

South Australian
Commissioner
for Children and
Young People
2020

Take Care

What can be done at school to
support children and young people
with caring responsibilities at home



Commissioner
Y for Children &
Young People

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the children and young people across South Australia who have shared their experience in the hope that school will do things differently to support them.

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Commissioner's Introduction



As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, it is my responsibility to promote and advocate for the rights, development and wellbeing of all children and young people living across our State, to ensure we meet our international obligations as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The majority of the children and young people with whom I speak and meet, are doing okay. A number need more support, while a smaller group are in immediate need of assistance to have their rights and needs met.

This report looks closely at one group of South Australian children and young people we know are struggling, and who need the systems around them to commit to providing the kind of support that will enable them to live the lives to which they are entitled. When groups of children are experiencing lives that are not as protected and happy as we would want them to be due to a set of common experiences and circumstances we fail them.

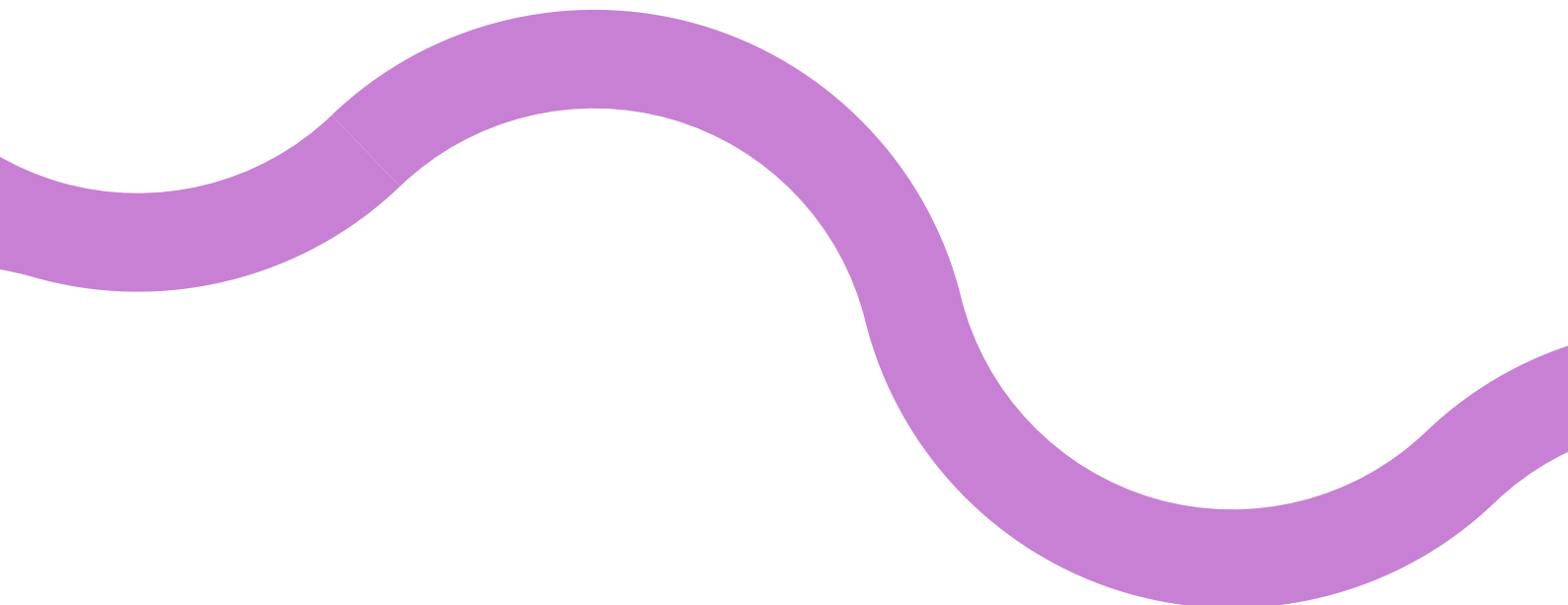
One such group of children is 'young carers' who provide significant amounts of care to people in their lives. The kind of care they provide can be either physical, emotional and intimate personal care and/or childcare. It can also include interpreting for a family member who is sick, has a disability, a mental illness, or a substance misuse issue or be a combination of these.

Many young carers emphasize that their caring role is a positive experience. However, research clearly indicates that, where a young carer is inadequately supported, the physical and mental strain that caring places on their health, wellbeing, and education outcomes is immense.

Many South Australian children and young people with carer responsibilities have been telling me that the dealings they have at their school are less than ideal. This indicates to me that education as a system is not meeting their needs and that:

- their best interests are not being considered
- they are being discriminated against
- they are not receiving the supports required to thrive and develop; and
- they are being overlooked, and not asked their views or opinions.

These are all key rights underpinning the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); the international convention outlining the core economic, political, social and cultural rights of children ratified by Australia in 1990.



