

SUPPORTING YOUNG CARERS

The term 'young carer' may apply to children who perform caring tasks within their family due to a number of issues such as parental physical illness, mental well-being, substance misuse or having a sibling with additional support needs. Caring tasks will range in nature and include actions such as:

- help with personal care
- medical help
- household tasks
- emotional and practical support

These types of duties may impact on the educational, health, social, emotional and financial well-being of pupils.

Examples of impact on wellbeing include:

- **Health** Providing physical care beyond capabilities
- **Social** Social isolation from peers and stigma of caring role
- **Emotional** Feelings of being trapped, anger, frustration, guilt and difference
- **Financial** If a parent is unfit for work families may have less financial resources or children may take on paid work
- **Educational** Being tired in class and unable to complete homework due to additional responsibilities

As many as 1 in 10 pupils could be a young carer but 75% don't tell their school as they don't want them to know. Reasons for secrecy are varied and include family loyalty and an associated wish for privacy, misplaced fear of what agencies might do (e.g. take children into care) or simply not feeling that they need support. Young people may not identify that the roles they hold within their family are those of a young carer. Every young person will have a unique experience of being a carer and for some children this will be a positive experience which they have the resilience to manage.

Schools are important places which can identify if a young person is a carer. Some possible signs to look out for include:

- Low mood and less motivation
- Mood swings and/ or anxiety
- Difficulties engaging parents (may appear avoidant or overly anxious)
- Small friendship group (as pupil can't go out or have friends round as often)
- Physical appearance, sometimes weight loss/being thin (if there are financial constraints, or children can mimic eating habits of ill parent and also eat less food, stress can reduce weight). Clothing may also be something to look out for, with children perhaps having to do their own laundry or being restricted in what they can buy to wear
- May be tired in school which can impact on learning and concentration levels
- Homework may not be returned, materials not returned to school
- Some young carers experience behaviour difficulties in school. Sometimes this may be related to attention needing behaviours
- Pupils could appear quiet/withdrawn or mature in outlook. May be bullied

- Young carers may have higher rates of absenteeism (usually parentally recognised and excused), higher rates of lateness and illness during school day

How can schools support young carers?

Be aware of the possible signs that someone could be a young carer as a staff group. It may be appropriate to directly ask if a pupil is helping to look after someone at home.

- If a pupil is known to be a young carer, consider this at transition times e.g. P7 → S1. Transition is a stressful time. It may involve a longer school day further from the family home meaning that they can't pop home to check how things are. Secondary schools may wish to collect names of young carers from primaries to make sure this information isn't lost
- It is relevant for certain staff to know that the pupil is a young carer so that they can be sensitively responsive if there are problems (e.g. with homework, attention in class). However, young carers need confidentiality around the exact nature of caring within the wider staff group. Let the young carer know about their right to confidentiality and how information will be shared
- Provide information around the school on issues such as physical illness, mental well-being and substance misuse as well as related support systems
- Set up drop-in groups for pupils who have siblings with significant additional support needs
- Provide discrete access to the young carers' website within school
- Children may be more able to stay in school if they can have access to a private phone line to ring home to check things are ok
- Include reference to young carers in the PSE curriculum, including well-being strands of Curriculum for Excellence. Raise self awareness in pupil population about actually being a carer and why it is harder to cope. Raise peer empathy (e.g. why not invited round, why person doesn't meet up). This all helps to reduce the stigma of being a young carer.
- Provide information on where to go for support (e.g. Quarriers)
- If large enough numbers of young carers are in your school, a peer support drop-in could be offered. It is very powerful for some children to know that they are not the only young carer
- Make sure any appropriate agencies are linked to the family
- Having a school Young Carers' Policy in place
- If needed a key person in school for them to talk to (e.g. guidance teacher; school nurse etc)
- Keep an expectation of academic success in place. There isn't a choice to be made between being a carer and having an education
- A homework club may be valued by some young carers to give support with work. It is also an opportunity to do homework in a peaceful environment
- Consider the school's bullying policy and practice alongside a school ethos of acceptance of diversity. Be sure the school community doesn't add to the distress some young carers' experience.

By having these types of supports in place the school provides an opportunity for young carers to identify themselves and can also support those who wish to keep their caring roles separate from school.