identify themselves, access service and will improve their overall wellbeing and that of their families. Ensuring that young carers who identify themselves and seek help are met with a positive and helpful response is an important step in assisting young carers to participate successfully in school and other opportunities.

¹⁸ *Carers Australia, Young Carers Research Project Final Report*, Department of Family and Community Services, September 2001.

¹⁹ *Reading, Writing and Responsibility: Young Carers and Education*, Institute of Child Protection Studies (ACU National), 2006.

²⁰ *Reading, Writing and Responsibility: Young Carers and Education*, as above.

²¹ *Bring it! Young Carers forum 08 Background Paper: A literature review – Young carers and identification*, Carers Australia, 2008.

²² *Reading, Writing and Responsibility: Young Carers and Education*, as above.

ADVICE TO THE MINISTER

The Council would like to provide the following recommendations to the Minister on strategies to better identify and support young carers who are studying in NSW.

It is recommended that the Government:

1. *Ensure that teachers are aware of and informed about young carers and their role within families. Provide resources and training to teachers to enable them to provide support to young carers within the school system.*
This could be done in partnership with the Department of Education and Training and Carers NSW. Providing support within the school itself and allowing young carers some flexibility in their study timetable and attendance will assist young carers to achieve better results and feel more comfortable at school.
2. *Raise awareness of young carers both within the school community and the community in general.*
This could include undertaking community education programs in partnership with Carers NSW to encourage a better understanding and appreciation of the role of young carers in the community. Another suggestion is to include a question on student enrolment forms which may assist in better identifying young carers in school (eg. Is there someone with an illness, disability, or drug and alcohol problem in your family?).
3. *Provide increased funding and resources for young carer support and activities. Undertake promotion of these support and activity programs to young carers through schools and higher education institutions.*
Funding could be given to existing non-government organisations such as Carers NSW, Reach Out!, etc, to develop and expand support programs for young carers, including respite, peer support, social events, and young carer camps. These organisations could also provide specific support for young carers who wish to continue attending school and transition to higher education, such as tutoring or mentoring programs.
4. *Encourage the Federal Government to review the current Carers Payment guidelines to take in to account the need for young carers to consistently attend school and the possibility that they may wish to undertake further education.*

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