South Australian support agencies estimate there are more than 14,800 young people under the age of 18 who are required to take on caring roles for members of their family. This figure equates to 2 or 3 students in every classroom.

Articles 28 and 29 of the CRC recognise the right of every child to an education which supports the development of their personality and talents, as well as their mental and physical abilities, so that they can reach their fullest potential. This means schools should not only provide basic teaching, but also the resources, skills and capacity for all children to become successful learners and succeed according to their abilities.

In order for children and young people with caring roles to take advantage of the opportunities the education system offers, there needs to be a better understanding of the life circumstances they face on a daily basis. In fact, under the CRC, we have an obligation to consider and protect children's best interests. This applies particularly to educators and teachers who

are required to know something of the lives of the children and young people they have in their classrooms and school.

For children who have caring responsibilities Article 19 of the CRC requires us to put in place protective measures and programs that will provide the support children need. This includes support for children and young people who are caring for other children. Article 31 requires the state to ensure children have the right to relax, play and join in activities.

In addition to these international obligations, the South Australian Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People states that all children should be successful learners as measured by their readiness to take advantage of learning environments, be engaged in their learning, and have a positive experience of learning.

From the very start of my commission I have had involvement with children and young people with carer responsibilities and the carer support agencies with which they connect. I have attended numerous events

and forums and have met with children and young carers in small groups and in one-on-one meetings to discuss areas of concern they have, actively supporting them to connect and have conversations with me.

I know the children and young people I have met over the past three years are just the tip of the iceberg. There are many more across our communities who are caring for family members but who don't tell anyone this is what they do – not their friends, teachers or neighbours – ultimately meaning they are not being adequately supported to live the best life they can.

Just knowing the reason why these children are not doing as well as their peers is not enough. Neither does it excuse us from not doing something to change this situation. We have a duty and obligation to ensure young carers are able to fulfil their own potential and have the same opportunities as their peers. It is our responsibility to support them to achieve the outcomes we have set for them so that they are healthy, safe, nurtured, inspired, and engaged, and actively able to participate in school and society like others their age.

While many of life's domains can be affected by caring responsibilities, children and young people invariably told me about their experiences at school, describing it as either a sanctuary or source of major distress.

As a sanctuary school provides a break from home and supports communication with other children and young people as well as providing some young people with a regular connection to an adult who cares about them. However, I have also heard about unsympathetic adults in education settings, and how stigma and shame adds to the pressures some young carers feel in the school environment.

The vision for education in Australia as set out in the Alice Springs Declaration is to encourage and support every student to thrive, develop and have the social, emotional and cognitive skills to succeed.

The focus of this report is to highlight the ways in which schools are falling short on this vision for children and young people with caring responsibilities. Practical strategies to improve education outcomes and wellbeing for young carers, and the perspectives of students, teachers and support agencies, are also be presented.



Recommendations

1

The Department for Education develop and implement school based supports for students with significant caring roles to improve their educational, social and community inclusion and learning outcomes.

2

Each school site identify a young carer champion to act as a single point of contact who reviews students' needs on a weekly basis, and acts as an internal advocate thereby developing capacity in the student, educators, and the school.

3

Carer support agencies be resourced to work with young carers to co-design and develop easy to access, localised information and resources that will support educators and school leaders who provide support to young carers at school.

Key Messages



There are between 2 to 3 children in every South Australian classroom who fulfil a caring role within their family.



Children with caring responsibilities report that caring impacts their whole life, their friendships, school, and community involvement.



We have a duty and obligation to ensure children with caring roles have the same opportunities as their peers.



Education is best placed to respond to and support the whole of life outcomes for children and young people who have caring responsibilities.



Leaders and educators can improve attendance, behaviour and learning when they understand the issues young people who have caring roles face, and support them to access the services they need.



Educators need to feel confident in their abilities and be supported to engage and support students who are in caring roles.

