EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF YOUNG CARERS

A factsheet for teachers and school and college staff in Wales
Figures for the 2011 census suggest there are at least 7,544 young carers (under 16) in Wales. Social Care Wales notes that ‘There are approximately 30,000 carers under the age of 25 in Wales. According to the 2011 census, Wales has the highest proportion of carers under 18 in the UK’. The School Health Research Network survey indicates that sixteen percent of secondary school pupils in Wales have caring responsibilities. The proportion rises to 21% for students from the least affluent backgrounds.

Teachers and other school and college staff are in a key position to identify and help young carers. The frequent and regular contact staff have with young carers enables them to observe the impact of caring on their learning and well-being, and to provide support in the learning environment or to seek additional help.
THE IMPACT OF CARING

Some young carers may provide a few hours’ care a week, others may provide 50 or more hours per week. Children and young people of all ages provide care at home, and some carers services report that there is a growing number of very young carers (those below 8 years of age).

The experience of each young person is different, and the impact of caring and how they cope differ too. Some young carers with a significant caring role may be more resilient than those with a less demanding caring role.

Many young carers describe feeling tired and under pressure. Caring can place considerable physical demands on a child or young person which, when combined with a lack of sleep, can result in exhaustion.

Many also experience other traumatic life changes such as bereavement, family break-up, losing income or housing, and seeing the effects of an illness or addiction on the person they care for.

38% OF YOUNG CARERS REPORTED HAVING A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM.
Those who are caring for a person with mental health problems or addiction (this is often a parent or close relative), may also have to cope with the stigma associated with such conditions. This can increase social isolation and lead to bullying. In a survey of young carers, over two thirds (68%) said that they had been bullied at school\(^2\). All of these things, alongside the pressures of school or college can lead to stress, anxiety and depression.

Carer services across Wales report instances of self-harm and poor mental health as a result of bullying, this includes primary school pupils. Research by Carers Trust and the University of Nottingham found that almost a third of young carers surveyed (29%), reported that their own physical health was ‘just OK’, and 38% reported having a mental health problem\(^3\).
IMPACT ON EDUCATION

The emotional and physical demands of caring on young people can manifest themselves at school and college in the following ways:

- arriving late or without the proper equipment,
- absenteeism,
- tiredness,
- being unable to concentrate in class or disengaged with learning,
- being preoccupied worrying about the person they care for,
- being isolated within their peer group,
- struggling to complete homework, particularly homework which might rely on support from the person they care for,
- acting stressed, anxious or having a low mood.
Acknowledging the challenges facing individual young carers and providing a supportive learning environment for them can go a long way to reducing the overall stress a young person faces. However, young carers may be reluctant to disclose their personal circumstances, particularly in the learning environment, so a sensitive approach is needed.

**Ways in which teachers can help might include:**

- general advice letting learners know what support is available, including counselling. This can be given directly or more passively through the prominent displaying of helpful information in classrooms and on noticeboards;

- being aware of the increased risk of bullying for young carers and offering support and empathy. Improving awareness across the school/college of young carers’ experiences can help reduce bullying;

**National training session for education professionals led by Carers Trust and education consortia (2019)**
delivering lessons that will raise collective awareness about the impact of caring and the support available;

respecting confidentiality by not sharing information about a young carers’ personal circumstances with their peers;

encouraging young carers to talk to relevant staff members if they’re struggling with their work. For some young carers, lunchtime homework clubs have proved to be beneficial;

developing an open culture can empower young carers to discuss the barriers they are facing with teachers so shared solutions can be found; such as altered deadlines or giving class notes ahead of time if a young carer knows they may miss school or college;
limiting after-school detentions, which may conflict with caring commitments;

giving permission to have a mobile phone in the school or college in case of medical emergencies at home; and

giving permission to use the school reception phone to contact home.

The most important aspect is supporting every learner to meet their full potential. Aspirations for young carers should be as high as for their peers and all adaptations should support them have a more positive and successful experience in education. It is important that schools and colleges work with external organisations, including young carers’ services, to ensure they can access a holistic package of support to enable them to be ambitious for their futures.

“ASPIRATIONS FOR YOUNG CARERS SHOULD BE AS HIGH AS FOR THEIR PEERS”
Estyn recently published a Young Carers Thematic Report which highlights good practice in education settings to support young carers and makes recommendations for improvement including:

- developing a young carers policy;
- identifying young carers and monitoring their progress;
- taking a person centred approach to supporting young carers;
- identifying a staff member to take lead responsibility for young carers;
- publicising support available within the school or college and from external agencies e.g. on a notice board or electronically;
- raising awareness across the school or college of the issues young carers face;
- providing a place to complete homework; and
- liaising with external services for young carers where appropriate.
Many schools and colleges work with other services to help young carers including social services and health services such as child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).

There is a young carers’ service in every local authority area in Wales, often provided by the voluntary sector. Their services include young carers’ clubs, activities, respite activities, one-to-one and family support. Many young carers benefit from the friendship and support of other young carers. Signposting young people to their local carers’ service can give them access to invaluable support and expert advice. In some areas they provide activities in schools and colleges, and programmes to support schools and colleges identify and support young carers.

When liaising with external services it is important that appropriate consent has been obtained before sharing information on young carers.

Safeguarding concerns should be routed through the designated safeguarding person.


