

COMMENT



**PROF SAUL
BECKER**
Carers Trust
Ambassador

WHAT do I have in common with JLS pop star Oritse Williams? Despite our age difference Oritse and I were both carers as children.

Oritse cared for his mother, Sonia, who has multiple sclerosis, and for younger siblings.

I cared for my grandmother, Julia, who had Parkinson's disease. We both started caring at the age of 12.

When I cared in the 1970s there was no recognition or support for young carers.

I found getting up at night to turn my grandmother and take her to and from the lavatory the most difficult tasks.

I had no idea then that there was a "hidden army" of children just like me, caring for parents, grandparents and siblings who were ill, disabled, frail or had mental health or addiction problems.

Oritse's and my caring experiences led us both to become campaigners and advocates for young carers. There are young carers in every class. They



Sick mum... Oritse Williams

are everywhere – a million children and young people.

They provide intimate personal care alongside emotional support, feeding, household and financial management, cooking and cleaning.

The average age is 12 and many started caring much younger (examples start from age five).

Many will care throughout their childhood. Around one in five is caring for more than one person.

Young carers now have legal rights to an assessment of their needs and rights to support.

But fewer than one in five young carers has had one.

This means they miss school or can be exhausted when there because they have been up at night so they do less well at school than their peers.

The pandemic has made things much worse.

Some children became carers for the first time as family members became ill.

We all need to recognise young carers' major contributions to our families, society and economy, and provide the support they need to thrive.

'We need a plan to help young carers'

Pictures: TIM MERRY, DARREN COOL

By **Sarah O'Grady**
Social Affairs Correspondent

A HIDDEN army of a million young carers has been left reeling by a triple Covid whammy.

The children, who look after sick or disabled parents or siblings, were abandoned by health and support services during lockdown.

School closures meant there was no respite from caring.

And family members were sometimes stricken with Covid, forcing many youngsters into caring for the first time.

Today is Young Carers Action Day and campaigners are calling for a national plan to help the UK's million young carers, some of whom were only five when they started.

Carers Trust boss Gareth Howells said: "Coronavirus, and our findings of its impact, have brought into sharp focus the unacceptable pressures young carers are under and the effect this is having on their well-being and life chances.

"We're long past the time when sympathy and kind words for young carers is enough.

Burden

"Hundreds of thousands of young carers across the UK need real support and we are calling on the Government to urgently invest in support services for young carers to ensure they get the support they need."

Duties can include personal care, such as washing or helping relatives to the lavatory, alongside cooking, cleaning, organising medicines and doctor's appointments.

Charities, academics and others say the burden has grown heavier over the last year and urgent action is needed to stop a sharp downward spiral in the mental and physical health of a new generation.

A trust survey revealed high levels of anxiety and stress. Two-thirds of young carers aged 12 to 17, and almost four in 10 of those aged 18 to 25 are more worried about their futures since coronavirus.

MP Paul Blomfield, chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Young Carers, said: "Covid-19 has highlighted the challenges young

Extra responsibility and anxiety

**Tough pandemic...
Fikunmi, 14,
helps care for her
sister Abigail, 12**



By **Sarah O'Grady**

FIKUNMI Adeloye, 14, wants to be a neurosurgeon to help find a cure for the cerebral palsy her sister has.

The teen, who lives in Orpington, Kent, with her mum Funke and estate agent dad Aji, both 46, has been caring for Abigail with her sister Teniola, 15 for seven years.

Abigail, 12, also has scoliosis – a curvature of the spine – and epilepsy. She is in a wheelchair.

Fikunmi said: "There should be more help for my family. There are carers coming in now, but it has been difficult and sometimes the help is not that helpful."

During lockdown Abigail got Covid and was in hospital for a month. Fikunmi saw little of her mum which she found difficult.

She suffered anxiety, especially as she had to spend more time caring and was also worried about her education.

Mum Funke, who runs the disability charity Oakonsult, said she was "proud" of her daughters.

She added: "They dote on Abigail."

carers face in juggling caring responsibilities, schoolwork and the other demands in their lives.

"The Government must act to ensure that young carers get the help they need, because too many are unrecognised and face these challenges alone.

"We should start by introducing a requirement for every school to appoint a young carers lead able to identify and support those with caring duties." Lib Dem leader Sir Ed

Davey has tabled an Early Day Motion in the Commons calling for young carers to get support.

He said: "Having been a young carer myself – as a teenager, nursing my mum during her long battle against bone cancer – I know how difficult it can be to juggle caring responsibilities with schoolwork.

"As a result, young carers' exam results are, on average, a staggering nine grades lower than their peers." The trust is also urging employers to

acknowledge the skills and attributes young carers develop.

Paul Feeney, chief executive of wealth-management group Quilter, which has supported 1,800 young carers, was one.

He said: "I was raised by a single mum who had to care for my grandma who had a stroke, and I helped then and I helped care for my mum later on. It made me who I am today in terms of responsibility and values I hold."



Proud... Sandy, right, with daughter and carer Summer

My 13-year-old Summer sunshine

SUMMER Amerena is the sole carer for mum Sandy, who suffers from the painful condition fibromyalgia.

For the last six years, the 13-year-old has helped her mother get out of bed, wash, dress and put on her socks and shoes.

Summer said: "We don't have help from carers, there's only me here.

"There is some help but nothing really practical. I could do with some.

By **Sarah O'Grady**

I like going out with my friends but when I do I worry about mum."

The teenager, who wants to be a forensic scientist, has to give Sandy the right medicines at the correct time and has to prompt her to eat. She also washes her hair.

Sandy said: "I'm proud of Summer, she does a lot for me. She's right,

there should be more help, if not for the adults, for the children like her."

Fibromyalgia sufferers also experience confusion – called "Fibro Fog" – and Summer has to be alert to this as her mum moves around their Brighton home.

She added: "I worry about what will happen if I go to university. Unless there's a cure, mum will be left to cope by herself, and she can't."