Approach

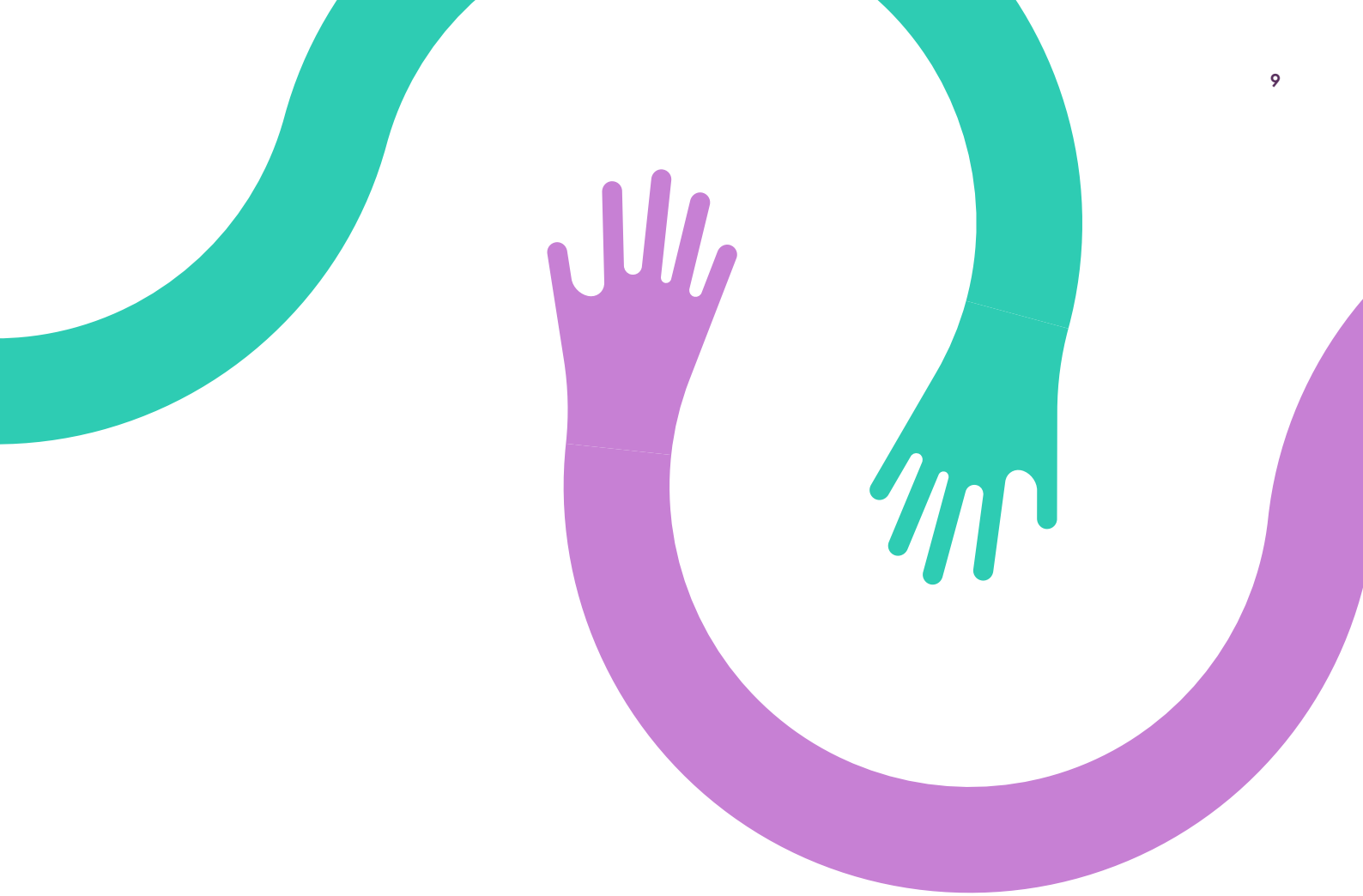
Over the past three years I have had many conversations with groups of young people with caring roles across metropolitan and regional South Australia. These groups have included children in primary school and secondary school as well as some who are transitioning from school into work.

My connections to these young people have been facilitated by a small group of health and community service agencies. They have supported my focus groups in diverse locations, my attendance at camps and school holiday programs, and my involvement in training programs and workshops. Through these avenues I have been able to spend time getting to know and understand some of the challenges young carers face on an ongoing basis.

The 150 children and young people who have told me about their lives and experiences caring for others has been eye-opening. Many of their experiences are common, but equally I have been struck by the individuality and uniqueness of their situations. They have had caring roles for parents or siblings living with either one or a combination of physical disability, chronic illness, post-traumatic stress, mental illness, degenerative disease, terminal illness, and/or drug and alcohol issues.

As I explored what aspects of their lives my advocacy should focus on, it was their relationship with teachers and schools that more often than not sat at the top of their list. Outside of their families, most of the significant adults in their lives were at school, and they wanted these adults to support them to live a better life.

From my many interactions with school leaders and educators, I know that for them to be able to better support young people in their caring role, they need to feel confident in their own ability and feel better supported themselves to take action. To better understand the perspectives teachers have of students with caring responsibilities, and what supports they need, I conducted an open survey on this subject in October 2019. The survey was advertised through social media posts and was voluntary and anonymous. I received responses from 97 participants who identified as



South Australian primary and secondary school teachers from metro, regional and remote areas. The majority of respondents were secondary school teachers.

The survey was designed to find out how well equipped teachers felt they were to deal with vulnerable students, and in particular students with caring responsibilities. The survey also asked questions regarding the learning outcomes for these young people and the capacity of their school to support them. Teachers were asked how well their training prepared them for the task of identifying and supporting students who are vulnerable, or students in who have caring responsibilities. Teachers were also asked if they were aware of how many children in their classes had caring roles, how confident they were in identifying these children, and what formal and informal strategies their school has in place to support them, including how effective they think these are.

These teacher perspectives provide insights into the challenges of developing strategies to improve educational outcomes for students with carer responsibilities.

The perspectives of students and teachers both need to be considered when developing and implementing a young carer support model for all South Australian schools.

This model would ideally include adoption of a single point of contact for information and advice for students with a significant caring role at home, the focus being on supporting them to maintain academic levels and social inclusion, as well as their connection with peers and the wider school community.

The case studies included in this report are from current clients of two Adelaide based Young Carer Support Programs, and are included with permission.

Understanding Children and Young People with Caring Responsibilities

Children and young people with caring responsibilities are a diverse group undertaking varied roles that include practical tasks, managing medication, and interpreting. They may also be providing companionship and emotional support, as well as supervision and assistance to attend health appointments.

Many adults, including teachers and school leaders, describe in glowing terms the maturity, independence, compassion, resilience, and empathy of the young person with caring responsibilities. But whilst all these characteristics might be present in a young carer, it is only half their story. These children take on this role and adult issues without choice. They are missing out on many of the other things young people their age do, including team sport, learning an instrument, joining a club, or similar activities.

While children and young people can gain life skills that will assist them in the future as a result of their caring roles, their choices and opportunities can also be limited. They talk about feeling sad and worried about what will happen if they don't do the caring, given there is not enough support to help their family member or them. They talk about having less time to engage in age appropriate activities, friendships, and education opportunities than their peers.

For many this is compounded by the financial hardship that often accompanies chronic illness and disability, particularly as many of the children and young people are living in sole parent families.

Young carers also talk about the difficulty they face leaving the family home, getting a job and having financial independence, or dating and committing to intimate relationships. Young people said that it can be really difficult when they see their peers developing more independence. A number of young adults spoke about the conflict that arises from their parents fears about their evolving independence.

Young people have told me that caring is a part of who they are. While it is part of their identity, they don't want it to be the whole of their identity.

They have also told me, that sometimes their situation is manageable but at times it can be really overwhelming. The bad times are often when routines change for either themselves or their family members, or if there is 'drama' with friendship groups, or pressure from peers or other school related issues.

At these times they feel they have no one to trust or talk to about their caring role or about feeling overwhelmed. They talk about the social stigma and misunderstanding associated with illness and disability across the community and how this isolates them. They also talk about



not wanting to be different or 'special' and wanting to blend in, and so keep silent and not tell anyone about their situation. Many have said they don't want to be teased or bullied for being different and some speak about the fear of being taken away, or of their family member getting into trouble.

I have heard consistently from young people with caring responsibilities that their caring impacts their whole life:

- their friendships and getting along with peers
- their ability to play sport and other activities
- having sleep-overs
- their physical health and mental self-care, sleep, concentration
- their ability to fit in as they often feel anxious, worried and different
- their ability to afford nice things
- having time for school work
- their future goals and aspirations
- getting a drivers licence
- having a part-time job

Anna (17) lives alone with her mother who has bipolar disorder.

She regularly misses school to stay home with her mother when she is unwell. Anna says that she keeps a close eye on her mother to monitor her highs and lows. Anna also accompanies her mother to her GP appointments and will speak to the doctor if she notices any behavioural changes in her mother.

Recently, Anna had to contact mental health triage and this resulted in her mum being admitted into the psychiatric ward at the hospital. Anna missed a week of school. Anna said she wasn't sure whether this was because she was 'burnt out' from her caring responsibilities or because she is depressed, but she felt no motivation to return to school. Anna said her school doesn't check up on her anymore and she believes this is because they are used to her not attending and have given up on her.

School Demands

Young people caring for others have told me about missing school because of their caring responsibilities. They worry about not having the time to complete homework because of all the other demands on their time.

While at school young carers say they worry about their family member at home and can be distracted. Sometimes they talk about not having friends, or having friends that don't understand and therefore put them under pressure to 'do things' that other kids do. Others live with the worry of people at school finding out about their care responsibilities, while others want adults to find out and then do something to support them. In most instances children and young people have said that they want their schools and teachers to be better at understanding their lives.

Children and young people with caring responsibilities have said they want teachers to:

- “ ‘Understand why they might be upset, stressed and anxious at times.’
- “ ‘Understand why we are being bullied.’
- “ ‘Understand why we can't do homework or complete assignments on time.’
- “ ‘Understand why our parents can't come to the school and don't assume they don't care.’
- “ ‘Understand that sometimes we have to take family members to appointments, or provide extra care if things are bad and that's just the way it is.’
- “ ‘Understand that we don't have much money and choices have to be made, and sometimes we stay home because we don't have clean clothes, food or bus fares.’

Given the everyday contact teachers have with students they have capacity to improve their education experience and develop local responses that acknowledge and recognise the caring responsibilities of children and young people.

Many young people with caring responsibilities have said that school attendance can be difficult and that they don't feel acknowledged for the efforts they make getting to school after juggling their family member's needs and their own care at home. Many times I have heard that they feel singled out for uniform breaches and lateness. Given how difficult it can be for young carers to get to school at all, these seem like minor things.

They also talk about concerns regarding their privacy at school. They fear intrusive questioning when they ask to see the school counsellor, and are given little or no flexibility with workload management in recognition of the heavy load they bear on the home-front, which can often include domestic duties in addition to their carer responsibilities.

Joanna (18) said she was really excited to attend her Year 12 camp.

She said she wanted to relax, hang out with her friends and join in on fun activities. However, Joanna was worried about her financial and home situation. Joanna said she did not know how they would pay for this trip and who would look after her mother Deb while she was away. Deb has chronic arthritis and a crushed disc in her back. Along with these physical conditions Deb has anxiety. Joanna knows that her mum worries about being home alone and also about Joanna while she is at school, or on the rare occasion she stays at a friend's house. Joanna usually helps her mum arrange her medication and reminds her to take it morning and night. Joanna changed her mind about camp and said she no longer wanted to go.

Joanna's mum Deb wanted her daughter to live life beyond her caring responsibilities.

However, she was under significant financial stress and turned to Joanna's school to discuss how she would pay for the upcoming camp. Deb said that she found this process emotional and after many difficult conversations was very disappointed that the school were unable to assist. Deb spoke about this with the young carer's worker. The young carer's worker rang the school and the fee was subsequently waived and paid for through the school's social justice fund. This required an external service provider to negotiate this outcome despite Deb endeavouring to explain her circumstances to the school direct. Deb was proud that Joanna was able to attend her camp and Joanna said she had a great time.

Bella (14) is the eldest of 5 children and cares for her father who has a disability and mental illness.

Bella helps organise her younger siblings every morning for school when her Dad is not feeling up to it. Bella will also help her Dad with his medication, rehabilitation exercises and with walking around the house when his pain is bad. Due to religious beliefs, Bella was required to wear stockings that were not 'see through'. Her school's uniform policy requested for these to be brown stockings. However, Bella was not in a financial position to purchase these and opted for another option (different colour) that was more financially feasible and that she had access to. Bella is not always able to get to the shops and the families food shopping is done by support workers. These different coloured stockings did not align with the school's uniform policy and as a result, Bella was sent home.

Access to Support

There are many children and young people within our schools whose caring roles are not known due to previous family experiences with systems, or a fear of intervention that will not be supportive of keeping families together.

There are also cultural considerations and expectations that can influence how forthcoming children and young people are with regards to their situation. They are very aware of not wanting the person they are caring for to feel any worse about the situation they are in, and would rather protect them than reach out for help.

Peter (14) cares for his mother Tanya who as a result of domestic violence has severe anxiety and also struggles with severe diabetes.

Tanya has found it difficult to openly disclose her experiences and has worries about stigma and judgement. As a result, Tanya does not want Peter's Young Carers Worker to communicate with the school about his home situation. Tanya fears that Peter will be treated differently or even bullied because of his caring responsibilities. Peter assists Tanya to record her blood sugar levels and also cooks most meals as it is important for Tanya to be eating well. Tanya worries that her competency as a parent would be challenged if the school were aware of Peter's home life and stresses and about the potential of intervention.

The impact of caring for a family member with illness or disability is significant, and a cause of concern for the children and young people with whom I have met. The difficulty often lies in the amount of support available to the family member through health and disability systems. They have told me that sometimes they not only need support for themselves, but also for the person they are looking after. If their family member had more supports when they are needed then this would prevent the young person from having inappropriate or extreme caring roles that undermine their ability to participate in education, leisure and social activities.

Many young people and support workers have also spoken about the challenges of engaging schools in their approach. They have told me how hard it is to convince schools to develop more flexible policies, show leniency with regards to behaviour, or implement a whole school approach to young people with caring responsibilities. Young people speak about the frustration of repeatedly explaining their circumstances to each individual teacher and how inconsistent each teacher's approach can be to behaviour and expectations. Support workers have spoken about the positive impact there can be on attendance, behaviour and learning there can be when schools and leaders understand the issues for young carers and find ways to support referrals and advocacy within the school.

Sally (8) recently started with a new class room teacher at school. Sally lives at home with her mother who suffers from chronic pain as well as severe depression. Sally helps her mother get out of bed, and to shower and dress every morning. Sally has said that she worries about her mother having a fall or not being able to get out of her chair while she is at school. The Young Carer Worker contacted the teacher and was told that Sally had settled in well with the new class. The teacher invited the Worker to meet with Sally at the school in a few weeks.

On attending the school the Young Carer Worker was not provided with a confidential or 'safe space' to talk with Sally. The conversation had to occur in a public area. Sally said that she had been sitting out of class regularly because of her behaviour. Neither her mother nor the Worker had been contacted regarding Sally's exclusion from lessons. After the session with the Worker Sally was excited to show her teacher her 'coping rainbow' that she had made with the Worker and which the Worker had suggested to Sally might be kept in the class room to remind her of what she can do to avoid getting into trouble. Unfortunately the teacher told Sally she was too busy to look at the rainbow and asked her to put it in her bag and return to the class. The teacher did not make herself available to the Worker to discuss Sally's progress or the strategies the Worker had discussed with her.

Teachers' Perspectives

Teachers are in daily contact with some of our communities most vulnerable children. They include children in our care and protection system, children with caring roles, children with complex disabilities and health conditions, and children with ongoing and complex adverse life experiences.

In conversations with leaders and educators, they often say they feel inadequately trained and resourced to deal with these vulnerable children. Over recent years, wellbeing and behaviour support resources have been injected into schools to help with this, and more professional development and training has been provided.

However in response to the survey question of how well their professional training equipped them to understand how to identify and support young carers, 70% of respondents said their training did not equip them to deal with vulnerable students, and that specifically they did not feel equipped to teach students who have caring roles. A small number reported that they knew how to identify and support young carers and a slightly larger number indicated they had general knowledge of vulnerable students, although this knowledge was not young carer specific.

The majority of respondents, over 80%, didn't know how many young carers they currently teach. Of those that reported they knew they had young carers in their classroom, most reported an awareness of one or two who were in caring roles.

Teachers were also asked how confident they were in their ability to identify young carers in their classroom. More than half indicated they were only slightly confident, or not at all confident.

Of those who identified as having a young carer in their class, more than a third reported they had found this out through the student's self-disclosure. The next most common way they learned about young carers at school was through another staff member. Very few teachers reported parental disclosure as their way of identifying if they were teaching

a student with a caring role. Once identified the majority of teachers reported that they took action, which included a range of strategies to modify their teaching approach, including providing the student with extra support, changing expectations and becoming more accommodating of the student's requests. They also said that they checked in more often, practised active listening and were intent on building trust. Other common actions included reporting to wellbeing and school leadership groups. Only a very small number of teachers reported that they contacted parents.

Those who had a young carer in their classroom were able to identify a comprehensive list of behaviours they ascribed to young people with caring responsibilities. These behaviours or traits included those previously described, such as maturity, compassion and resilience, as well as some or all of the following:

- anxious for the day to be over
- no friendship group
- hyper vigilant
- coping with tiredness
- anxious about going home in the afternoon

Teachers were also very aware of the reasons why identifying young carers and seeking support for their situations is becoming increasingly difficult. Like the young people themselves, teachers identified that many students keep their situations private because they don't want to be seen as different, and would prefer to blend in and be the same as everyone else in school. They also spoke about the shame many students feel, particularly around their parents being unable to provide them with a level of care that other children their age experience. They also described the student's fear of being judged and misunderstood.

Reasons identified by teachers, which reinforced the views of children and young people that they might be judged or misunderstood, are best described in the following quotes:

- “ *‘The emotional labour of having to explain and defend their situation time and time again. It sounds like complaining or whining to unsympathetic ears. Fear of being taken away from their parents or guardians so that the parent/guardian can be institutionalised or hospitalised, and the child be placed in foster care. Belief that teachers/staff/friends don’t care or won’t care.’*
- “ *‘They don’t want to be different from their peers. Although I have seen them ‘own’ it as they move into year 12, they just don’t want the 100 questions from people who they don’t think will understand. Sometimes they don’t think it’s relevant or necessary to reveal.’*
- “ *‘Fear of ‘the welfare’ getting involved and taking them away. That they are the glue to their family fabric, and if they are taken other members suffer or die, leaving them permanently. They know they need support but know the type they won’t get, so they don’t ask.’*

More than two thirds of survey respondents were unaware of whether their school had formal or informal strategies in place for young carers. Of those that reported they did have strategies the following were named:

- School Counsellors/Wellbeing Team
- Flexible Learning Options
- Adjusted Curriculum

The perceived effectiveness of these strategies was unclear, with more than 70% of respondents undecided on whether their school was doing a good job of supporting young carers or not. How well young carers performed on educational outcomes compared to their peers was another unknown area for most respondents.

Teachers felt strongly that they had a role in identifying and supporting young carers, although the majority identified that if other agencies have identified young people as carers, the school/teacher should be informed. They also acknowledged they knew very little about what resources are available to young carers at their school.

Teachers had a variety of ideas they felt would be useful for a school program aimed at supporting young carers. However, the majority believed any additional supports would require additional resources and partnerships outside the school. This included educators identifying more professional learning and better access to information and resources created specifically for young carers. Teachers indicated they had time constraints in secondary schools with the only uninterrupted time being during Home Group.

- “ *‘Listen to the stories of those young carers that have already been through the system so that educators are made aware of how they can adapt the program to support young carers continued education.’*
- “ *‘More eyes on the issues with a clear support structure and process in place to assist those identified as carers.’*

Teachers had insights into what an appropriate program for students with caring responsibilities should include. Specifically they suggested:

- “ *‘Identification of a Young Carers Champion within the school, who acts as an internal advocate/liaison.’*
- “ *‘Creating an online resource portal where young carers can access up to date relevant information to help them continue with their education.’*
- “ *‘Access to a central funding pool that schools and families can access to pay for additional learning support and educational needs and support with transport to/from school.’*
- “ *‘Designated stress free areas within the school and access to lessons in self-care and self-nurturance.’*
- “ *‘Connection with a single contact person at school who reviews the student’s needs on a weekly basis and develops capacity in the student and in the school.’*
- “ *‘Examine options to change timetables and curriculum to allow for students to have their caring roles acknowledged in lieu of elective subjects and flexible assessment options and shorter school days and flexibility regarding permissions to attend/do things.’*

Getting it Right

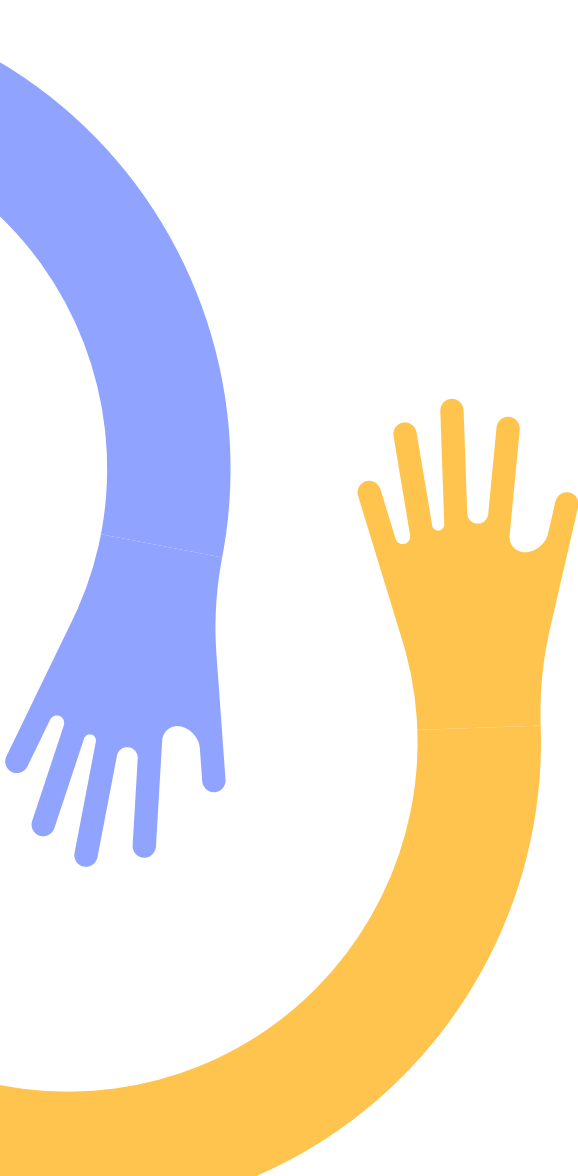
A positive learning environment is one in which all children feel known, valued, have a voice, know their purpose and can make informed decisions. Young people with caring responsibilities have told me they want teachers to understand the issues they face.

Young carers would appreciate a 'go-to' person for support, however, they have said this person must be more than just someone who they have to seek out. This person needs to be proactive and to advocate for them at school. It is important too, that this person is mindful of their privacy and confidentiality, as many young people have raised concerns about their situation being known by too many people in the school, and how this can lead to bullying.

This 'go to' support should include ensuring children and young people with caring responsibilities receive welfare checks, tutoring, extensions on assignments, support to attend school, flexible learning and take home work options as well as self-directed and independent learning choices.

A school's ability to meet the individual needs of young carers is essential. If support from the school extends to the family, there is a real opportunity to provide genuine and helpful protections for the young person, which in turn builds their capacity for self-care and the ability to identify their own needs.

When support for young carers is done well it can have significant benefits.





Ellie (12) lived in country South Australia and attended a small school.

She lives with her mother who has anxiety, depression, and PTSD, as well as coping with physical injuries to her back caused by a previous domestic violence incident.

Ellie was finding it difficult to concentrate at school because of constant worry about her mother's wellbeing while she was away from her.

In consultation with staff from a carers' support agency, the school was able to put in place a number of strategies to reduce Ellie's anxiety, including an opportunity for her to make a phone call to her mother from the school office at the start of recess and again at the start of lunch each day.

This arrangement was maintained for the remainder of the school year allowing Ellie to focus better at school. The following year the arrangement was transitioned from the primary school to the secondary school Ellie moved to for year 8, making a significant difference to her capacity to engage with her education.

Toby (16) attended a large secondary school.

Toby lives with his mother and two younger children. His mother suffers with severe depression, which can see her confined to her bed for 4-5 days at a time.

During this time Toby, along with his grandmother, is responsible for the younger children.

Toby's school provided him with the opportunity to complete his SACE studies flexibly through an Independent Learning Centre, which forms part of his school's Flexible Learning Options program.

This allowed Toby to complete his studies while maintaining his support and caring role for his family.

The school was able to develop a unit of study (workplace practices) to reflect the tasks involved with his caring role, and he was able to gain points towards his SACE.

What Needs to Change

Children and young people have been clear that the difficulties they have at school as a result of their caring responsibilities has an adverse effect on their lives and educational outcomes. Likewise, teachers have indicated they do not have the necessary knowledge and resources to adequately respond to students with caring responsibilities.


Teachers and community agencies have described the lack of a whole of school approach. This means that support for children and young people with caring responsibilities is ad hoc and often too vested in individual teachers. A whole of school approach is generally considered best practice and includes, at a minimum, a general understanding of students with caring responsibilities; a review of system policies and practices through the lens of a young carer, and identifying young carer school champions. Ideally, there would also be a lead key contact to raise awareness in the school, as well as a go-to contact for teachers and students who is able to liaise with vulnerable families.

I have previously recommended to the Department for Education that they adopt a whole of school approach to ensure children and young people with caring responsibilities can be:

- safe from harm
- do well at learning, and gain skills for life
- enjoy a healthy lifestyle; and
- be active citizens with a voice and influence.

We know that the educational outcomes for children with caring responsibilities are poorer than those of their peers, and that they face unique issues and barriers at school. They therefore require a specialised response within the school environment to support them to fulfil their educational potential.

I urge the Department for Education to take the necessary steps to bring together key stakeholders, including carer support services, teachers and young carers, to develop a workable whole of school approach that can

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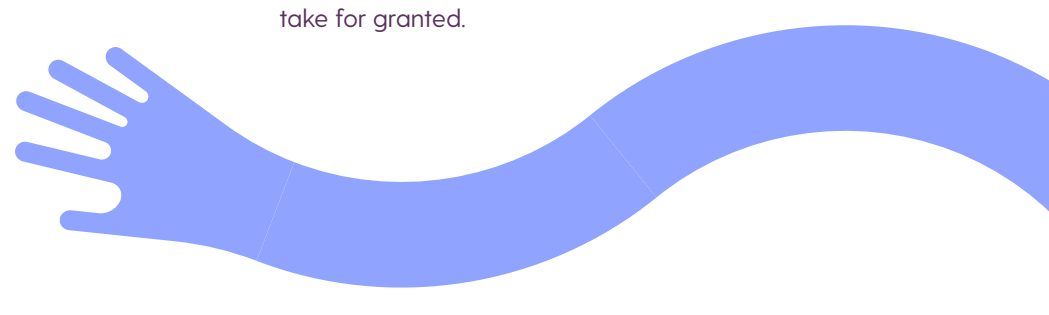
be immediately implemented. By working with diverse stakeholders we can create an approach within schools that meets the fundamental rights and needs of children and young people with caring responsibilities, and we can do this now.

It is my hope that by identifying these systemic issues, which need our immediate attention, we can galvanise our efforts to make lasting positive change for these young carers who exist in large numbers across our communities. I am advocating that we involve these young carers in the design of solutions needed to make lasting change. Not just because it is the sensible thing to do, but because without their input we risk failing them again, perpetuating systems and processes they have already told us aren't working for them.

We know the best way to achieve this is through education; the common denominator for children and young people that also offers them the possibility of tailored support and much earlier identification and intervention.

We must embrace a fundamental shift in culture and practice, to meet our collective obligations to children and young people who are doing it tough. They have a basic right to be supported so that they can grow to be confident, resourced, resilient citizens who feel they belong, and who are able to participate in their family, school and broader communities.

We need to support children to live the best lives they can; lives that enable them to have access to the 'good things' that most children take for granted.

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Who are we?

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* ('the Act').

The Commissioner promotes and advocates for the rights, development and well-being of all children and young people in South Australia. The Commissioner is committed to advocating for children and young people's involvement in decision-making that affects them, giving particular consideration to the needs of vulnerable and at-risk children and young people.

A key objective of The Commissioner for Children and Young People is to position children and young people's interests, development and wellbeing front and centre in public policy and community life and to advocate to decision makers to change laws, policy, systems and practice in favour of children and young people.

In the Commissioner's work she listens to the views of children and young people, collaborates with them and represents their diverse voices in the public arena with a special focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard. Much of her advocacy is directed by the experiences and issues that children and young people talk about and have asked her to focus on.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) says children and young people have a right to have a say on all issues that affect them and for their views to be taken seriously. By improving our children and young people's participation in decisions that impact on them, we can strengthen our democratic institutions and structures and build a strong state for the future of all children and young people.



